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## East Bay couple convicted in nationwide human trafficking ring

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MARTINEZ — A man who was linked to at least three human trafficking and pimping operations since 2001 was convicted of conspiracy, trafficking, and rape Wednesday.

James Vernon Joseph Jr., who authorities say goes by the alias “Spyder,” now faces a sentence of more than 100 years to life. His common law wife, Avisa Lavassani, was convicted of conspiracy and human trafficking, and faces a possible sentence of 20 years in prison.

Both defendants were acquitted of kidnapping charges related to allegations made by a woman who testified she was forcibly taken from a restaurant and forced into the sex industry 16 years ago. The woman appeared on America’s Most Wanted using the name “Natasha” and said Joseph had forced her into the sex trade; beating and raping her and other women into submission.

Natasha has been a thorn in Joseph’s side for years; she was responsible for his arrest and conviction on an assault charge in New York years ago, and sparked the investigation that led to Joseph’s conviction Wednesday. Natasha and several other women, referred to in court records as Jane Does, testified Joseph had used threats and violence to control them.

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“Fifteen years of horrific crimes and a nationwide human trafficking ring have come to an end thanks to the phenomenal courage of the survivors — the Jane Does — who came forward in this case,” prosecutor Aron DeFerrari said in a written statement to this newspaper. “Each and every woman who had the guts to confront this monster, James Joseph, in court and hold their ground has my, and our community’s, admiration and gratitude.”

Joseph admitted during the trial that he was a pimp, but denied that he’d forced anyone into the sex trade. Under state law, the crime of pimping applies to people who recruit willing prostitutes to work for them, whereas human trafficking is the act of forcing an adult, or coercing a child, to become a sex worker.

Joseph did not react as the verdict was read. Lavassani bowed her head.

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The verdict brings to a close what prosecutors describe as the biggest trafficking case in the county’s history. Joseph and Lavassani lived in an elegant Danville home, drove expensive cars, and sent sex workers around the country, attracting wealthy clients who paid tens of thousands of dollars for their services. They somehow avoided detection in the quiet suburb for years.

But then, by coincidence, Natasha gave a presentation about human trafficking in the Bay Area and told her personal story. A San Ramon officer attended the talk and thought he recognized the name Spyder from an unrelated case. His revelation led to a wiretap investigation by the FBI and San Ramon police.

Without those agencies’ help, DeFerrari said, the pair, “would still be operating a human trafficking ring wherein young women were systematically turned into slaves.”

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Tags: [Human Trafficking](#), [Regional](#)



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