

Savala gets 90 days for abuse



Daniel Savala speaks with his attorney, Julie Willoughby, in Ketchikan Superior Court Wednesday before being led away to begin serving his 90-day jail sentence. Staff photo by Andrew Sheeler

Former youth minister pleads to sex abuse

By **ANDREW SHEELER**

Daily News Staff Writer

A traveling youth minister accused of sexually abusing teenage boys was sentenced in Ketchikan Superior Court Wednesday on a single count.

Daniel Savala, 56, of Texas pleaded guilty to one count of third-degree sexual abuse of a minor in a plea agreement that saw 10 similar charges dropped. As part of the arrangement, Savala was sentenced to two years in prison, with all but 90 days suspended. With good behavior, Savala could be out in 60 days. The sentence reflected the fact that the crime for which he pleaded guilty took place before stricter sentencing guidelines for sex offenders were put in place.

From 1995 to 1997, Savala worked as a youth minister at Ketchikan's Clover Pass Community Church. During that time, he worked with young boys and girls. Assistant District Attorney James Scott said "part of Daniel See 'Savala,' page 2

Savala

Savala's appeal as a youth minister was his ease with kids." As part of his duties, Savala often would talk with kids about delicate subjects related to puberty, Scott said. According to Scott, Savala used that role and the authority that came with it to "groom" several young boys for sexual relationships.

Scott, describing his phrasing as careful, said, "It's no mistake that this kind of thing can happen in a religious environment." He said Savala took advantage of the churchgoers' trust.

One of Savala's alleged victims, after reaching adulthood, told Alaska State Troopers about the abuse. During the subsequent investigation, troopers found a number of other possible victims.

It was for the well-being of the alleged victims, Scott said, that he agreed to the plea deal resulting in an arguably "symbolic" sentence. He said many of the alleged victims privately admitted to being abused but would not do so in public. Had the case gone to trial, Scott said he would have been forced to compel them to testify.

Savala's attorney, Julie Willoughby, spoke after

Scott. She agreed with Scott that a trial would only bring grief to the alleged victims. As Savala's "zealous advocate," she said she would be forced to attack their character and credibility on her client's behalf.

"Trials are messy. Trials are ugly. There are no winners," Willoughby said.

She also said Savala had been out of the youth ministry for many years and now works with college students.

Willoughby described Savala as "an extraordinary man," "humble," with "a little grace about him."

"He walks his talk," she said. She added that Savala took the plea deal out of a sense of "altruism" for the alleged victims.

Willoughby defended the sentence, saying Savala would be stripped of his right to vote, forced to register as a sex offender and barred from ever working in the youth ministry again. The "extreme" loss of rights was punishment enough, Willoughby said.

Savala made no comment.

Judge William Carey said he was reluctant to ac-

cept the deal. He initially called the 90-day prison sentence a "deal-breaker" but after further consideration he agreed to it.

Carey said the details in Savala's charging documents were "quite chilling," and the judge reiterated Scott's assertion that the minister groomed young boys for sex. He said Savala's light sentence was a product of pre-2006 sex offense laws. That year, the state implemented much stricter sentencing guidelines for sex offenders.

"If this had happened six years ago, we'd be talking a different ball game," Carey said.

In addition to his prison time, Savala received three years of probation and will be required to register as a sex offender for 15 years after he is released. Willoughby said Savala planned on relocating to another Southeast community after getting out of Ketchikan Correctional Center in order to minimize the chance of encountering any of the alleged victims. Scott supported that idea.

"I discussed this with counsel and I'd like him off the island as soon as he gets out of prison," he said.