

Mother who tried to drown girl found not guilty

Written by Bill Schanen IV
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Mental illness cited in case of Town of Port woman accused of holding daughter underwater off beach

A Town of Port Washington woman who held her 10-year-old daughter underwater in Lake Michigan, nearly drowning her because she was a sinner, was found not guilty because of mental illness last week.

A psychiatric evaluation determined the 41-year-old woman, who has a long history of bipolar disorder, was suffering from religious delusions and was in a manic and psychotic state when she held her daughter underwater off the Port Washington beach Aug. 26, Ozaukee County Circuit Judge Sandy Williams said.

Police credited the girl's 13-year-old sister and people walking by on the beach with preventing a tragedy. The woman, who released the girl after her other daughter began screaming and passersby called police, told authorities she knew she came very close to killing the 10-year-old, who at one point was so deprived of oxygen she stopped struggling.

The woman, who worked as a clerk for the Ozaukee County Sheriff's Department at the time, was charged with first-degree reckless endangerment and could have been sentenced to more than 12 years in prison if the judge determined she was responsible for her actions.

Mental illness cases have two phases, that first of which determines if the person committed the crime. The woman, who Ozaukee Press is not naming to protect the identity of her daughters, pleaded no contest to the charge.

The second phase determines if the person can be held responsible for her actions. Based on the psychiatric evaluation, which was not challenged by Ozaukee County District Attorney Adam Gerol, Williams determined the woman lacked the capacity to realize what she was doing was wrong.

Williams referred the case to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, which will recommend whether the woman should be institutionalized or remain free. A hearing on the issue has been scheduled for March 17.

According to the criminal complaint, the 10-year-old girl told police her mother took her and her sister to the beach and told her she needed to be punished

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The woman told authorities she led the 10-year-old about 20 feet off shore, pushed her underwater and knelt on her. She said she put her hands on the girl's shoulders and held her under the water as she struggled, the complaint states.

The woman remains free in lieu of bail pending the outcome of the March 16 hearing.