

## Gym Teacher Is Cleared in Sex Case

By TINA KELLEY

A Long Island elementary school gym teacher who had been accused of inappropriately touching nine young girls during class was acquitted of all the charges yesterday in Nassau County District Court in Mineola, his lawyer said.

The teacher, Kent Franks, 39, of Valley Stream, had worked at the Ann M. MacArthur Primary School in Locust Valley for seven years when the allegations against him arose. The police said he had inappropriately touched or rubbed against the girls during class while he and they were clothed, but he maintained his innocence from the beginning.

The girls were 6, 7 and 8 when Mr. Franks was arrested in January 2002 and charged with nine counts of repeated sexual conduct against a child. Investigators said the incidents occurred between September 2000 and November 2001.

Mr. Franks' lawyer, Joseph Tacopina, said the girls gave conflicting accounts on the witness stand. "They never told the same story twice," Mr. Tacopina said. "They all said they didn't realize he did anything wrong until someone suggested it."

After officials learned of the allegations, Mr. Franks was reassigned to work at home preparing curriculum materials. He had faced up to seven years in prison if convicted.

Rick Hinshaw, a spokesman for the Nassau County district attorney, Denis Dillon, said last night, "Obviously we believed the children, or we wouldn't have pursued the case. The grand jury voted for an indictment, but the jury heard the evidence and made their decision, and we respect that."

Asked whether Mr. Franks would return to teaching gym, Mr. Tacopina said, "That's a decision that will not be made tonight, but over the next several months."



**WALKING FREE:** Kent Franks gets a hug from wife Kristine yesterday after the gym teacher was found not guilty of molesting nine girls. *Veronique Louis*

## L.I. gym teacher acquitted

By GILLIAN HARRIS

A Long Island gym teacher thanked jurors for "giving him his life back" yesterday after being cleared of sexually abusing young girls.

Kent Franks, 39, said he felt extremely relieved when a jury of seven men and five women acquitted him of molesting nine girls between the ages of 6 and 8 at Ann MacArthur, a school in Locust Valley.

As the Nassau County jury delivered their unanimous verdict, Franks' wife Kristine began to sob uncontrollably. Across the courtroom, the families of the third-grade pupils who accused Franks of sexually abusing them during gym class also were in tears.

Afterwards, the parents refused to comment on the verdict.

"You have to rape a child to go to jail," one mother snapped angrily.

For Franks, yesterday's outcome marked the end of a "two-year nightmare" that began when two of his former pupils told their parents the gym teacher had touched them inappropriately by rubbing their hands on his genitals while holding a ball. Later another seven girls made similar allegations against him. Franks, a teacher for 14 years, strenuously denied the allegations.

"I would like to thank everybody who supported me throughout this horrific time," he said outside the court. "Especially my wife — she is my hero. She gave birth to our son just five days after these accusations were first made." The couple then kissed and hugged.

Franks' lawyer, Joe Tacopina, said he had "never been more satisfied with a verdict in my entire career." "The last two years

have been the worst of Kent Franks' life," he said. "But at least he has now got his life back. Justice has been done."

During the 10-day trial, defense witnesses spoke of Franks' unblemished teaching record and the good relationship he had with his pupils.

The accusations against Franks emerged more than a year after the alleged incidents took place. The defense argued that the girls, who all appeared in court to give evidence, were coached by their parents about what to say.

Yesterday, Tacopina said "a certain hysteria kicked in. They were well-meaning parents, but untrained, and that's what happens — you get a case like this."

Before leaving the court, Franks said it was too early to decide whether he would return to teaching.