

Court reverses conviction of Austin girl in toddler death

Attorneys plan next move: Supreme Court

AUSTIN (AP) — A girl accused of beating a toddler to death when she was 11 may face a third trial after an appellate court reversed her conviction Thursday, ruling she may have obtained her conviction illegally.

Lacresha Murray, now 14, originally was charged with capital murder, making her the youngest person in Texas to face such a charge. After two trials, she was eventually convicted of injury to a child and sentenced to 25 years for the beating death of 2-year-old Jyla Belton.

The 3rd District Court of Appeals on Thursday remanded the case to juvenile court, saying the statement she gave police should not have been used at her trial because it resulted from an illegal interrogation when she was "isolated and alone."

"At a minimum, we cannot say that appellant's statements were the product of fright and despair," the court said.

Keith Hampton, the teen's attorney, said the next move is up to the prosecutor, who may seek a retrial before the appellate court, or take it to the Supreme Court or try the case.

"I am going to assume that they're going to retry her a third time," he said.

Lacresha will remain at a Texas Youth Commission facility unless prosecutors drop the charges, Hampton said.

Prosecutors had no immediate comment.

Jayla died May 24, 1996, of massive internal injuries, including a ruptured liver, after spending the day in the home Lacresha shared with her grandparents and

five brothers and sisters. The family often baby-sat for Jayla and other children.

After Jayla's death, Lacresha and her siblings were taken into protective custody and placed at a children's shelter, where Lacresha was interviewed by two Austin police detectives and a representative of the department's victim services division. Neither her grandparents nor her lawyer were present.

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— Barbara Taft
People of the Heart

During the interrogation Lacresha denied killing Jayla at least 40 times in a two-hour span, but signed a statement written by police saying she may have dropped and kicked the toddler.

In Texas, a juvenile taken into custody by police must go before a magistrate before being questioned.

Prosecutors argued that Lacresha was not officially in custody and could have left at any time, so she did not need to go before a magistrate.

Justice Lee Yeakel, writing for the appeals court, disagreed.

"She was not, however, told that she was free to leave the interview room or the children's shelter, and she was never told she could call her grandparents or any other friendly adult," Yeakel said.

A bill by Rep. Sylvester Turner, D-Houston, pending in the Texas House would clarify that such interrogations are illegal and a magistrate should decide whether the youth may be questioned.

The jury in her first trial found Lacresha guilty of criminally negligent homicide and injury to a child, sentencing her to 20 years.

District Judge John Dietz ordered a second trial, saying he was not certain justice had been served. The second jury found Lacresha guilty of injury to a child and sentenced her to 25 years.

The case has been high-profile in the state capital, where dozens of protesters have gathered monthly outside the courthouse where the case was pending.

"Three years ago I promised a little girl that we would get this case reversed and that she would come home, and she will," said Barbara Taft, who quit her job as a legal secretary to devote herself to People of the Heart, an organization she created to help overturn the verdict.

"I would like to see the prosecution admit they made a mistake, and I would like them to go after the real killer."

Columnist Bob Herbert of *The New York Times* also has championed her cause, writing several columns arguing that the supposed facts of the case do not add up. Herbert suggested that another relative might have beaten the child.

NASA launches imaging satellite

VANDENBERG AIR FORCE BASE, Calif. (AP) — NASA's Landsat 7 satellite was launched Thursday on a \$770 million mission to monitor global conditions ranging from soil moisture and snowpacks to the effects of flood, fire, earthquakes and volcanoes.

A two-stage Boeing Delta II booster with nine strap-on solid rockets roared off the launch pad at 11:32 a.m. PDT, carrying the 4,400-pound satellite toward polar orbit.

All went well through the first phase of the flight, ending with cutoff of the second stage and the rocket and satellite coasting at 17,000 mph, launch control reported.

The second stage was to restart 57 minutes after liftoff and burn briefly before separating from the satellite at an altitude of 434 miles.

The Landsat series dates to 1972. Landsat 5, launched in March 1984, is still operating. The Landsat 7 mission, with updated technology, was designed to maintain the flow of Earth observation data gathered over the past quarter century.

Project scientist Darrel Williams said the orbit was designed to have Landsat 7 to repeat coverage of any given area every 16 days. Combined with Landsat 5's data, each area will be covered every eight days.

The data can be used to determine the health of crops and other vegetation by monitoring water content of the soil, keeping tabs on natural disaster impacts, and monitoring population changes in metropolitan areas.

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Tase Edward Bailey
Charles John Bechert
Elicia Dawn Bennet
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Kelly Michelle Boley
Ross Thomas Bown
Aaron Wayne Campbell
Melissa Rene Conley
Dana Denise Devlin
Joshua D. H. Duncan
Toan Duy Duong
Andrew Benjamin Ebert
Curtis Allen Franke
Alice SuzAnne Gonzalez
Ryan Collins Green
Victoria Elizabeth Guerra
Justin Scott Harper
Kelly Chaundel Hartline
Michael Redmond Haughey
Clark Michael Kardys
Kendall Ryan Kelly
Robert William Kimmel
Kristen D'Lynne Kirby
James Phillip Lary
Ann Elizabeth Leslie
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Amy Elizabeth Magee

Brian Roger Marks
Carla Denise Martinez
Madison Auge Mauze
Kristen Anna Maxey
Pablo Francisco Merheb
Brian Eugene Minyard
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Mark Andrew Naftanel
Reese Edward Neumann
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James Weston Poston
Lesliam Quiros
Richard Scott Rolison
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Nicole Christine Smith
September Anne Smith
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Kaycie Lynn Swain
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Brent Edward Troyan
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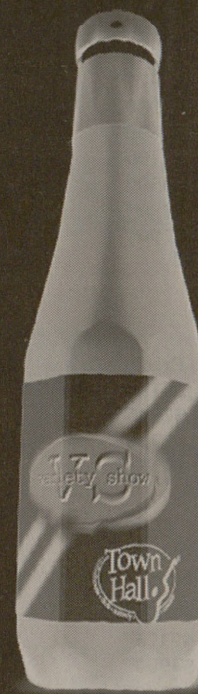
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Nutritional Information	
Serving Size	9 acts (1 guest)
Calories	1
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Amount/Serving	%DV
Total Acts	8 90%
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