

Grandmother, Sex Offender Fight for Custody of Child



Outrage Over Miranda

By DEAN SCHABNER
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A judge's ruling giving custody of a 3-year-old girl to a registered sex offender over her grandmother has created confusion and outrage in Jacksonville, Fla.

"I was absolutely appalled. Very concerned for the well-being of this little girl," State Rep. Janet Adkins told [ABC News affiliate WJXX-TV in Jacksonville](#).

Trista Crews, the mother of the girl, died a month after her daughter, Miranda Wilkerson, was born. At the time, she was married to registered sex offender Donald Coleman, though Coleman, whose offence was impregnating Crews when she was 14 and he was 38, had filed for divorce.

In his divorce petition, Coleman claimed that Crews was pregnant with another man's baby. Despite the claim in his divorce filing, Coleman is still Miranda's legal father because he was married to Miranda's mother at the time she was born, which apparently played into the judge's ruling.

Reporters were not allowed in the courtroom when the decision was reached last week, and lawyers and family members were barred from speaking about the ruling to the media.

Adkins told [WJXX-TV](#) that she and the Florida Department of Children and Families are trying to determine whether anything can be done to return Miranda to her grandparents, with whom she grew up.

"I find it absolutely incredible that the law would say you are going to take a child out of a family, the only family this child has ever known, and to put this person with a complete stranger who is not any relation, I find that just appalling," she said. "My biggest concern is for that child's safety."

According to [court documents acquired by WJXX-TV](#) two days after the ruling, Coleman's motion for custody claimed that the girl's maternal grandmother, Rita Manning, was not allowing him to see Miranda.

The motion also detailed Manning's arrest record, which included a 1995 case that was eventually dropped in which she was charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

Manning was also charged with child neglect in 1997, when her daughter got pregnant by Coleman. Manning was eventually sentenced to probation, according to the documents [obtained by WJXX-TV](#).

Coleman was sentenced to register as a sex offender for the rest of his life, but Manning agreed to her daughter's marrying him that same year because the 14-year-old was expecting a baby, she said.

"I signed for them to get married for that reason only," [Manning said](#).

Since then, the Colemans had two more children together.

Custody Transfer Causes Outrage

The custody transfer of Miranda occurred last Wednesday, after Manning petitioned to adopt the child. Outrage over the case has grown since the judge's decision, which forced Miranda to leave her grandmother and move to Georgia, where Coleman lives.

"Her whole world is here (so) how could a judge do that?" Manning said.

"The only home, the only person this child she has ever known she's being ripped away from to be put with a stranger," said Michael Shorstein, a board certified adoption attorney.

Shorstein said the family and its attorney should have built a case for years against the presumed father before starting legal proceedings.

"Once you're serving the father, then it triggers ego and pride and fathers don't just disappear. They always show up to fight," he said.

Miranda's grandmother will have the opportunity to appeal the judge's decision. She could also report the case to the Department of Child and Family Services.

"Could his rights be terminated? Yes," **attorney Janet Johnson said**. "And if he runs afoul, or DCF says this person should never have been given parental rights then it would be undone."

But for now, when Miranda turns 4 in a couple days, Manning said she doesn't know if she will be able to wish her a happy birthday in person.