Teen girl charged with lying to police after abduction hoax

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RIVIERA BEACH — Her story of being abducted from a dark school bus stop by three masked men and sexually assaulted for hours in their candy-apple-red car seemed credible.

"She acknowledged she made up the entire story," Police Chief Clarence Williams said.

And apparently a good storyteller.

Instead of being abducted, the Palm Beach Gardens High School sophomore spent the morning with a male friend Tuesday. In a text message to an acquaintance, the 16-year-old said she was going to have sex and eat breakfast with the friend, making her late for school, police said.

That text message was the teenager's undoing. Confronted by police Monday, she broke down and finally told the truth.

The girl fabricated the story because she feared getting into trouble, Sgt. Pat Galligan said.

After the confession, police charged the teen girl with two misdemeanors: making false statements to police and making false statements during a police investigation.

"We talked to teachers," Galligan said. "Everyone had good things to say about her. Her mother is beside herself. It's sad."

As word of the alleged abduction hit the street, Galligan began receiving anonymous calls from teens challenging the girl's story. The big break came when a tipster told police about the text message, he said.

Police took the girl to the Juvenile Assessment Center, where she was to be processed and housed until being released to her parents.

School officials were dismayed to learn that the student made up her claims.

"Unfortunately, we had to go through this because of a charade, but it did give us a chance to go through this academically rather than in reality," Palm Beach County
Schools Superintendent Art Johnson said. "In this particular case it didn't happen, but that doesn't mean we don't need to prepare like it did happen."

The girl could face disciplinary action, Johnson said.

Last month, an Atlantic High School freshman was charged with filing a false police report after telling police that he saw men with guns on campus, sparking a school lockdown and alarming parents and students. The student has been recommended for expulsion.

Police waited about 18 hours before going public with the teen's abduction story. At the time, police spokeswoman Rose Anne Brown said, they needed time to make sure the girl's account was "credible."

School officials were not notified of the alleged attack until more than 24 hours later, and then only when Palm Beach Gardens Principal Jonathan Prince called police to inquire about it.

The hoax prompted unwarranted criticism of Riviera Beach police, Williams said. He has received e-mails alleging a lack of concern for the city's children as well as calls from parents who feared dropping off their kids at bus stops.

"Our detectives have been working this case since its inception," Williams said. "We have devoted a substantial amount of resources to this investigation."

Police spent 80 regular hours and about 40 hours in overtime trying to track down the "abductors" over the past week. The investigation cost taxpayers "thousands of dollars," Brown said.

The department also had authorities as far away as Tallahassee stopping anyone driving cars matching the description given by the alleged victim. Police also fielded complaints from some individuals who believed they were being harassed.

"All of this in the aftermath of a hoax," Williams said. "Her story has had a ripple effect throughout our entire community."

Mayor Thomas Masters enlisted the support of a local motorcycle club, which agreed to patrol the city's bus stops to help protect students. He also wanted school board officials to move some of the bus stops to areas with better lighting.

The teen's saga began when a relative dropped her off about 6:30 a.m. Tuesday at the bus stop in the 3400 block of Avenue H East. It was dark, and the student allegedly was standing alone when a "bubble-type" car pulled up, she told police.

She said the driver pointed a gun at her and ordered her into the car. She described the men as in their 20s and wearing stockings over their faces.

They drove her throughout the city, sexually assaulting her, the teen told police. She said she was pushed from the car in the 500 block of Avenue S.
A stranger found her in distress near the Stonybrook Apartments on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

After talking with police, Prince contacted parents in the area and encouraged them to send their students to the bus stop in pairs.

http://www.palmbeachpost.com/localnews/content/local_news/epaper/2008/03/18/0317abduct.html