

Indecent assault trial begins

Betsy Gilliland, Staff Writer

WEST CHESTER - His defense attorney portrayed Gerald "Jerry" Haas of West Chester as a congenial man who was known for having a ready supply of Popsicles to share with neighborhood children.

However, Chester County Deputy District Attorney Elizabeth Pitts told a jury of eight men and six women that Haas used the promise of Popsicles to entice two adolescent girls into his home and to touch them inappropriately.

"We're talking about something that has left an indelible mark on two little girls," Pitts said Thursday in her opening statement at Haas' trial in the Common Pleas Court.

Two West Chester girls, ages 10 and 11, testified that a game of hypnosis went sour after Haas led them to his bedroom and inappropriately touched them over their clothing. They also said that Haas asked them to touch him inappropriately. The alleged sexual misconduct occurred May 29 at his home.

Haas, 68, is charged with two counts each of indecent assault, corruption of minors, solicitation of indecent assault and solicitation of corruption of minors.

The 11-year-old girl, who was a neighbor of Haas', wiped tears from her face during her testimony. Her 10-year-old friend, who barely was visible over the witness stand, also paused during her testimony to collect herself after she began crying softly.

Defense attorney Samuel Stretton said Haas "emphatically asserted his innocence."

In his opening statement, he said: "This case is about a nightmare for Jerry."

Stretton said the girls saw Haas outside and asked him if they could have Popsicles. He also said Haas' neighbor, who had played the hypnosis game with him before, asked him if they could play the game that night.

"Perhaps there's some bad judgment here," Stretton said in his opening statement. "Bad judgment doesn't translate to criminal liability."

Haas frequently held his right hand over his right ear during the testimony. Stretton said several times that his client was having problems with his hearing aid and could not hear the prosecutor or the witnesses.

Both girls testified that they went upstairs with Haas to his bedroom where they took turns lying on his bed to be "hypnotized." The girls, who laid on his bed two times each, also said that he touched only their heads, arms and legs during their first time on the bed. During their second turns, they said, Haas also touched them inappropriately on the front and back of their bodies.

"He kind of didn't really hypnotize us," the 11-year-old said. "He kind of massaged us."

Both girls said they did not protest about the game and did not try to leave his house.

"I kind of felt like it wasn't right," said the 11-year-old.

Her friend, who had come to her house to study for a science test, said both of them initially thought the hypnosis game was a good idea. She said Haas told them it would help them get ready for their test.

When the deputy district attorney asked the 10-year-old what happened in the bedroom, the girl hesitated and sighed before answering the question.

"He started massaging my parts where the bathing suit covers," she replied.

Pitts also asked her what she was thinking when Haas allegedly touched her inappropriately.

"I was just thinking, like, 'what should I do?'" she said.

After the girls had laid on the bed two times each, they said, Haas told them it was his turn to get a massage and laid down on the bed.

The girls stood on either side of the bed, they said, and touched his arms and legs. They also said Haas told them they could touch his genitals. However, the girls said, they did not.

Both girls testified that Haas said they could use lotion and light candles the next time they played the game. Stretton disputed the testimony, however, saying neither girl mentioned this allegation in

their statements to
police.

They also said Haas told them not to tell their parents what had happened because they might "get the wrong impression."

Although they did not tell their parents initially, they discussed the incident on the phone that evening after the 10-year-old went home. They reported the alleged sexual misconduct to their school guidance counselor the following day.

Haas previously has been convicted on sexual crimes involving teenage children in 1956, 1961 and 1987.

Referring to the 1987 conviction as a "remote incident" during retrial motions, Judge Juan R. Sanchez said he would wait until he heard the prosecution's case before he decided if testimony about that case would be admitted at the trial.

Sanchez released Haas, who has been incarcerated since this summer, on bail during pretial motions.

Haas is a former Democratic committeeman and a decorated Korean War veteran. As a paralega, he has helped fellow veterans secure medical treatment and benefits. He also served on the Chester County Drug and Alcohol Commission and served in Gov. Milton Schapp's administration in the 1970's.

www.marxhowell.com