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Case of adopted daughter's death goes to jury

After closing arguments concluded this week, the jury has begun deliberations in the case against Larry and Carri Williams, the Skagit County couple accused of abusing their adopted daughter to death.

By Gina Cole

Skagit Valley Herald

MOUNT VERNON — The jury has started deliberating the case against Larry and Carri Williams, a Sedro-Woolley-area couple accused of abusing their adopted daughter to death and assaulting their adopted son.

They must weigh whether the pair caused the girl's death and caused "substantial bodily harm" to the boy, or if, as defense lawyers argued, they were just using "reasonable parental discipline" and could not anticipate or stop their daughter from perishing from exposure behind the house.

Lawyers made their closing arguments Wednesday and Thursday in Skagit County Superior Court, and the state had one last rebuttal Thursday afternoon. Then the Williamses' fate was passed to jurors.

Spectators have filled the courtroom benches most days of the trial. Members of Seattle's Ethiopian community have been present each day, sitting on the prosecutors' side in silent support of Hana.

One, Metassibia Mulugeta, said she had her doubts until Carri Williams took the stand, but the defendant's own testimony convinced Mulugeta she was guilty. A mother of eight other children should have been able to tell something was wrong with Hana before she died, Mulugeta said.

Roseanne Bramlett of Bellingham is a friend of Carri Williams who has been coming since the trial's first week, when the jury was being selected. She also has been contributing money to a fund to help the Williamses pay their mortgage while Larry Williams has been in jail.

"I just feel like the facts were laid out pretty clear," she said. "I feel really confident that things will go well."

Carri Williams' case

A jury could have plenty of reasons to doubt the charges against Carri Williams, Skagit County Public Defender Wes Richards said Thursday morning in his three-hour closing argument.

Richards said Carri Williams did not cause Hana's hypothermia — if that is even what really killed the girl. He noted inflammation in Hana's esophagus that pointed to vomiting and suggested she could have been bulimic.

The homicide-by-abuse charge applies only if Hana was younger than 16 when she died. Her age has been at issue throughout the case, and no expert has said she was definitely younger than 16. That issue alone could result in a not-guilty verdict on that charge.

The manslaughter charge requires that Carri Williams knew there was a substantial risk to Hana's life and disregarded that risk. But Carri Williams did not know the signs of hypothermia and did not suspect the weather on a spring night to be deadly, Richards said. Besides, he said, she repeatedly tried to get her daughter to come into the house.

The pair also is charged with first-degree assault of the younger boy they adopted from Ethiopia at the same time as Hana.

Richards questioned the boy's credibility as a witness, saying he contradicted himself during his almost 12 total hours on the stand. The boy also has an interest in the outcome of the case, Richards said.

"There's no doubt that this boy was abused, mistreated, mistreated badly," Richards said. "Did that cause him some bias in this case? Sure."

Several times Richards said there were problems with the Williamses' parenting tactics, calling them "unbelievable," "degrading" and "humiliating."

But they do not amount to the crimes charged here, he said, imploring the jury to decide based on the law, not on their emotions.

Prosecutors' rebuttal

Deputy prosecutor Rosemary Kaholokula based much of her rebuttal around one concept: If not for Larry and Carri Williams, Hana would be alive.

What the Williamses' lawyers argue was reasonable parental discipline was in fact starvation and torture, she countered. They deprived their daughter of basic necessities of life, locking her in a closet, feeding her unpalatable food and isolating her from the outside world, she said.

Degrading punishments like buzzing off Hana's treasured braids and making her use a portable toilet and shower with a hose outside went way too far, Kaholokula said.

"They took away Hana's dignity, they took away her will, and then they took away her life," she said.

Alternate explanations for Hana's death offered by the defense don't make sense, Kaholokula said.

The most helpful witnesses to the Williamses' case were those with clear interest in the outcome: themselves, their children and other family members, Kaholokula said. Meanwhile, she said, the state's expert witnesses had no reason to lie.

The adopted boy, whose credibility came into question in both defense teams' closing arguments, was likely confused by the way defense lawyers phrased their questions, she said. Larry Williams' lawyer Rachel Forde called the boy a self-professed liar, but Kaholokula said what he'd admitted to was lying to his parents about having broken rules — and why wouldn't he, she asked, considering the punishments coming his way?

Many objections

The rebuttal was peppered with 17 objections by Forde, who said Kaholokula was mischaracterizing evidence and playing on the jurors' emotions. All but one objection was overruled.

On the stand, Larry and Carri Williams corroborated every accusation against them but downplayed the severity, duration and frequency, Kaholokula said. They worked as a team over a long period of time leading up to the night Hana died, agreeing on ways to punish her and carrying them out in concert, she said.

Kaholokula closed by showing photos to the jury and telling them Hana died the way her adoptive family made her spend the final year of her life: cold and alone.