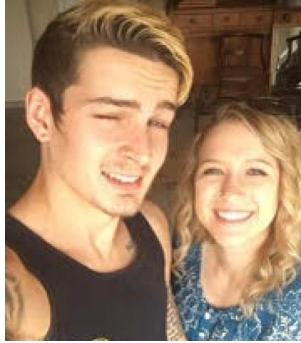


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## DA: Ex-Bend man innocent in high-profile sex case

Shane Morgan not 'close to being guilty' of forcing girlfriend into sex work



Shane Morgan and Kambria Armstrong in summer 2017. They were once a couple in Bend, until Armstrong accused Morgan of sex crimes. The Deschutes County prosecutor now calls Morgan innocent. (Shane Morgan/Submitted photo)

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Five months ago, Shane Morgan's mugshot was all over the news.

His face — solemn and pale — ran along stories headlined, “Bend man accused of forcing teen into sex work” and “Court records detail deranged, illegal relationship.”

Morgan, 22, had been arrested by Bend Police on suspicion of two counts of first-degree kidnapping — a crime that carries a minimum sentence in Oregon of seven years and six months. Additionally, he was charged with sexual coercion and assault constituting domestic violence.

The fallout was swift and severe, he told The Bulletin through his lawyer, Jamie Gerlitz. He lost a job. His roommates kicked him out. He felt scared everywhere he went.

But it became clear the stories told by Morgan's accuser, Kambria Armstrong, were not believable.

“At the end of the day, I was not confident this alleged victim was credible,” said Deschutes County District Attorney John Hummel, who dropped all charges against Morgan last month. “He was innocent. We couldn’t find him close to being guilty.”

Armstrong had moved from Arizona to Bend to live with an uncle’s family. Gerlitz provided documentation to the district attorney that Armstrong had accused the uncle of rape, and was subsequently living with her grandfather.

She met Morgan through Tinder. He was living in Bend with his mother and sister. Armstrong soon moved in, too.

On Sept. 20, Armstrong called police to report Morgan had repeatedly beat her and had been forcing her to perform sex acts on a live-streaming website for tips, which he was keeping. She told Officer Cynthia Ksenzulak that Morgan had controlled all of her money throughout their four-month relationship.

She claimed Morgan rarely let her leave his side. She claimed he’d been trying to separate her from her family. To this end, she claimed he’d forced her to make the rape allegation against her uncle, Gerlitz said.

She described months of brutal beatings and degradation by Morgan, whom she claimed kept a pistol on himself at all times.

The Bulletin and other media ran detailed stories about his arrest based on Armstrong’s statements to police.

But Morgan caught one lucky break early on in his case: He was assigned public defender Jamie Gerlitz.

“In this case, the defense attorney took her job seriously and dug in,” Hummel said.

Gerlitz has been practicing law since 2005. She said she’s never seen a case like this.

She was encouraged after talking with Morgan's mother and sister, who both provided accounts that matched his denials. She also knew Armstrong had filed false reports of rape in the past.

With six separate police interviews and months of phone records to sort through, Gerlitz knew she had a lot of fact-checking ahead of her. And with Morgan's first hearing weeks away, she knew she had to work fast.

She praised her opposing counsel, Deputy District Attorney Matthew Nelson, for promptly turning over discovery documents and allowing her to delay the grand-jury process until she'd sorted through all of the many police reports in the case.

"On one hand, there was the victim, who was compelling. And on the other, we had three individuals who were telling the same story," Gerlitz said. "(Nelson) and I were in line in terms of figuring out who was telling the truth."

She set about "furiously" typing transcriptions and applying it to a spreadsheet.

"Kambria's story was different in major ways every time she told it," Gerlitz said.

Finally, Armstrong's phone records were released. What Gerlitz found was astonishing — evidence of an outrageous setup, she says.

Armstrong arranged to meet her grandfather at a restaurant to discuss the supposed abuse, Gerlitz said. Armstrong told him Morgan was stalking her. They went to a nearby park.

While this was happening, Gerlitz said, Armstrong's phone records show she was texting with Morgan to say her grandfather was threatening her. She convinced Morgan to show up. When he arrived at the park, Armstrong used it to confirm to her grandfather that Morgan had been following her.

“This whole thing is kind of mind-blowing in terms of the ‘why?’ Why did she do this?” Gerlitz said. “I have never seen this scale of deception.”

Morgan now lives in South Carolina. He is trying to put the story behind him, Gerlitz said.

Armstrong returned to Arizona to live with her family. Armstrong’s mother, Melissa, said her daughter didn’t wish to comment for this article.

Melissa Armstrong said she still believes her daughter “completely.” She said she personally saw the signs of abuse on her daughter’s body, including dramatic weight loss, when she returned to Arizona.

She said Hummel’s office never offered her an explanation.

“We still do not understand why the charges were dropped,” she said.

Hummel said his office considered charges of filing a false police report against Armstrong. He said he decided against it in part because it would have been difficult to prove her misstatements were intentional. He also said he worries doing so could have a chilling effect on survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, who might worry no one will believe their accounts and they’ll be charged with a crime.

“The women who come into our office, they’re terrified, embarrassed and reluctant,” Hummel said. “They do it out of desperation. They try to minimize it and hide.”

There are false accusations in all crimes, he said.

“We don’t see more in sexual assault; only once in a blue moon,” he said. “The bigger problem is the women who don’t come forward.”

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