

Mom grilled on tot's death - Defense questions C.R. woman in murder trial of former boyfriend

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Only one may be charged, but two people seem to be on trial in Linn County this week to answer for the shaken-baby-syndrome death last Christmas of 2-year-old Rylee Gray.

Matthew Lewis, a 23-year-old, oft-unemployed Cedar Rapids man who was the short-term boyfriend of Rylee's mother, is charged with first-degree murder in the baby's death.

Until now, the boyish-looking Lewis has languished in jail since his arrest a week after Rylee died.

But on Tuesday at the hands of Lewis' defense team in Linn County District Court, it was Rylee's 21-year-old mother, Elise Gray, the prosecution's first witness, who had the trial's early explaining to do.

Defense attorneys Duane Rohovit and Faye Hoover-Grinde painted a picture of Gray as an immature and even promiscuous woman, a poor parent and a mother who did not grieve for a dead daughter.

The defense attorneys made it clear to jurors that detectives did not easily seem to give up on Gray as being culpable in the case. Hoover-Grinde noted that of the three rounds of interrogation by detectives, one lasted into the night and a second was prompted by a troubled funeral director who thought Gray acted "cold and indifferent" before and during Rylee's funeral.

For updates on this story, call CITYLINE at 363-7000 or 337-7000, category 2551. "I was in shock," Gray testified, admitting that the funeral director had called detectives.

From the first to the second time Gray talked to detectives, she also fundamentally changed her story, she admitted.

The first story had her putting Rylee to bed at 10:30 p.m. Dec. 22 and checking on her twice through the night.

The true story, Gray said she subsequently told detectives, is that she and boyfriend Lewis fought, and he stormed out of his northeast Cedar Rapids apartment she had come to share. Then she awakened Rylee at 10:30 p.m. and headed out on a late-night drive to Lost Nation in hunt for an old boyfriend. Not finding him, she returned to Lewis' apartment at about 3 a.m. and put her daughter to sleep.

Time lines will be crucial in the trial.

Gray, who now lives in Oxford Junction, and authorities maintain that Rylee was seriously injured later that morning, in a period of 20 to 30 minutes after 8 a.m. Dec. 23. That's when Gray left Lewis and Rylee and went out to buy a gallon of milk and make a quick stop at a friend's.

Rylee was rushed to the hospital that morning and died two days later.

Prosecutor Todd Tripp, assistant Linn County attorney, told jurors in opening statements that a University of Iowa medical expert will pinpoint the time of Rylee's fatal injury to the short time Lewis was alone with the child in the apartment.

Defense attorney Rohovit ridiculed such a claim and said several other medical experts will testify that such precision is impossible.

Tripp told jurors that in November 1994, life seemed to be going well for Gray. She was living at home with her father, Don, in Central City and was working at a Cedar Rapids company where he worked. She loved her daughter and she had met a new boyfriend, Lewis, the prosecutor said.

But Tripp said Gray soon quit her job and the quick-moving relationship with Lewis began to sour. Gray began to worry about how Lewis was treating her daughter. Rylee began to shy away from him.

Gray testified that Lewis turned out to be a boyfriend who wanted to control her every move. He also often complained about how she cared for Rylee. Lewis wanted more disciplining, she said.

Defense attorney Hoover-Grinde shifted the focus to Gray. She had Gray admit that she went home with Lewis the first night she met him at a bar; that Gray and Rylee moved into Lewis' apartment two days later; and that she forced her daughter to put up with two of Lewis' "at-loose-ends" friends who crashed in the apartment for three weeks in December.

To Hoover-Grinde's questioning, Gray also admitted that Lewis had cared for Rylee alone on several occasions without problem; that she had told detectives that Rylee had fallen in the bathtub at one point and that Lewis had reported a fall from the crib at another point; and that Gray was still with Lewis after the child's funeral.

Just when Lewis was reading a pediatric medical manual given to Gray by her mother is a point of dispute.

Gray testified that Lewis was on their apartment couch reading from the manual when she returned after having gone out for milk and after Rylee apparently was injured.

Hoover-Grinde read an earlier sworn statement from Gray in which Gray said Lewis had begun to read the medical manual before she went out. Gray disputed her earlier recollection.

Much of the trial testimony ahead will be about how Rylee was injured, evidence that defense attorney Rohovit said mattered little.

That Rylee was murdered is not in dispute, he said.

"The only question is who did it, not whether it occurred," he said.

Caption: COLOR PHOTO
Matthew Lewis Accused of murder

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