

Mom who killed her children not guilty because of insanity

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By all accounts, Bridget Stovall loved her children. They were her life and she would have done anything to protect them.

On April 7, 2001, she killed them.

In the midst of a psychotic breakdown and believing her family had succumbed to a voodoo hex, she drowned her 4-year-old daughter, Cariyan, and her 20-month-old son, Iyan, in a bath of saltwater.

Her attorneys told a three-judge panel Monday that the 24-year-old Evanston woman believed she was exorcising demons from her children and didn't know the wrongfulness of her actions.

Those delusions and hallucinations helped the mentally disturbed mother escape the death penalty Monday when the trio of Hamilton County Common Pleas judges found her not guilty by reason of insanity.

She was ordered to appear in court again on Aug. 8 to determine treatment. She will remain hospitalized until doctors are sure she is not a threat to herself or society.

This case is reminiscent of the high-profile trial of Andrea Yates, the Houston mother who drowned her five children last year.

But unlike this case, Mrs. Yates' insanity plea was rejected. She was sentenced to life in prison.

Experts agreed that Ms. Stovall's children were the victims of the paranoid delusions and hallucinations that led their mother to believe evil spirits possessed them.

Dr. James Hawkins, a court-appointed psychiatrist who examined Ms. Stovall for two hours in March, told Judges Fred Cartolano, Thomas Crush and John Andrew West that Ms. Stovall will likely never regain her sanity.

He said she began experiencing a break from reality about a week before she drowned her children. A day before their deaths, during a visit to her mother's home, she believed her young son spoke to her in complete sentences and told her she was not his mother.

When it was time for them to go home, Ms. Stovall's mother gave her daughter \$10 to take a cab. Instead, Ms. Stovall walked to a nearby hospital chapel.

In a prayer book, she requested prayers for her children. "Please help wash the demons away," she wrote. She placed the \$10 in a collection plate and - stopping briefly to buy snacks for her children - she walked the remaining miles to her Woodburn Avenue apartment.

Through the night and into the morning she kept her children next to her on the living room couch. She played gospel music and read the book of Genesis aloud over and over again.

Dr. Hawkins said she told him she saw furniture move and her lights flicker. She saw dark shadows.

She said she was following her mother's advice to bathe the children in saltwater to rid them of the demons, but she did not admit to drowning the children.

Robert Kurzahls, a court-appointed clinical psychologist, agreed that Ms. Stovall was unaware of her the wrongfulness of her actions. He examined her in February.

"In the state of mind that she was in at the time she saw a different reality than what was taking place," Mr. Kurzhals said.

But Assistant Hamilton County Prosecutor Jerry Kunkel countered, "it wasn't voodoo, evil spirits or demons that killed those children, it was the defendant." He acknowledged that she suffered from "severe mental disease" but that she was ultimately to blame.

But Ms. Stovall still believes she did nothing wrong, according to her attorney, Clyde Bennett II.

"She understood that if we lost, she would die," Mr. Bennett said after the trial.

"But her belief and understanding to this day is that she did not kill her children."

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The Enquirer/GARY LANDERS

Bridget Stovall is led into court Monday, where a three-judge panel spared her from death.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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