

Mother guilty on lesser charges

Crime: Woman tried to set fire to her home while child was inside.

By Riley Yates

Of The Morning Call

A Richland Township woman accused of trying to burn down her house while her 4-year-old daughter was inside was acquitted Monday of attempted murder and arson, the most serious charges against her.

But the jury found [REDACTED] 34, guilty of risking a catastrophe, endangering the welfare of a child and recklessly endangering another person - charges that bring less serious possible sentences.

The verdict was praised by [REDACTED] attorney, Andrew Schneider, who said he plans to ask Judge Mitchell Goldberg to hand down a sentence that does not send her to prison.

"She's well within the range for probation," Schneider said. "[REDACTED] does not need prison."

[REDACTED] was alleged to have tried, but failed, to start fires at three spots in her [REDACTED] townhouse late Dec. 4 while depressed over her ex-boyfriend.

Police responded to the home early Dec. 5 after [REDACTED] called 911 and told a dispatcher, "I tried to set my house on fire." Police testified they found smoke and a gaseous odor, two partly-burned drapes and a butane canister with its top off near the kitchen stove.

[REDACTED] daughter was not hurt.

The attempted murder charge could have brought 10 to 20 years in prison. But risking a catastrophe is also a felony, with a maximum sentence of 3½ to seven years.

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Prosecutor Marc Furber said he was satisfied with the verdict, which came after three days of testimony and just under three hours of deliberations late Friday and early Monday.

"Risking catastrophe sounds like a very serious crime and it is," Furber said. "What this shows is the jury accepted what her intent was and the extreme risk that she placed others in."

In the trial, Furber argued [REDACTED] actions could have provoked a deadly blaze that would have endangered her daughter - asleep upstairs - and five other townhouses attached to her unit.

Schneider maintained the fire could never have spread as authorities warned. Many times he criticized police for what he labeled a flawed investigation that included a failure to seal off the crime scene.

As the jury's foreman

read the verdict acquitting [REDACTED] of the heftiest charges, her mother, Patricia, gasped audibly each time.

"We are delighted she was acquitted of attempted homicide," Schneider said. "If you knew how much [REDACTED] loved her daughter, you would know that charge should never have been brought."

Schneider said [REDACTED] hopes to eventually regain custody of her girl, who has been cared for by her parents.

"Somewhere down the road, mother will be reunited with daughter," she said.

Jurors leaving the courtroom said they quickly reached unanimity that [REDACTED] had not tried to kill her daughter. They said they also rejected accusations of arson, feeling an attempt was made, but no fire was started.

Goldberg will impose sentencing later. He praised the verdict and let [REDACTED] go home with her family, though she is limited to work, her parents' house and therapy appointments.