

## A YEAR LATER, A RELUCTANT PLEA BARGAIN / RACE ADMITTED AS CENTEREACH ASSAULT ISSUE

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Steven Manganello stood before Suffolk County Court Judge Louis Ohlig yesterday in handcuffs, with one last thing to say after he had been sentenced for instigating what authorities called a racially motivated brawl.

Manganello, 21, of Centereach, pleaded guilty last June to second-degree assault and aggravated harassment. During that plea, he admitted that the attack outside a Centereach bar on black Marine reservist Gregory Jean-Pierre of Plainfield, N.J., was racially motivated, but only after Assistant District Attorney Dara Martin threatened to withdraw the plea deal.

Yesterday, Manganello told Ohlig, "In order [for the court] to take my plea, I had to tell lies." Ohlig raised his eyebrows and defense attorney Michael Brown of Central Islip urgently whispered to Manganello.

"I apologize for what I just said," Manganello added, his voice shaking. "My emotions came out."

"If you want to go to trial, you're certainly entitled to do that," Ohlig said in the Riverhead courtroom. "You tell me what you'd like to do. I don't want you to think you're getting railroaded."

Manganello tearfully said he would like to begin his sentence of 30 days in jail, 5 years' probation and 700 hours of community service. Brown asked Ohlig to put Manganello in protective custody in jail.

Manganello could have faced 4 years in prison if convicted after trial.

Minutes earlier, his girlfriend, Raechal Dunham, 22, of Centereach, was sentenced to 3 years' probation and 280 hours of community service for her guilty plea to aggravated harassment.

Three codefendants-Nicholas Leocata, 23, his brother Joseph, 27, and Bobbie-Jo White, 27, all of Centereach-are scheduled to be sentenced tomorrow for their roles in the fight at the Road House Pub in Centereach with Jean-Pierre and Brian Moran, 27, of Coram.

Brown and Dunham's attorney, Tad Scharfenburg of Holbrook, both said the September, 1999, incident was not so much a racial attack as a bar fight that got out of hand. If it was something more serious, Brown said he doubted the district attorney's office would have consented to such relatively light sentences.

Jean-Pierre, in fact, dealt out more punishment than he received, said participants and authorities. Manganello was hospitalized after the fight, which spilled across the street before it ended.

"It was a tough case," Scharfenburg said. "I believe Raechal's involvement was minimal. It really wasn't driven by race."

Police said Dunham doused Jean-Pierre with pepper spray and yelled, "Take that, you filthy black ---."

The prosecutor said Manganello's depiction of the incident as a bar fight was his way of minimizing the attack.

"The defendant seems to think this mitigates his culpability, by calling it a bar brawl," Martin said. "Call it what you will, it's still an assault."