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Title: Jury returns not guilty verdict in Blessing trial
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By JON STINCHCOMB Staff writer

PORT CLINTON – After 2 hours and 40 minutes of deliberations, a jury Thursday found Chris Blessing not guilty of two rape charges.

Blessing, 32, had been accused of raping a woman after the pair visited several bars in Put-in-Bay, an island village with a regional reputation for bar-hopping, drinking and partying.

In his closing arguments, defense attorney Tom DeBacco sat in the chair on the witness stand and repeated loudly what the woman had said in court two days earlier: that she would never have sex with Blessing.

“The first person (the accuser) is lying to herself,” DeBacco said.

The defense said the evidence showed that the woman was embarrassed because the “whole island” might find out about her behavior, including having sex with Blessing. The defense said this is a case of regret, not rape.

DeBacco said the woman was, in fact, able to say “no” throughout the night but never did. He added that the evidence and testimony showed that she wasn’t acting like someone who couldn’t say “no.”

“She was saying ‘yes’ all day,” DeBacco said.

DeBacco pointed to the testimony from witnesses who saw the two at Put-In-Bay on May 4, 2014, the night of the incident, and said the woman was seen dancing, hanging on the bar and was “all over” Blessing.

The two were seen open-mouth kissing so aggressively that someone said, “Get a room,” the defense noted.

“She’s a party girl and he’s a party guy,” DeBacco said, continuing that his client was enjoying the night as well.

The woman worked at Mr. Ed's Bar and Grill in Put-in-Bay, where Blessing was the manager. The day of the incident was part of what Put-in-Bay restaurant and bar employees regularly refer to as "Sunday Funday," the day of the week in which island workers party because there are few tourists.

Blessing's defense attorney said that the woman's story was convenient for someone who regretted her own behavior.

The woman "liked" a photo of her and Blessing together, via social media, then drank a "magic elixir" around 5:45 p.m. causing her to forget everything afterward, DeBacco said.

"It started a snowball rolling down the hill that's now bigger than me," DeBacco said of that "convenient" story.

The defense's closing arguments also questioned the extent of the investigation, which never obtained security camera footage from any of the Put-in-Bay bars that Blessing and the woman attended that evening. Nor did it include questioning any of the witnesses, other than the accuser, who were with them that Sunday, the defense said.

The state countered in its closing arguments that none of those witnesses were in the bedroom with Blessing and the woman, and that several of them were friends with the defendant.

Prosecutor Joe Gerber said that despite the woman being unable to say "no," she dropped a lot of powerful "hints" that she did not want to have sex with Blessing.

Gerber also said in closing arguments that Blessing's version of the encounter given from the witness stand did not make sense.

On Wednesday, a sexual assault nurse testified as an expert witness for the state, saying that she interviewed the woman on May 6, two days after the alleged rape, and she believed the woman "was sexually assaulted."

After the verdict, the prosecutor said "justice was done."

"The jury considered all the evidence that we had," Gerber said. "That's their decision and I respect that."