

WITH VIDEO: Jury finds Pontiac mother not guilty of murder



Defense attorney Cyril Hall listens with client Shontelle Rae Cavanaugh, 24, during her arraignment in Judge Preston G.Thomas' courtroom at Pontiac's 50th District Court for charges in the smothering death of her 9-month-old daughter Simone Marie Cavanaugh. Photographed Wednesday, June 08, 2005.

Shontelle Cavanaugh has been in custody for almost five years.

She could soon taste freedom again after a jury on Monday found her not guilty of first-degree premeditated murder and not guilty by reason of insanity of felony murder, a verdict that brought her relatives to tears.

"I'm happy. I'm elated," said Cavanaugh's smiling mother, Gina James. "I feel it was the right verdict."

Cavanaugh, a 28-year-old Pontiac woman, was charged with murder in the June 6, 2005, smothering death of her 9-month-old daughter, Simone.

Assistant Prosecutor Brett Chudler told jurors that Simone had become an inconvenience to Cavanaugh and she deliberately killed her baby. Defense attorney Richard Convertino said Cavanaugh, who had been diagnosed with postpartum depression, had a psychotic breakdown.

During a trial that began in late March and included a two-week break, both sides presented mental health professionals who offered differing opinions on Cavanaugh's state of mind at the time of Simone's death

On Monday, the second day of deliberations, jurors sent a note a few minutes before 4:30 p.m. announcing that they had reached a verdict.

Cavanaugh's relatives melted into tears and hugged each other upon hearing the jury's decision.

"Thank God!" one woman said.

Chudler asked Oakland Circuit Judge Rae Lee Chabot to remand Cavanaugh to the department of mental health for an evaluation. She granted the motion.

Convertino plans to file a motion seeking Cavanaugh's immediate release.

"Congratulations," the judge said to Cavanaugh and her supporters at the conclusion of the hearing.

Convertino said he was thrilled with the verdict.

"I'm so glad we had a careful, conscientious and thoughtful jury," he said.

Convertino took on the case pro bono. He said his wife, Valerie Convertino, who has two master's degrees in nursing, was instrumental in sorting through and deciphering medical records.

Convertino said he believes the careful review of records that showed that some testimony was inaccurate, incomplete or distorted helped win the case.

James, Cavanaugh's mother, returned home on June 6, 2005, to find Simone unresponsive in Cavanaugh's arms. Cavanaugh told authorities she put her hand over the baby's face.

Since Cavanaugh has been in custody, James has primarily interacted with her daughter through Plexiglas or monitors.

As Cavanaugh was being led out of the courtroom Monday, James asked if she could finally touch her daughter. A sheriff's deputy told her no.

But James is hopeful that her daughter will be home soon.

"I'm just going to hug her, hold her," she said.

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