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Charges dropped in burglaries case

American River College student released after 53 days in county jail.

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No matter how much Eric Allen Warren tried to lose himself in a book in his Sacramento jail cell, he says, a glimpse of his orange jumpsuit jerked him back to reality.

Warren had been charged with committing three home invasion burglaries at gunpoint in an apartment complex not far from his South Natomas home. Police also said he sexually battered one of his female victims.

Throughout 53 days in jail, the 20-year-old says he remained certain that any hour, any day, authorities would realize they made a mistake.

On Wednesday, the Sacramento County's District Attorney's Office dismissed all nine charges against him, lacking evidence to tie Warren to the June burglaries.

Thursday afternoon, Warren enjoyed the simple pleasures of his mother's big-screen television and barbecue cooking.

"To be able to walk in and out the door when you want to," Warren said, "you start to appreciate what you had."

Sacramento Police Sgt. Matt Young said five witnesses or victims identified Warren as the suspect in the attacks. However, district attorney spokeswoman Lana Wyant said "substantial doubt" arose as to Warren being the perpetrator.

Before he was arrested, Warren took classes at American River College. He coached sports for a city after-school program. Around the neighborhood, the young man with the wire-rimmed glasses and dimple on his right cheek was best known as a Natomas High School football linebacker -- before he was accused of burglary and sexual battery. He said he was only vaguely aware of the crimes that police were investigating before they came to look for him.

Sacramento police say a man committed three home invasion burglaries at the River Terrace Apartments in South Natomas in June. The suspect went to apartments, politely feigned being lost, then forced his way inside, police said. The man sexually battered one woman and took items from the three apartments.

Based on an anonymous tip, police went to Warren's home, hoping to talk to him. Warren said he wasn't home, but later talked to them by phone.

Warren said he told officers where he'd been during the June 10 and 17 attacks.

"I went about my day," Warren said. "I thought that was that."

It was not. The next contact Warren had with police was when they surrounded his home and handcuffed him.

"I was shocked," he said. "I was scared. It was the first time I'd seen something like that in my life."

Warren said detectives questioned him for hours. He said he repeated the same story, but detectives

asked him the same questions.

Finally, he asked for a lawyer.

"That was when they took me to jail," he said.

On July 3, nine charges were filed, including three counts of assault with a gun, attempted robbery, two counts of burglary, sexual battery and making a criminal threat.

Jail was a shock, Warren said. He said he was in the holding cell for more than 24 hours before he got a cell with a bed.

Warren's mother, Faye Warren, and sister Erika Muhammad made the maximum number of weekly visits. They mailed Warren books and comics and pressed deputies to get his inhaler to control his asthma.

"I put all my faith in God," Faye Warren said. "When he was there, I told (Eric) to read the Bible, pray and the truth will come out."

Muhammad did some research and found Bay Area attorney Stephen Naratil. Naratil said he read the police reports about the attacks and got a hunch that the real offender would strike again.

Naratil said he saw reports of two similar attacks in the neighborhood that he believes the perpetrator committed while Warren was behind bars. "I said that's bad for the neighborhood but good for us," Naratil said.

Wyant, of the District Attorney's Office, said reports of one similar attack were among the factors that led prosecutors to dismiss the charges.

Sacramento police spokeswoman Michelle Lazark said a home invasion attack occurred in Natomas while Warren was in jail, but it was not the same as those in which Warren was a suspect.

Warren learned the charges against him had been dropped Tuesday when Naratil's investigator, John Kirkman, visited him at the jail.

"How would you feel if this was dropped?" Warren recalled Kirkman saying.

"Don't joke with me," Warren replied.

"It's done," Kirkman said.

Warren said he just started shouting and couldn't eat or sleep until he was released Wednesday afternoon.

While Naratil insists the case shows the justice system's virtues and the district attorney's courage, Warren remains a bit shell-shocked.

"The thing I don't like is that someone can say you did something, and if it's bad enough, they just keep you there," Warren said. "If I didn't have money for a lawyer, I could have been there for a long time."

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