

## CASES UNDER WAY IN BEAUTY QUEEN BUSTS

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A week after District Attorney Thomas Spota blasted a televised Suffolk police Internet sex sting that enlisted the help of the reigning Miss America, the prosecutions against those nabbed in the bust are well under way.

Spota had called the operation a "publicity stunt" and said his office had been kept in the dark about its details. Spota's office since then has examined the evidence and been assured that beauty queen Lauren Nelson will be available to testify. The prosecutor's office declined to comment yesterday on the strength of the cases.

Ronald Stahl, 43, a Holbrook luxury car salesman, pleaded not guilty yesterday to indictment charges of second-degree attempted sodomy and attempted dissemination of indecent material to minors. He was released on bail of \$75,000 bond.

Stahl was one of 11 men charged in the April 20 operation by the Suffolk police computer crimes unit. As part of the sting, Nelson posed as an underage girl, chatting with potential predators online and using a photo of her as a young teenager to lure them. It was televised on "America's Most Wanted."

It was not apparent what, if any, involvement Nelson had in Stahl's arrest. Assistant District Attorney Shauna Lonigro said in court that Stahl spoke to an undercover detective posing as a minor to arrange a meeting at the Bay Shore marina.

Lonigro said Stahl, who went by the screen name "Bytemeeeee," used "extremely sexually explicit" language in an Internet chat room to describe the sexual acts he intended to perform in the back of his car.

On the program, host John Walsh confronted Stahl at the marina and asked, "What the hell are you doing here?" Stahl told Walsh that he did not intend to have sex with the girl, but rather was there to "get her not to do this with people."

Stahl's attorney, Michael Brown, of Central Islip, said his client was fired from his job selling cars at a Huntington Mercedes-Benz dealership.

"It's all Hollywood," said Brown, who criticized the police operation, aired during a ratings "sweeps" period on Fox. "That's not what the police department is supposed to be used for."