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Temporary custody awarded to grandmother

Child of Iowa City woman, who died suspiciously, won't live with his father, judge rules

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IOWA CITY - A judge has awarded temporary custody of Laura Van Wyhe's 16-month-old son to Van Wyhe's mother, rather than the child's father. In his ruling released Monday, Judge David Remley stated that long-term alcohol and drug abuse, among other factors, prevents Donald Knight III from being a suitable guardian for his son, Samson.

Leanne Thomas of Iowa City, Samson's grandmother, will take custody of the boy Friday. Knight, who lives in Bonaparte, said he had not heard about the ruling until contacted by The Gazette. He declined comment.

Thomas could not be reached. Donald Thompson of Cedar Rapids, the attorney who represented her in the custody hearing, said he had no comment.

Van Wyhe, 21, an Iowa City child-care provider, died a few hours after being found injured along a northeast Missouri highway Oct. 26. Authorities have said they are treating her death as a homicide.

In awarding custody to Thomas, Remley also noted Knight's history of physical abuse toward Van Wyhe, his inability to deal with stressful situations and his demonstrated lack of responsibility.

He also said that Samson's only home from age 5 months to 15 months was Thomas' residence.

A summary of custody hearing testimony, which was released with the ruling, detailed the relationship between Van Wyhe and Knight.

SHORTLY AFTER MEETING in late 1992 or early 1993, they lived for short periods in California and Hawaii, then returned to Iowa. Both used drugs during this time, testimony indicated, but Van Wyhe stopped using them after Samson was born.

Testimony showed that the relationship ended after Knight struck Van Wyhe during a van trip to Montana in July. Van Wyhe returned to Iowa on a bus, and Knight, who had been living with Van Wyhe in her mother's house, moved into his own apartment upon returning from Montana.

According to Thomas, Knight also struck Van Wyhe in 1994, saying, "You make me so mad sometimes I think I could just kill you."

Knight worked for Thomas at her catering business from 1994 until November this year, testimony indicated. Thomas and another employee testified that Knight was unreliable and smoked marijuana during breaks on the job.

Testimony showed that Knight spent about one hour a day with Samson until moving out in July. Between July and the time of Van Wyhe's death, he saw Samson about once a month and provided some financial support.

After Van Wyhe's death, Knight helped care for Samson at Thomas' residence. When Thomas confronted Knight on Nov. 11 about a bag of marijuana she'd found in the baby's room, Knight took Samson to Bonaparte. Samson has been living in Bonaparte since that time.

Testimony also indicated that Knight's history of drug abuse began when he was 14 and that he was convicted of second-degree criminal mischief, a felony, in 1989. He also has been convicted of lesser charges.

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