

Drug Courier Gets Probation

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MIDDLETOWN — A New Jersey man who told police that he was paid \$1,500 by drug bosses to transport 51 pounds of marijuana out of Connecticut was spared prison time Thursday.

Gianmarco Ponce, 25, of Union City, N.J., was sentenced to three years' probation in exchange for his guilty plea to a charge of possession of a controlled substance with intent to sell.

Ponce was caught on surveillance tapes picking up the marijuana -- with an estimated street value of more than \$80,000 -- from a man in the parking lot of the Crystal Mall in Waterford.

Prosecutors said that a confidential informant alerted police to the drug deal before it occurred.

Ponce's attorney, Salvatore Bonanno of Hartford, said that Ponce did not have a criminal record and called the arrest an "isolated incident, one which I suspect and believe will never repeat itself."

Ponce plans to serve the probation while living in New Jersey. Bonanno said that Ponce was appreciative of the sentence -- handed down by Superior Court Judge Frank A. Iannotti -- of three years in prison suspended after three years' probation.

"He was very embarrassed by this and he's grateful the court has given him an opportunity to prove himself," Bonanno said.

Agents of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and Clinton, New London and state police set up a plan to nab the drug suspects before they had a chance to leave the state. With hidden cameras rolling, Ponce picked up the marijuana and loaded it into his car, police said.

When Ponce and the other man left the mall, police followed until the men were stopped on I-95 at the Westbrook-Clinton line. Detectives later searched a building where the marijuana had reportedly been stored prior to the drug deal. Court records do not identify the location of the building.

Angel More Portella, 35, address unknown, is serving five years in prison for his role in the drug deal. Portella also faces deportation once he is released, according to court records.