

Man gets probation in autistic teen case

Admitted to shoving runner, 15, in park

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The Pittsford man convicted of harassing an autistic teenage cross-country runner in Cobb's Hill Park in October was sentenced in Rochester City Court on Tuesday to three years of probation and 80 hours of community service.

Martin MacDonald, 57, had pleaded guilty to a charge of second-degree harassment, which is a violation, and a charge of endangering the welfare of a child, which is a misdemeanor punishable by up to one year in jail. His sentence was in line with what the prosecution had requested and included an order barring him from contacting the teenager, Chase Coleman, or his family for five years. MacDonald's attorney, Gary Gianforti, asked that only community service be imposed.

Prior to sentencing, a tearful MacDonald read a statement in which he apologized to Coleman and his family, who were in the gallery, and said he had been volunteering with an autism advocacy group to learn more about the condition. MacDonald said he had no idea that Coleman was autistic and revealed that he was once a high school crosscountry runner whose home course was in Cobb's Hill Park. "I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me," MacDonald said.

MacDonald encountered 15-year-old Chase Coleman in the park on Oct. 14 as Coleman, who is from Syracuse, was attempting to finish a 3.1 mile cross-country race.

Coleman was running for his high school and wearing a uniform and bib number, but was lagging far behind the rest of the runners. His mother said she believes her son, who has difficulty communicating, got lost on the route and turned to MacDonald for help. MacDonald has never spoken publicly of the confrontation, but police reports indicated that he acknowledged shoving Coleman to the ground.

One police report — there were two — showed that MacDonald was unaware of Coleman's disability and expressed remorse for the altercation.

That report suggested Coleman approached MacDonald and a woman described as MacDonald's wife while they were at their car, and that MacDonald suspected Coleman was on drugs and mocking him because "he wasn't acting right." The confrontation touched off nationwide debates about civility, tolerance of people with disabilities, and racism, as MacDonald is white and Coleman is black. In accepting MacDonald's guilty plea in November, Rochester City Court Judge Ellen Yacknin pledged to cap his sentence at probation or less and the order of protection if she found that MacDonald's claims about his criminal past were consistent with his record. He claimed to have had a clean record with the exception of a drunken-driving conviction many years ago.

During sentencing, Yacknin said a pre-sentence investigation found that MacDonald was a “loving” man with a clean record. But she sentenced him to probation, she explained, because, she said to MacDonald, “You could have walked away.” She also pondered aloud whether MacDonald was acting on an “implicit bias,” and questioned whether he would have shoved a white teenager who was displaying the behavior of Coleman.

“It’s clear to me that this whole situation is a prime example of how people make assumptions about other people without knowing anything about them,” Yacknin said.

Outside the courtroom, Coleman’s mother, Clarise Coleman, said she was satisfied with the sentence but that she believed MacDonald had acted on bias. “I did appreciate his letter,” she said of Mac-Donald’s statement. “It was just a little too late.”

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Chase Coleman, right, and his father, Stan Coleman, in the courthouse following the sentencing of Chase’s harasser, Martin MacDonald.

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Martin MacDonald, right, enters the courtroom for his sentencing with his lawyer, Gary Gianforti.

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