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### Adoptive parents on trial in Ethiopian girl's death

The trial of Larry and Carri Williams in Skagit County has revealed details of alleged child abuse, and highlighted gaps in protection of adopted children in Washington.

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Immanuel Williams' face barely showed over the witness stand.

Many in the courtroom could see only the top of his chair swivel slightly and his eyebrows scrunch up in confusion.

Sign-language interpreters relayed questions to the deaf 12-year-old boy, and the answers flashed from his fingertips.

"Very often that happened," he signed, "that I went without food."

Immanuel's adoptive parents, Larry and Carri Williams, of Sedro-Woolley, are on trial in Skagit County Superior Court, charged with homicide by abuse, manslaughter and child assault for allegedly abusing Immanuel and their adoptive daughter, Hana, and causing her death. They have entered pleas of not guilty.

The couple adopted both children from Ethiopia in 2008. Three years later, Hana was found dead of hypothermia, face down in the mud, in the family's backyard, her malnourished body covered in scratches and bruises. She was about 13 years old.

The case has highlighted the gaps in oversight of adoptions in Washington and drawn attention to the challenges that some Ethiopian adoptees and their new parents may face. Parents and leaders in Washington's adoption system are closely following the trial, as are Seattle-area Ethiopians, who have attended proceedings every day, almost as a vigil.

After China, most children adopted into the United States from abroad now come from Ethiopia, according to the State Department. Disease, poverty and fraud have increasingly brought children to Ethiopian orphanages and eventually to American homes — from a little more than 100 adoptions in 2002 to more than 1,500 in 2012.

Many of these children are 5 to 12 years old and may have lived in an orphanage for years. For some, past traumatic experiences, coupled with language and cultural differences, can bring challenges within a family.

Defense lawyers have sought to portray Carri and Larry Williams as misguided but well-intentioned parents, saying she worked to make the house peaceful and home-schooled their seven biological and two adopted children while he worked from noon to midnight as a millwright at Boeing.

Hana and Immanuel's health problems, including their scars and a stomach condition that hastened Hana's death, existed before the children were adopted, defense attorneys have said.

Neither side disputes that the couple harshly disciplined their children — and the defense says both regret certain parenting decisions. What jurors must decide is whether their parenting amounted to criminal behavior.

### **Family's home life**

Skagit County Prosecutor Rich Weyrich has charged that the Williamses engaged in a pattern of abuse that left permanent physical scars and was tantamount to torture, harming Immanuel and causing Hana's death.

The maximum penalty for each of the charges of homicide by abuse, manslaughter and child assault — Class A felonies — is life in prison without the possibility of parole and/or a \$50,000 fine.

Since the trial began July 26, experts, adoption workers, relatives, acquaintances and law-enforcement officers have answered questions about the family's home life, Hana's death and the details of the adoption.

Immanuel has told the court that he and Hana were beaten, made to eat outside or deprived of food altogether. Hana was made to sleep in a closet, bathe outside with a garden hose and relieve herself in a portable toilet instead of the family bathroom.

Five of the Williams' biological children have also testified, describing details of the punishments their adopted siblings received.

The evening of May 12, 2011, was rainy and cold when Carri Williams called 911 and told dispatchers that Hana was unconscious and face down in the mud after refusing to come indoors. The biological children have testified Hana was in the cold for hours as punishment, and that their mother had told Hana to do jumping-jacks to stay warm.

When Hana stopped, her brothers were instructed to hit her legs with a plastic switch, according to court testimony.

An autopsy showed that Hana, 5 feet tall and weighing 78 pounds, was covered in scratches and bruises and that her hypothermia was hastened by malnutrition and a stomach ailment.

Defense attorney Laura Riquelme has told the court that Carri Williams tried repeatedly to get Hana to come inside that night but she refused. Riquelme also said that Immanuel did not suffer marks and scars at the Williams' house but rather had them when he came into the family.

Larry Williams' defense attorney, Rachel Forde, has presented him as unaware of Hana's condition on her last night and that "certainly he cared about whether Hana lived or died."

After the state rests its case, perhaps this week, the defense lawyers are expected to call just a handful of witnesses, possibly including acquaintances of the family to testify that the couple were loving and affectionate toward their children.

Hana's age will continue to be an issue, as the charge of homicide by abuse applies only to children under 16.

No one knows for sure when Hana was born because proper documentation is often missing in adoptions from Ethiopia.

### **Better oversight needed**

The case of Hana and Immanuel is an extreme example of the gaps in Washington's adoption system.

A variety of agencies oversee the fate of adopted children, whether the child was adopted through a private organization, the courts or the state's welfare system.

In general, adoptions go very well, said Mary Meinig, director of the Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman, an independent agency housed in the governor's office and charged with protecting children from harm in the child-welfare system.

"I wouldn't say it's a failed system in any way," she said. "I think it can be improved."

The biggest need is better oversight, whether by the state or a private agency, she said. The state has laws to protect adopted children, but its authority is limited in private adoptions, such as that of Hana and Immanuel.

"They don't have the power or responsibility to oversee all these adoptions," she said.

In 2012, a committee of private and public child-welfare agencies, led by the ombudsman's office and by the Children's Administration in the Department of Social and Health Services, highlighted 15 cases where an adoption agency or court had "scrutinized and approved" a family for internationally and domestically adopted children who later suffered at the families' hand.

The families showed a common pattern of physical and emotional abuse, including isolating and depriving children of food.

"In many of these cases, it just continues to spiral to a point where the discipline practices get way out of hand," ombudsman Patrick Dowd said.

Another problem is that there is no way to track the rates of abuse and neglect in adopted families, he said.

The committee reported that responsibility for the problems is diffuse, with shortcomings at every step in the adoption process — assessing a family, identifying red flags and following up.

"It's not like we identified a smoking gun," Dowd said.

Meanwhile, the committee, comprising representatives of the Children's Administration, Child Protective Services, private adoption agencies and others, is plodding forward, figuring out how to put recommended changes in place, DSHS spokeswoman Chris Case said.

Stronger laws are needed, the committee found, but a bill before the Legislature foundered last session after it was proposed by Rep. Mary Helen Roberts, D-Edmonds, to improve the adoption process.

"These things grind ponderously slow sometimes," Case said.

Parents following the trial have been shocked by Hana's death and have tried to understand what went wrong at the Williams' house.

"We do not do enough to prepare adoptive parents," said Maureen McCauley Evans, a Seattle-based mother of Ethiopian adoptees and former executive director of three child welfare and adoption organizations on the East Coast. She has been observing the trial since the beginning.

U.S. adoption agencies accredited under an international treaty known as The Hague Convention require parents to undergo at least 10 hours of pre-adoption training that can be completed online — which McCauley Evans called inadequate.

The Ethiopian Community Center in Seattle has tried to help families with adopted children from Ethiopia, offering parenting classes, cultural camps and a welcoming ceremony based on Ethiopian traditions.

"We want others to know that we're here as resources for them," outreach-committee member Metti Mulugeta said.