

## **Murder charge reduced for beauty parlor mom - Statement of ignorance sways judge's decision**

Detroit News, The (MI) - Thursday, July 11, 2002

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SOUTHFIELD -- After sitting stone-faced while a witness described the vomit-smeared faces of her dead children, **Tarajee S. Maynor** was finally moved to tears when she heard her own words read in court by a police officer.

"I never left my children in the car before. I didn't know -- was too stupid to know they would die. I didn't want them to die," Southfield Detective Christopher Helgert read Wednesday from an interview with **Maynor**. The 25-year-old mother had confessed to leaving her toddler son and baby daughter inside a closed car in 88-degree weather for nearly four hours while she visited a hair salon.

**Maynor** showed little emotion throughout the preliminary examination, during which witnesses testified how she spent the afternoon of June 28 in an air-conditioned salon getting a massage, trying on a sun dress, studying and having her hair done while her children died of hyperthermia, or heat exposure, in the back seat of a black Dodge Neon outside North Park Towers in Southfield.

Witnesses said she never once mentioned her children, asked to bring them inside or left to check on them. She did leave the salon once to get a drink and snack, a salon worker said.

Little did **Maynor** know that her own words -- an alleged admission of ignorance -- may spare her from a life behind bars.

Relying heavily on the interview -- in which **Maynor** feigned a story of rape then admitted to contemplating suicide as she drove around with her dead children in the car -- 46th District Judge Stephen C. Cooper reduced charges of felony murder against her to two charges of involuntary manslaughter, saying prosecutors failed to bring evidence to support the higher charges.

The decision surprised prosecutors, who will start working on an appeal today, but came as a relief to **Maynor**'s attorney Elbert Hatchett, who characterized his client's action as a stupid mistake, not murder.

**Maynor**, a pregnant college student who lives at home with her father, had faced the possibility of life behind bars if convicted of felony murder in the deaths of 3-year-old Adonnis and 10-month-old Acacia. Involuntary manslaughter is punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

Testimony also showed how **Maynor**, once she discovered her dead children, tried to deceive police about how they died and later could barely utter the words of where she had been and what she had done. And how she had considered taking her own life while concocting an elaborate story of kidnapping and rape that a detective refused to believe.

**Maynor** 's parents and two sisters, who all sat together in the courtroom, declined to talk to reporters. They were quiet throughout the proceedings, whispering occasionally among themselves.

**Maynor** showed little emotion as witnesses took the stand at the 46th District Court. Utopia Salon co-owner Karl Reed told how **Maynor** arrived for a 4 p.m. appointment for a "wash, blow dry and curl" as she did almost every 10 days.

Reed, who said children are in the salon every day, recalled the salon being very busy that day and appointments were backed up.

"She could have brought them (children) in," he testified. "I had no idea."

During her visit, **Maynor** had a relaxer put in her hair, Reed said. A relaxer is a cream-based substance used to straighten wavy or curly hair.

"She sat and waited for a while because I was backed up," he said. "She was studying, reading books. She tried on a sun dress and had a sit-up massage."

Reed said **Maynor** left after 8 p.m.

Investigators said that was when she walked down to the parking lot outside North Park Towers and found her children dead. The sight, she would later tell police, caused her to drive aimlessly around the area, contemplate suicide and finally concoct a story.

Finally, at 11 p.m. she arrived at Providence Hospital to report her children's deaths.

Valerie Gasiewski, an emergency-room attendant, said **Maynor** pulled up in the black Neon, jumped out of the driver's door and began screaming and waving her arms.

Gasiewski said she looked into the back seat and saw Acacia dead in the car seat, vomit smeared across her face. Adonnis was laying on the floor, foam curled out of his mouth, his body stiff.

The vehicle, which Gasiewski moved to clear the ER area, smelled so badly of vomit, she had to put her head out of the window.

Helgert, the police detective, testified he grew suspicious of **Maynor** 's story of being abducted from a Southfield parking lot. He told **Maynor** the lot was under video surveillance and that investigators had not seen her on the tapes. He then spoke to her about the importance of truth and "how truth would help lighten her burden."

"That was when she genuinely cried," Helgert testified. "She said 'I was ... I was ...' then reached in front of me and took a pen and wrote 'at the beauty salon.' "

"Once I read the words out loud, she was able to articulate what happened."

