

Prosecution rests case in Jackson trial

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Prosecutors rested their case Wednesday in the Michael Jackson trial after more than two months of dramatic testimony in which they sought to prove that the pop star molested a teenage cancer patient and conspired to hold his family captive at his fairy-tale estate.

The defense immediately filed a motion for a judgment of acquittal on grounds the prosecution did not prove its case.

Superior Court Judge Rodney S. Melville said the motion would be heard first thing Thursday.

District Attorney Tom Sneddon closed his case pending the judge's decisions on whether to admit various items that had been shown to the jury but had not yet been formally entered into evidence.

The judge said the prosecution could reopen its case later depending on his decisions.

The prosecution closed its case with witness Rudy Provencio, who talked about hearing a phone discussion in which the singer's associates talked with Jackson about response to a damaging documentary about him.

But the witness, who used to work for a Jackson associate, did not tie Jackson to the heart of the alleged conspiracy, quoting the singer only as saying such things as that he didn't want to hold a press conference.

Provencio then came under withering cross-examination by Jackson attorney Thomas Mesereau Jr.

Provencio acknowledged that two weeks ago he was given a copy of an interview he gave to law enforcement long ago, and when asked to check it for accuracy, wrote in changes to implicate Jackson in the alleged conspiracy.

Prosecutors wove their case around drama in and out of the courtroom.

A colorful cast of more than 80 witnesses paraded to the stand over nearly 10 weeks, chief among them Jackson's young accuser, the boy's theatrical mother and others who alleged Jackson molested boys as far back as the 1980s. Some of the prosecution's own witnesses wound up benefiting the defense, including Jackson's ex-wife, who cast him as a victim of money-hungry charlatans.

Without saying a word, Jackson remained the trial's

star. Even his absence, twice caused by ailments, created a scene — and once required him to rush to court in pajamas, under threat of arrest by the judge.

After that Jackson was on time and calmly listened to testimony in a rainbow of suits with brocade vests and matching armbands.

As the last prosecution witness stepped down, Sneddon closed a presentation that had two main thrusts: that in 2003 Jackson twice fondled the boy, at the time a 13-year-old cancer survivor, and arranged to detain him and his family so they would rebut a damaging documentary about the singer.

"Living With Michael Jackson" pictured the boy side-by-side with Jackson, who said he let children sleep in his bed but dismissed the notion that the practice had any sexual meaning.

Jackson allegedly molested the boy at least 14 days after the program aired in the U.S., as he and associates panicked over its implications.

The molestation case boiled down to the word of the accuser and his brother. The boy testified he was twice molested in Jackson's bedroom at Neverland ranch.

His brother said he saw Jackson twice molest the accuser as the boy slept. It was left unclear whether they gave conflicting accounts or described two different sets of alleged events.

The accuser told jurors how he met Jackson while being treated for cancer and thought the singer was "the coolest guy in the world." He also said he was shown adult Web sites during his first visit to Neverland.

The boy recalled being whisked about in limousines and a private jet, being hosted by Jackson at a Florida resort and appearing in a rebuttal video with his family. He and his siblings also claimed Jackson gave them wine.

During a stinging cross-examination, the accuser became combative and admitted having been a troublemaker at school. He also said he protested leaving Neverland at the end because "I was having fun."

Sneddon won key rulings from the judge, including one that let him all but try a 1993 case that never made it to court because Jackson and the accuser reached a multi-million-dollar financial

settlement.

Under a California law specific to molestation cases that permits claims of past activities to show a pattern of behavior, witness after witness told of seeing Jackson touching boys inappropriately more than a decade ago. On cross-examination, however, Mesereau showed each was paid thousands for their stories by tabloids or had lost a big lawsuit to Jackson.

One of the most significant of these witnesses was a 24-year-old man who said Jackson touched him over and under his shorts during

tickling games as early as 1987.

His mother, a Neverland maid, testified she saw Jackson shower with a boy. But it turned out she was paid \$20,000 by a TV tabloid reporter before she told her story and that she and her son received a settlement from Jackson. Jurors were not told it was \$2 million.

Prosecutors also spent considerable time showing jurors numerous girlie magazines seized from Jackson's home, then near the end of their case presented two art books with pictures of nude

boys.

Last week, prosecutors appeared blindsided when Jackson's ex-wife Deborah Rowe, the mother of his two eldest children, contradicted Sneddon's opening statement claim that she would relate being manipulated by Jackson associates.

Instead, she called the unindicted alleged coconspirators "opportunistic vultures" and said they conspired against Jackson, not with him, scheming to make millions from his troubles.

During her five days on the witness stand the

accuser's mother admitted to lying under oath in an unrelated lawsuit and, extending her arms to the jury, implored jurors: "Please don't judge me!"

Testifying to the conspiracy allegations, she told of being coached to do a rebuttal video and being held against her will by Jackson henchmen who spoke of "killers" pursuing her.

She said they once suggested she and her family would disappear in a hot air balloon and planned to send them on a one-way trip to Brazil.

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