

Two drug offenders ordered to write essays

Men spared prison; Long Valley roommate was growing marijuana

BY PEGGY WRIGHT
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Two former Long Valley residents who were charged in February, along with a third roommate, with running a marijuana harvesting operation in their attic were spared prison sentences Friday by a judge who gave them probation and community service, and ordered them to write essays.

Superior Court Judge Thomas V. Manahan ordered John Coates III of Great Meadows and John A. O'Connell of Succasunna, both 24, to read "Judgment at Nuremberg," a 1957 play by Abby Mann that was adapted into the Academy

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Award-winning 1961 film about Nazi war criminals brought to justice for their crimes against humanity.

The significance of the assignment is that the war criminals claimed to just be following orders, just as Coates and O'Connell said they went along with the marijuana-growing plan of roommate Zachary Toomey, 27.

Toomey pleaded guilty in November to conspiracy to maintain or operate a drug production facility in February from the rented Fairmount Road home in Washington Township and to an unrelated aggravated assault charge. The Morris County Prosecutor's Office has recommended that Toomey be sentenced in January to seven years in prison and more than \$2,000 in fines.

Coates and O'Connell both pleaded guilty before

County Prosecutor Robert A. Bianchi said his office is reviewing the sentences and might appeal them within the required 10 days.

Manahan in October to conspiracy, and the judge on Friday noted their roles were serious, but minimal. Their actions amounted to offering to keep the books if the marijuana was sold and preventing outsiders from entering the attic room where 26 marijuana plants were discovered by authorities. Defense lawyer Alexander Pagano, who represents O'Connell, said his client bought some soil and lights to cultivate the marijuana but never touched the plants.

The prosecutor's office wanted the judge to sentence Coates and O'Connell to at least three years in state prison. Manahan took the unusual step of bypassing the recommendation, saying he found too many mitigating factors in both

men's cases. He said that both men made "very bad" decisions but when he viewed their cases as a whole, he believed it would be an injustice to send them to prison. But he warned them he wouldn't hesitate to lock them up if they violated probation.

County Prosecutor Robert A. Bianchi said office attorneys are reviewing the sentences and might appeal them within the required 10 days.

Manahan sentenced both men to four years' probation, 250 hours of community service and 90 days each on the county Sheriff's Labor Assistance Program, a work-in-lieu of jail program. They must pay more than \$1,200 in fines, and were ordered to read "Judgment at

Nuremberg" and deliver their essays to the judge within 60 days. The judge wants the men to fulfill the community service requirements by speaking to students about the experience of being charged with drug crimes. Over the next four years, they also must appear once every six months at a session of Superior Court drug court for recovering addicts.

"I want you to see how lives are destroyed by drugs because almost everyone in there started out with marijuana," Manahan said.

Both men apologized for their actions, with O'Connell — who has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice — saying he wasn't trying to understate his conduct but was truly sorry.

"It's a shame to myself and for my family to stand here before you today," O'Connell said to the judge.

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