

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



Hulsey defense pushes for leniency : Attorneys for pregnant woman want to see her in home for moms

ANGEL PACHECO, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

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The six-year, four-month sentence in state prison handed down to Heather Lea Hulsey, who pleaded no contest to vehicular manslaughter in connection with a 2006 death, could be changed to probation if Santa Barbara Superior Court Judge Frank Ochoa rules in favor of the defendant.

Ms. Hulsey, who was 21 when she was sentenced in February and is now in custody, appeared in Superior Court Department 1 Monday, visibly pregnant. Five years of her sentence were for fleeing the scene of the July 2006 crash, which resulted in the death of psychiatrist Dr. Ronald Shlensky, who was 71.

Deputy Public Defender Mindi Boulet argued that the sentence should be reevaluated, and Ms. Hulsey should be put on probation so she can enroll in a live-in mother program such as Villa Majella of Santa Barbara, which is set to reopen its doors today.

The defense called upon Fawn Ray Kuba, the program director for Villa Majella, who said Ms. Hulsey seems like the perfect candidate for the program, which imposes boundaries, requires drug and alcohol testing, does not allow men on the premises and provides counseling. Mothers can stay in Villa Majella for two to three months after birth.

Villa Majella has been around for 26 years but closed its doors for eight months, she said. Ms. Kuba has been involved with reworking the program for its reopening for the last three months.

Ms. Boulet said that Ms. Hulsey was able to fulfill all of the requirements at Casa Serena, a Santa Barbara residential treatment home for women, and she was quite responsible.

Ms. Hulsey was stressed and depressed about her situation while she was staying in Casa Serena and became pregnant after reaching out to someone, Ms. Boulet said. The pregnancy was not brought up previously because she hid the fact from Ms. Boulet because Ms. Hulsey thought that she had a miscarriage on account of heavy stress.

During cross examination by Deputy District Attorney Arnis Tolks, Ms. Kuba said that only a manager is living at the home, and what she had described about the program is what is planned to be accomplished based on the history of the program. The home has

six beds for mothers, two of which are already spoken for.

Mr. Tolks asked if there would be a space for Ms. Hulsey in two weeks, and Ms. Kuba said she couldn't see it being full in that time. However, when asked if there would be space in two months should Ms. Hulsey need to serve time, Ms. Kuba said she did not know.

Mr. Tolks asked Judge Ochoa to think back to the February ruling and consider whether the pregnancy would alter his decision. Mr. Tolks said that Ms. Hulsey's behavior has shown that she is not responsible and can't follow rules. He pointed to how she was able to get pregnant while at Casa Serena.

Instead of Villa Majella, Mr. Tolks wanted Ms. Hulsey to apply to a mother's program that is part of the state Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. This offers three facilities for inmate mothers after giving birth, he said after the hearing.

However, documentation featured language that would seemingly disqualify mothers who were involved in a crime that resulted in a death from enrolling in the program. Mr. Tolks said he had heard different answers as to whether Ms. Hulsey would be eligible and is awaiting confirmation.

Judge Ochoa said whether the defendant can participate in the Department of Corrections program would affect his decision, and the matter will come before him again at 1:30 p.m. today.

e-mail: apacheco@newspress.com