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Public defender intern in Broward had been arrested for sex with teen

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A Coral Springs man whose stepdaughter is in Broward juvenile court said he "almost had a heart attack" when he learned her assistant public defender once was arrested for having sex with a minor.

"We were shocked," said Steve Potgieter, 38. "We were like, this is the twilight zone; this cannot be."

It turns out Bryan Docobo, 26, is an intern newly hired by the Broward Public Defender's Office. The May graduate of Nova Southeastern University law school is awaiting approval of his law license after passing the July Bar exam.

In May 2005, Docobo, then 23, had consensual sex with a 15-year-old Cooper City girl he met on the Internet. He pleaded no contest to two misdemeanor charges of contributing to the delinquency of a minor and was sentenced to one year's probation.

Public Defender Howard Finkelstein stands by his new hire. He said Docobo always has been candid about his past and he opted to give the "earnest and hardworking" young

man a second chance.

"He was contrite, he was ashamed, he was apologetic, he was remorseful and completely understood the wrongfulness of his actions," Finkelstein said.

In hindsight, Finkelstein said, "it may have been a mistake to put him in juvenile court."

But all the interns hired in August were assigned to juvenile court, because that's where they get the most supervision, he said.

If Potgieter's stepdaughter is uncomfortable with Docobo as her attorney, Finkelstein said, he'll "replace him in a heartbeat."

Docobo met the 15-year-old on MySpace. Her profile displayed semi-nude pictures and said she was sexually active, experienced and liked older guys. The profile also said she was 16, over the age of sexual consent.

They exchanged e-mails for a time until the girl directed Docobo to a Web site where she and fellow members bragged about their sexual conquests. After a couple of months Docobo and the girl moved on to phone conversations and eventually a one-time sexual encounter at his Pembroke Pines home.

Less than 24 hours later, Docobo was arrested and charged with four felony counts of lewd or lascivious battery of a minor and two felony counts of lewd or lascivious molestation of a minor.

The state dismissed four of the charges and downgraded the other two because the girl was "embarrassed by the sexual content" of her Web page, was afraid that schoolmates and teachers might find out and didn't want to testify publicly, according to a memo written by prosecutor Melissa Vaughan.

Thursday, in an interview with the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, Docobo expressed his regret and remorse.

"I have recognized and continue to recognize it was just a horrible mistake," he said. "I will spend the rest of my life just trying to make amends by serving my future profession and the community."

Potgieter said he and his wife, Dana, are uneasy having someone with this history working so closely with troubled teens like their daughter.

He and Dana have pressed felony charges against Dana's 17-year-old daughter for breaking into their car, stealing credit and banking cards and withdrawing about \$460 from a bank account, he said.

"This guy should not be working in a capacity where he deals with juvenile delinquents,"

Potgieter said. "He's acting as the savior public defender for troubled teens ...Who's to say he doesn't use that?"

Finkelstein said he doesn't think Docobo has a predilection for underage girls or a predatory nature. He said "a unique aberration" brought about by "really poor judgment" led to Docobo's arrest.

The Florida Supreme Court knew of Docobo's criminal history and certified him as a legal intern with no restrictions, Finkelstein said.

A past conviction would not automatically preclude someone from full admission to the Bar, said Michele Gavagni, executive director of the Florida Board of Bar Examiners.

The board assesses past conduct and present character, considering "all the facts surrounding any incident," she said. "They look at the entire picture, not just what the individual charge or accusation was."

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