

'I DIDN'T KNOW . . . THEY WOULD DIE' - CHARGES REDUCED FOR MOM WHO LEFT KIDS IN HOT CAR

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She said she was just stupid.

Her attorney agreed, and Wednesday, so did the judge.

So **Tarajee Maynor** -- who had been charged with felony murder after her two children died in her sweltering car while she visited a Southfield beauty salon -- now faces a maximum sentence of 15 years in prison instead of life without parole.

Judge Stephen Cooper of 46th District Court in Southfield reduced the charges against **Maynor**, 25, to involuntary manslaughter after a preliminary examination. The prosecutor's office plans to appeal Cooper's decision.

Maynor, a Detroit resident, remains on a suicide watch while being held in the Oakland County Jail without bond.

"I didn't know (was too stupid to know) that they would die," **Maynor** wrote in a statement to Southfield Police Detective Chris Helgert. "I didn't want them to die."

The case, which has received international attention, was the first of at least three recent incidents involving children left in vehicles. The other two were not fatal. A grandmother left a 2-week-old baby in a car outside a Big Lots store July 5 in Redford Township, and the next day a Bloomfield Hills mother left four kids in a running SUV parked at the Somerset Collection in Troy. The mother, Nadia Simon, faces a misdemeanor charge of child neglect.

Maynor's case started at 4:20 p.m. on the steamy afternoon of June 28, when she parked behind the North Park Towers for a hair appointment at the Utopia Salon. In the back of her black Dodge Neon were Adonnis **Maynor**, 3, and his sister Acacia, 10 months.

According to testimony, she locked her kids inside, left the driver's window open about 1 1/2 inches and headed for the salon.

Outside, it was 86 degrees; inside the car, it became much hotter.

Maynor -- a student at the University of Michigan at Dearborn who supports herself with student loans -- spent the next 3 1/2 hours in an odyssey of personal indulgence. While her kids were dying in the afternoon heat, **Maynor** was getting a massage, trying on a sundress and having her hair relaxed, shampooed, trimmed and blown dry, according to testimony.

Although she left the salon to buy a soft drink and snack at a convenience store in the high-rise, she never went out to check on her kids, salon employees told the court. She never mentioned them.

Utopia beauty salon co-owner Karl Reed said kids are welcomed into his shop every day.

When **Maynor** found her children dead in the car, she drove around for hours concocting a story of abduction and rape, Helgert said.

By the time she arrived at Providence Hospital, which is directly just minutes from the hair salon, it was about 11 p.m. Adonnis' body was stiff with rigor mortis. Acacia was sprawled in her unfastened child safety seat, emergency room worker Valerie Gasiewski said.

Vomit smeared the car, and Adonnis' mouth was covered in foam.

"She jumped out of the car and started screaming and throwing her arms up in the air," Gasiewski testified.

But, she said, there were no tears: "She was just screaming and flinging her arms around."

Helgert said **Maynor**'s story quickly collapsed when he fed her some disinformation -- that the site of the supposed abduction was under video surveillance.

"Gradually, it led into her beginning to cry -- genuinely cry real tears," Helgert said. "She was gasping, 'I was, I was.' "

Then she got out the words "North Park Towers" and groped for the detective's notepad, and wrote out "at the beauty parlor."

Cooper reduced the charges after arguments from defense lawyer Elbert Hatchett and Oakland County Assistant Prosecutor Marc Barron on whether **Maynor** intended to seriously harm her children.

To charge **Maynor** with first-degree child abuse, Cooper said, the prosecution needed to show that she intended to do great harm to or kill her children. The prosecution sought to use felony child abuse charges to rank the children's deaths as murder.

But Cooper said the evidence didn't allow him to bind **Maynor** over for murder because the prosecution hadn't shown that she intended for her children to die or suffer severe injury.

Hatchett argued for involuntary manslaughter, saying **Maynor**'s acts didn't amount to murder.

"It was grossly negligent. It was grossly stupid. It was grossly ignorant," Hatchett told the judge.

No, Barron said -- it was murder. He said he met the legal requirement to show **Maynor** "knowingly or intentionally" took actions that led to the children's deaths.

Given the June 28 heat conditions, he said: "We all know leaving a 10-month-old and a 3-year-old in a car will result in death."

But **Maynor** told Helgert she didn't know that.

And so, she told Helgert, when she found her children dead she drove around for hours, contemplating suicide. Then she came up with the abduction story.

Helgert asked why. She reached for his pad again.

"So that I wouldn't appear to be a horrible person," she wrote on the tablet. "Someone who left their children in a hot car."

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AT RISK IN CARS

There's never a good reason to leave kids alone in a car. Some reasons why:

- * Heat: Temperatures inside a car can rocket to more than 120 degrees in minutes, even on relatively cool days.
- * Theft: If a car is left running with the air conditioner on, a thief with a brick can drive off with it -- possibly with the kids still inside.
- * Abduction: It wouldn't take long for a kidnapper to talk an abandoned child out of a car.
- * Accidents: Curious kids can get cars out of park and into neutral, drive or reverse with disastrous results.

Source: Police and child safety experts.

- * First-degree murder: willful, deliberate and premeditated killing, punishable by imprisonment for life without parole. A killing can also be first-degree murder if it occurs during certain felonies, including first-degree child abuse.
- * Second-degree murder: all other kinds of murder, punishable by life in prison or any term of years.
- * Voluntary manslaughter: in general, an overt act that results in an unintended death. Maximum punishment is 15 years.

* Involuntary manslaughter: in general, a neglectful act or omission of duty that results in death.
Maximum punishment is 15 years.

Source: Michigan law.

Caption: Photos by HUGH GRANNUM/Detroit Free Press

TarajeeMaynor shows emotion in court Wednesday. A judge said evidence didn't prove the University of Michigan student intended to do serious harm. She's now charged with involuntary manslaughter.

With her attorney, Elbert Hatchett, **TarajeeMaynor** appears Wednesday in 46th District Court. Charges in the deaths of her two children were reduced to involuntary manslaughter. Judge Stephen Cooper reduced the charges after arguments from the defense and prosecution on whether **Maynor** intended to seriously harm her children left in the heat of her parked car.

Memo: CHILDREN FIRST. SIDEBAR ATTACHED

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