

FORMER PTA OFFICER SENTENCED FOR THEFT EMBEZZLEMENT NETS FINE AND SUSPENDED JAIL TIME

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A former Clara Byrd Baker Elementary School PTA president and treasurer was fined \$1,000 and given a suspended 12-month jail sentence Friday for embezzling \$3,000 in PTA funds last year.

Yolonda Curtis, 34, of the 1700 block of Skiffes Creek Circle, pleaded guilty in July and could have faced up to 20 years in prison. But Judge J. Warren Stephens reduced the charge from a felony to a misdemeanor at the urging of defense attorney Andrew Protogyrou.

"She had a very compassionate judge," Protogyrou said after the hearing in Williamsburg-James City County Circuit Court.

But assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Brian Wainger expressed frustration with the outcome.

"Ninety-nine percent of the people who come into this jurisdiction and are convicted of petty larceny - even for the most trivial offenses, including stealing candy bars and beers - are sentenced to one or two days in jail," Wainger said.

"In this case, a person placed in a position of trust in the community steals several thousands of dollars through numerous transactions and receives a misdemeanor conviction and no jail time," he complained.

Wainger made the same basic argument in court, although referring to chewing gum rather than candy bars - to which Protogyrou shot back : "If people are going to jail for stealing gum, the defense attorneys in the area must not be very good."

Protogyrou said Curtis took the money to make a down payment on her townhouse and had always planned to return it before anyone noticed it missing.

"I know what I did was wrong. I made the worst mistake of my whole life," Curtis told the judge. She said she had few other regrets in life. She said she was sorry for betraying people who trusted her. She cried when she said how badly she felt about hurting her family.

"I know I have made a mistake, and I am truly regretful," she said.

Curtis' father, a deacon at Curtis' church and a former supervisor at Fort Eustis, where she is the head secretary in a 250- person training department, testified on her behalf Friday.

Protogyrou elicited from the deacon that Curtis had been an active member of the church for years and didn't just suddenly get religion after her arrest. Her father said she had always been a "good girl" who had never before been in trouble.

Reaching for a tissue to dab his eyes almost as soon as he started talking, he said he would have gladly helped her financially if she had asked him.

Chief Warrant Officer John Zimmerman said he had been Curtis' supervisor until recently. He said he was shocked when he heard about the arrest. Zimmerman said he wrote her last job evaluation and read portions of it: "Honesty and loyalty above reproach ... totally committed to this command ... superb administrative competence ... total team player."

He said he considered her the most dependable employee in the department and knew he could always turn to her if he needed something done right the first time. An 11-year federal civil service employee with a top-notch evaluation, there was nonetheless a possibility she could lose her job if convicted of a felony, Zimmerman said. Under cross-

examination, however, he admitted it was unlikely.

Protogyrou also presented the judge with receipts showing that Curtis had made full restitution and with a letter from the current PTA president, Susan Stroud: "We recognize Yolonda made some bad decisions which have some serious consequences to all those involved, most especially to Yolonda. However, she is a mother with children and she is dedicated to their care and education, which we hope the court will recognize in assigning any future consequences."

"We teach our children that they may make bad decisions but they are not bad people. We feel that Yolonda deserves this same consideration."

Wainger said he didn't disagree that Curtis was probably a good person. But he stressed that she was also a thief who had stolen money from children, essentially, and did it not once, but in a series of transactions. He said she needed to be held accountable.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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