

Mom told murder suspect of plan to move out 1 day before tot hurt - C.R. man accused of murdering girl, 2

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Rylee Marie Gray, is associated with the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, not St. Luke's, as was reported Friday. This is the end of the correction.

A Cedar Rapids man is accused of fatally injuring a 2-year-old girl the day after her mother told him she was moving out of the apartment they had shared for five weeks.

Matthew Lee Lewis, 22, of 1614 Park Towne Lane NE, was charged Thursday with first-degree murder in the death of Rylee Marie Gray, the daughter of his girlfriend, Elise Gray, 21.

Rylee died of head injuries Sunday morning, two days after she was rushed to St. Luke's Hospital by her mother and Lewis, court records said.

The funeral for Rylee was held Thursday in Monticello. Elise's father, Don Gray of Central City, said last night that the large, close-knit family is in shock.

"To think one day we saw Rylee as her normal full-of-life self, up and running around, and then this," he said. He declined comment on the case except to say, "This charge never would have been filed if the police weren't absolutely sure about it."

According to the Linn County Attorney's Office, Rylee was unconscious and unresponsive when she arrived at St. Luke's Hospital the morning of Dec. 23 with injuries to her head, extremities and buttocks.

A brain scan showed Rylee was suffering from a subdural hematoma and brain swelling. She was taken to emergency surgery and remained in critical condition until she died.

The injury appeared to be caused by a severe blow to the head, according to Cedar Rapids police Capt. Glen Fox. An autopsy revealed the child died of brain injuries.

Wilbur Smith, pediatric radiologist at St. Luke's, concluded that the injuries were caused by trauma not related to a normal childhood injury.

Lewis remained in the Linn County Jail last night under \$1 million bond. His preliminary hearing was set for Jan. 6.

He had been questioned Wednesday night and was arrested early Thursday morning. He told detectives that he did not strike the child, the Linn County Attorney's Office said.

According to court documents, Gray said Lewis was upset when she told him Dec. 22 that she was moving out. Fox said Gray believed the injury to Rylee may have occurred when she left the toddler alone with Lewis for about half an hour the morning of Dec. 23.

The child had previously been injured when she was left alone with Lewis, court documents said.

Don Gray said Elise was planning to move back in with him, where she had lived for about two years before moving in with Lewis. He said he'd met Lewis a few times when Lewis had accompanied his daughter to the Central City house.

"He was pretty quiet," he said. "He didn't just start talking about himself."

He added, however, that his daughter must have been very comfortable with Lewis to move in with him soon after they met.

"Now she's absolutely devastated that someone she trusted would do this to her," he said.

Lewis' mother, Colleen Lewis of Cedar Rapids, said she doesn't believe her son did what he's been charged with. She said she believes Rylee's death may have been caused by two falls she said the toddler took in the week prior to her death.

Colleen Lewis said that Rylee took a spill in the bathtub two days before she was taken to the hospital and that she fell out of a Portacrib and twisted her neck five days earlier.

"It has to be a combination of the two," said Colleen Lewis, noting that may explain the two fractured vertebrae revealed by X-rays and the autopsy.

Don Gray said he doesn't believe Rylee's earlier spills contributed to her death.

"Obviously, the doctors didn't think those were the cause of death," he said. "Otherwise they wouldn't have pursued it with the police."

Don Gray said his granddaughter was an outgoing, happy child who was always laughing and smiling with those around her.

"I want people to know that this baby trusted everybody," he said. "She had no fear of anyone."

Colleen Lewis and her daughter, Lori Lewis, insisted that Lewis is not a violent person.

"He's not a physical person," said Lori Lewis. "We've never got in a fight in 19 years."

Mindi Waite, who introduced Lewis and Gray, said she doesn't think Lewis is capable of murder. She's known him for three years.

Waite said Lewis, just a friend, lived with her for about six months two summers ago, and she never saw him become violent. In fact, she said her 4-year-old son recently listed Lewis as one of his two favorite people as part of a preschool activity.

Colleen Lewis said her son was alone with Rylee the morning of Dec. 23 long enough for Gray to go to the store for a gallon of milk and make a phone call. When Gray got home, she made breakfast and asked him to go up to her bedroom and get Rylee.

That's when he found Rylee already comatose in her bed, Colleen Lewis said.

Lewis is unemployed, according to Waite. He was going to move in with some friends. The lease for the apartment Gray and Lewis were sharing is up Saturday, according to Colleen Lewis.

Elise was not working because she wanted to spend all her time with Rylee, Don Gray said.

"It used to bother me that Elise would start a job and not stick with it for very long," he said. "In retrospect, I'm glad she got to spend so much time with Rylee."

He said investigators told him that Elise, who is staying with friends, was never a suspect.

"For Elise, the way to stop Rylee from misbehaving was to tell her she had to sit still in a chair for a couple of minutes," he said. "She was never physical with her."

A check of court records showed Lewis has a prior record in both Linn and Jones counties. He is on probation for a third-degree theft charge from Jones County. He pleaded guilty July 22 to breaking into 10 to 15 vehicles in the Monticello area and taking items valued at under \$1,000. He had all but 10 days of his 60-day sentence suspended, and he was placed on probation for a year.

His probation officer, Mike Skaggs, said Lewis "hadn't been in for a while. He's been on the lam."

Lewis occasionally failed to keep appointments with him, Skaggs said. The Department of Correctional Services filed a report of a probation violation Nov. 3 and a warrant was issued Nov. 18, Skaggs said.

In Linn County, charges against Lewis included driving while barred and a few other traffic violations.

Caption: COLOR PHOTOS

Rylee Marie Gray Died Christmas Day Matthew Lee Lewis Charged with murder

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Page: 1

Correction: (CORRECTION, 12/31/94, Wilbur Smith, a pediatric radiologist who examined

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