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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 17, 2008

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GUILTY VERDICT IN PINELLAS HIGH SPEED CRASH

Tampa, Florida - A jury in U.S. District Court today found Damien Howard, age 30, guilty of being a convicted felon in possession of a firearm. The maximum penalty Howard faces is ten years' imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine. The sentencing hearing is scheduled for January 12, 2009, at 1:30 p.m., before United States District Judge James D. Whittemore.

Damian Howard was indicted on April 17, 2008, on firearm and cocaine charges. According to testimony and evidence presented at trial, in the early morning hours of March 24, 2008, shots were heard in the Greenwood area of Clearwater. In responding to that call, Clearwater officers observed a dark-colored SUV speeding through the area. Howard, who was driving the SUV, nearly collided with two Clearwater police patrol cars before leading police on a thirty-minute high speed chase that involved several local law enforcement agencies. Traffic at several intersections along Belcher Road, from Dunedin to Pinellas Park, had to be halted for safety reasons that night, and law enforcement officers employed stop sticks in an attempt to stop Howard. Eventually, Howard crashed the SUV when he tried to navigate a turn at the intersection of Belcher Road and Old Coachman Road in Clearwater. After Howard was removed from the vehicle, Clearwater Police officers located a loaded 9mm handgun on the floorboard of the passenger seat and cocaine in the center console.

The case was investigated by the United States Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Clearwater Police Department, and the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office. The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Jeffrey Miller and Kelley Howard-Allen.