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## Foster kids would leave for school, detour to brothel

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By Carol Marbin Miller

Miami Herald

**MIAMI** — The teenage foster kids called their rendezvous with men who paid for their affections "dates." Sometimes they had several scheduled each day.

Their alleged handler, whom they called "E-Nasty," or just "E," would text the girls on the cell phones he provided them. "You're gonna have some dates today," he would say, a source told The Miami Herald.

On days where the girls had a hectic schedule, they'd be driven to school in the morning, but fail to enter. Instead, the teens would call or text their pimps to pick them up. "It was a perfect cover," the source said. "People thought they were going to school."

E-Nasty, police and prosecutors say, is 29-year-old Eric George Earle, the head of a group of pimps who preyed on teenage girls in foster care.

"He was the ringleader of this organization," said Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernández Rundle, "the one who befriended the girls."

Police and prosecutors say Earle — together with his stepbrother, Anturrel Nathaniel Dean, and two other men — operated a prostitution ring that employed foster children as sex workers. A teenager identified only as S.S. worked for the ring as a prostitute, and "recruited" other girls from her group home to work for the ring.

Earle; Dean, 30; 34-year-old David Zarifi and 65-year-old Willie Calvin Bivins were arrested early Monday. They face charges of racketeering, conspiracy and unlawful sex with underage girls.

At a Tuesday afternoon news conference, Fernández Rundle said the busted ring was part of an ongoing investigation into "predators" who lure vulnerable children into becoming sex workers. Already, the investigation had spawned 50 subpoenas and eight search warrants.

Fernández Rundle gave the girls' customers a warning: "Watch out," she said. "We're coming to get you."

"Make no doubt about it: these are businesses operating just below the surface in our community," Fernández Rundle said. "You know what? They're not operating any longer."

Also caught up in the investigation, though not involved with the ring Earle allegedly operated, was a Department of Children &amp; Families child abuse investigator, 46-year-old Jean LaCroix, records show.

DCF administrators placed LaCroix on paid administrative leave and seized his government-issued cell phone after one of the girls involved in the ring, identified as M.D., told police she also had maintained a lengthy sexual relationship with LaCroix, who investigated her case when she was placed in foster care, records show.

"The victim advised that while in school she would call or text [LaCroix] and [he] would arrange to pick her up from school and take her to his residence where they would engage in consensual sexual intercourse," a May search warrant request says.

LaCroix became involved with M.D. in September 2011, DCF Regional Administrator Esther Jacobo told the Miami-Dade Police Department. His DCF cell phone showed "considerable phone communication between [LaCroix] and the victim's cellular phones for several months after October 2011," records say.

Even after his bosses at DCF took away his cell phone, LaCroix continued to call the teenage foster child with his personal phone, police said in a May search warrant obtained by The Miami Herald.

In an email to The Herald, DCF Secretary David Wilkins called LaCroix's behavior "absolutely appalling," adding the investigator's actions "betray the trust and confidence that all Floridians have in our department's employees. Mr. LaCroix's actions in no way reflect the expectations we and all Floridians have for our investigators or any of our employees," Wilkins added.

"As soon as we learned of these allegations earlier this year, the department immediately placed Mr. Lacroix on administrative leave with no access to department records, offices or files," Wilkins said. "Additionally, the department began working with Miami-Dade police and the State Attorney's Office in the investigation of Mr. Lacroix. We will continue to work with them to ensure that any prosecutions related to these allegations are pursued to their fullest extent."

As for the alleged prostitution ring that preyed on foster children, Wilkins said "these crimes violate every moral belief we share at the department and as Floridians. Children deserve the opportunity to survive and thrive with our help and to overcome the circumstances which placed them in our care."

M.D. lived in a six-person group home that is operated by Children's Home Society of Florida, a private foster care agency under contract with another private agency, called Our Kids, that oversees child welfare in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties. Fernández Rundle said about four girls from the home were working for the ring, and records suggest three of them were recruited by S.S., a resident herself.

Fernández Rundle said ring members groomed the girls with cash, flowers and other gifts, and were sophisticated in their efforts to woo the youths. All of the girls had previously suffered abuse or neglect, or had been abandoned by their parents. They were starved for affection, and delighted that an adult was showing interest in them — and showering them with gifts.

Jacobo, who also spoke at the news conference, called ring members "professional predators" who "knew exactly which children to target." DCF is eager, she said, to help police in their effort to "put people behind bars" for trafficking in underage girls.

When asked whether Children's Home Society foster care workers had failed to properly supervise teens at the group home, Jacobo said it is against state law to lock up foster children who are not accused of committing crimes.

And David Bundy, CHS's statewide president, described the trafficking in children as "bigger than group homes [and] bigger than foster care."

It was a CHS employee, both Bundy and Fernández Rundle said, who alerted police to the girls' plight after she overheard a conversation between two group home residents concerning money and sex.

"We do not knowingly allow our girls to leave our home with anyone who's not authorized for one-on-one visitation, by virtue of their position or relationship and after required background screening," Bundy told The Herald. "In reality, these and other vulnerable girls are targeted by predators during the course of their normal daily activities. Like other kids, they go to school, enjoy after-school and social activities and, like other kids and parents, they are not observed by us 24/7."

"Wherever they are, predators find them and entice them with attention, cash and gifts," Bundy added. "The problem is the criminals, which is why we've been working with law enforcement and our partners to bring them down."

*Miami Herald staff writer Christina Veiga contributed to this report.*

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