

Mug shots hinder future job hunt

Legal Services: 'Get mug shots removed now'

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Contributing Writer

The Google image search function is a tribute to the mistakes that can follow people.

That careless open container of alcohol on campus after game time can end in a mug shot being plastered all over mug-shot websites — and can make it difficult for students to land a job after

graduation.

These mug shots often include those of people who were found not guilty of the crimes they were charged with, and exist even when charges have been dropped altogether.

The websites that keep these snapshots of shame thrive because mug shots are public records.

But there are still legal options for students if they find their record being published online.

"If you're graduating and you

have something you want sealed or expunged on your record, you better come in, at the very latest, [during the] beginning of your senior year," said Jamie Owen, a UCF Legal Services attorney.

As long as the incident in the criminal record occurred in a county where there is a UCF campus, Owen and the staff of attorneys at Legal Services can represent students.

Many mug-shot websites offer to remove records upon request

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Prior arrests can impede job searches for graduates.

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for a fee. The price for removal from Mugshots.com: \$399 for one arrest with mug shot(s).

Donald Cadet, a freshman in the health sciences pre-clinical program, believes that a mug shot should not be exposed on the Internet because it violates privacy.

"I believe it's extorting a person. It's not even their mug shot, so why should they have it?" he said. "They have no reason to put it up there in the first place."

Owen advised not to pay sites to have records removed.

"Sometimes they will ask you for a fee to take it off and you pay that, and sometimes it pops up somewhere else and they say they had nothing to do with that other website where it's now at," she said. "But that's an awfully big coincidence that you just paid them \$400 and it shows up somewhere else."

Currently under committee in Florida are two bills that are attempting to prohibit the solicitation and acceptance of payment to have a mug shot removed from a website: House Bill 265, sponsored by Rep. Carlos Trujillo, and Sen. Darren Soto's Senate Bill 298, which will specify a time period during which a mug shot must be removed.

Marisa Zimmerman, a senior environmental studies major, believes asking people to pay a fee to have a mug shot removed from a website should be illegal.

"If it's a violent crime, you should definitely have your picture out there, and people should know that you could be dangerous. But not, say, underage drinking or something," she said. "I see no reason for that to be on the Internet."

Owen said that sometimes these sites will remove mug shots when a record is sealed or expunged.

According to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement,

'I believe it's extorting a person. It's not even their mug shot so why should they have it?'

The only entities with access to a sealed record include employers within the health care industry, law enforcement and education, among others.

When a criminal record is expunged, those who would have access to a sealed record can still obtain the record with a court order, but they would receive a caveat statement that says "Criminal Information has been Expunged from this Record."

It is also necessary to determine what crimes are eligible for the process.

Some of the most common categories: DUIs, possession of alcohol under 21 and petit theft.

People are only allowed to have a record expunged or sealed once. Charges must either have not been brought against a person or were otherwise dropped.

One of the ways this can happen is through a pretrial diversion program, which is a deferred prosecution program for selected first-time offenders, offered by the state attorney's office. The program, which can last between nine and 15 months, can cost between \$300 and \$750. It includes courses such as victim impact classes, anger management classes and theft prevention classes.

Myrna Barsoum, a freshman biomedical sciences major, believes some people just need one more opportunity to get back on their feet.

"I think if it's something minor and if they took the classes and they were serious about their community service and they're willing to not do that again, then that's OK," she said.

Certain categories of crime aren't eligible: domestic violence, aggravated battery, child abuse and sexual crimes.

"We do sometimes see students with more severe crimes that aren't going to allow them to be eligible," Owen said. "But the vast majority of students that we see do not fall into that category."

The next step is applying for a certificate of eligibility. Along with the application, a student has to request a certified copy of his or her court disposition from the Clerk of Court from the jurisdiction in which the incident occurred. Fingerprints also have to be taken, which can be done for free at the UCF Police Department. Then, the certificate package is sent off to the state attorney's office, where it awaits approval before being sent to the FDLE.

The process can take a long time. Currently, the FDLE is processing applications from October. Owen recommends students visit Legal Services well before graduation so that the process can be done before they need to find jobs.

"Some people just think that if you get arrested for something, you're guilty, and that anything like that is the worst thing ever," Owen said. "It would really make some people biased against people. So anything that a person can do to help minimize that I think really has some value for them."

DONALD CADET

Health sciences freshman