**Maynor** told Helgert she concocted an elaborate story "so I didn't appear a horrible person who left someone in a hot car."

**Maynor** 's intent questioned

In charging **Maynor** with first-degree felony murder -- which is a combination of second-degree murder and first-degree child abuse -- prosecutors were required to show she intended to cause serious physical or mental harm to her children.

Prosecutor Marc Barron argued **Maynor** 's intent could be proven three ways: by locking her children in a hot car for nearly four hours, disregarding the possible consequences of her actions and causing serious physical harm to her children.

Hatchett said prosecutors had made a case for involuntary manslaughter, showing that his client acted in a grossly negligent manner -- but not felony murder.

"They must prove she intended to kill those children. They can't. She said she didn't intend to kill," Hatchett said.

After nearly two hours of testimony, Cooper paused for a moment and told the courtroom the question before him was not whether a horrible incident had occurred, but whether prosecutors had proven their case for a felony murder charge.

They had not, he said.

"The question here is whether this defendant intentionally caused this result, and the court cannot find that. The defendant said 'I would never hurt my children. I was too stupid to know they would die.' There is no evidence to refute that," Cooper said.

Cooper said prosecutors had failed to provide evidence that **Maynor** intended to harm her children and therefore could not make the case that she should be charged with first-degree child abuse, which is a felony.

"You wouldn't leave a gallon of milk in a car for 30 minutes, let alone a 10-month-old child or 3-year-old child without checking on them," Barron told Cooper. "She has to be held to the same standards as everyone in Michigan."

Deborah Carley, chief deputy prosecutor for Oakland County, said her office disagrees with Cooper's assessment that first-degree child abuse is a specific-intent crime. Rather, she said, it is a crime of general intent, which means prosecutors don't need to show **Maynor** intended to harm her children, only that they died as a result of the harm.

Carley also said there is no case law in Michigan on first-degree child abuse, which means there is no precedent.

"The facts clearly show a person who put her children in the car and knew the outcome of what

would happen," she said.

Witnesses, others reflect

Several of the witnesses, such as salon co-owner Reed, sat out in the hallway following their testimony.

"I can't explain what happened or make any sense out of it at all," Reed said. "All I hope is this all won't affect my business too much. We've already had people calling us up -- calling us 'baby killers.' Some people hold us responsible for what happened. As if we had something to do with it."

Some people who attended the hearing, like Terri Faison, 32, of Detroit were compelled to see first-hand the woman they've read and heard about.

"It's hard to believe a mother would do something like that," Faison said, cradling her 7-month-old son, Tate, in her lap. "I feel for her as a mother. It is just unbelievable. One of the reasons I came here was to hear more about her. Did something happen to her that I should be watching for? Could this happen to me?"

Hatchett, who encouraged Cooper to consider the lesser charges, said they are consistent with the elements of the case, including his client's own words.

"She told me this was the greatest tragedy in her life and I believe her," Hatchett said. "She said she never intended to kill her children and I believe her.

"She was grossly negligent, grossly stupid, grossly ignorant," Hatchett said. "By her own words, that's what happened."

Hatchett said he decided not to raise the question of bond for **Maynor**, who was examined by a psychiatrist and found competent to stand trial.

"There is no question she is competent," said Hatchett. "But she is still under a suicide watch and I, (and) her family, all agree that it (jail) is probably the best place for her right now."

What's next

A hearing for **Tarajee Shaheer Maynor** on charges of involuntary manslaughter is scheduled later this month in Oakland Circuit Court before Judge Wendy Potts. The date is still undetermined. **Maynor** is being held in Oakland County Jail without bond.

Caption: **TarajeeMaynor** cries in court Wednesday as she listens to a Southfield detective read from her interview with police: "I didn't want them to die." Tracy Key of Utopia Salon describes how **Maynor** spent hours getting a massage, trying on a dress and having her hair done while her kids sat in an overheated car.

Edition: Two Dot

Section: Front

Page: 01A

Index Terms: MURDER ; CHILDREN ; ARRESTS ; CRIME ; CHILD ; CARE

Dateline: SOUTHFIELD

Record Number: det12606053

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