

WYHAVEN/STATE

Candidate awaits court in sex case

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Cantrell: Cheeks
Has pleaded innocent

NEW HAVEN — Republican aldermanic candidate Cantrell

Cheeks faces charges he had sex with an under-age client at a group home where he formerly worked as a counselor, court records show. Cheeks, who is charged with second-degree sexual assault, has pleaded innocent. Free on \$40,000 bail, he is due in court Oct. 11.

"I can tell you I'm not guilty because I'm not guilty," Cheeks said Tuesday. "I think if you look at the evidence, you'll discover the charges are bogus."

City detectives began investigating Dec. 16 when a teen-age girl came to police headquarters to report she had had sexual relations with Cheeks. The girl was 15 at the time of the alleged incidents. Cheeks is 32.

The alleged sexual encounters occurred Dec. 12 and 13 according to an arrest warrant on file at Superior Court in New Haven. The teen-ager, who takes prescription psychotropic drugs to combat depression and sleeplessness, was confused and in a state of shock when she initially talked to police, according to the warrant.

Detectives determined the girl's story remained consistent after a follow-up interview in May. The teen-ager said she had sex with Cheeks in the kitchen, a bathroom and the laundry room at Douglas House, a residential center for troubled youth at 599 Howard Ave. Cheeks was a probationary counselor at Douglas House for 3 1/2 months before signing to the night shift.

Cheeks, who lives of Winthrop Avenue, no longer works at the home. He now works for the Institute of Professional Practice, which manages homes for the mentally retarded.

Detectives interviewed several of the complainant's friends at the home and talked to another counselor who worked the early-morning shift with Cheeks on the days in question. Cheeks denied the teen's allegations when detectives questioned him on Jan. 12. The arrest warrant was executed on Aug. 7.

The girl told police she was not taking her prescribed medications when the alleged sexual encounters occurred, according to the arrest warrant.

Republican Town Chairman Chris DePino said he knows nothing about the charges. Cheeks is running against Democrat Bruce McClelling for an al-

dermanic seat representing the 28th Ward, a Hill neighborhood. (Cheeks) is vehemently maintaining his innocence and is confident that his name will be cleared," DePino said. "Cantrell deserves the benefit of the doubt and I'm giving it to him."

Cheeks' attorney, Tara L. Knight, declined through a secretary to discuss her client's case. David Sorensen, executive director of the Youth Consortium, which manages Douglas House, was unavailable for comment Tuesday.

Cheeks said he expects to be vindicated in court. "If I was guilty of this, I wouldn't put my name out (as a political candidate) to be trashed," Cheeks said. "If people are going to read something about me, I'd like them to have all the information."