

SUPREME COURT OF GEORGIA

Wilson v. State

297 Ga. 86 (2015) · No. S15A0340 · Decided May 11, 2015

SUMMARY

The Supreme Court of Georgia affirmed Andrea Renee Wilson’s convictions for felony murder and cruelty to children arising from the death of a child in her care. The court held that the evidence was sufficient to establish proximate causation based on the child’s extensive injuries and Wilson’s conduct. It also rejected her ineffective-assistance claim, concluding that the challenged statements by her co-defendant were cumulative of Wilson’s own statements and testimony.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Georgia
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Benham, Justice; All the Justices
JURISDICTION	Georgia
DECIDED	May 11, 2015
DOCKET	S15A0340
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Wilson appealed her convictions for felony murder and first-degree cruelty to children, and the denial of her amended motion for new trial, to the Supreme Court of Georgia.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The sufficiency of the evidence is viewed in the light most favorable to the verdict. Ineffective-assistance claims are evaluated under the two-prong performance-and-prejudice test, and failure to establish either prong defeats the claim.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	published precedential opinion
PARTIES	Andrea Renee Wilson v. The State

TOPICS

- criminal procedure
- evidence
- ineffective assistance
- sixth amendment
- appellate procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

- criminal law
- criminal procedure
- appellate practice

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the evidence was sufficient to support Wilson's felony-murder and first-degree cruelty-to-children convictions when the medical examiner could not identify one particular injury or act by Wilson as the cause of death.
2. Whether Wilson received ineffective assistance of counsel because trial counsel failed to object on hearsay and Confrontation Clause grounds to Brown's custodial statements.

HOLDINGS

1. The evidence was sufficient to support Wilson's convictions because felony-murder causation requires proximate causation, and the evidence showed that Wilson's criminal conduct was a proximate cause of the child's death even though no single injury or act was identified as the sole cause.
2. Wilson failed to establish ineffective assistance of counsel because the challenged statements by Brown were cumulative of Wilson's own properly admitted statements and testimony, and she therefore failed to show prejudice.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Proximate causation imposes liability for the reasonably foreseeable results of criminal ... conduct if there is no sufficient, independent, and unforeseen intervening cause.” (297 Ga. at 88)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Wilson and her boyfriend, Corey Brown, were the only caretakers of a child who lived with them from March 2006 until his death in January 2007. The child suffered approximately 200 non-accidental injuries, including brain trauma, bruising, an immersion burn causing a necrotic toe, genital injuries, malnutrition, and starvation-related ketones. Wilson admitted that she and Brown hit the child, that she knew he was injured and ill, and that she never sought medical attention before his death. The medical examiner concluded that the totality of the injuries caused death from battered child syndrome.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

A Liberty County grand jury indicted Wilson on two counts of malice murder, two counts of felony murder, and two counts of first-degree cruelty to children. After a jury trial, she was acquitted of malice murder but convicted of the remaining offenses and initially sentenced to concurrent terms of life without parole and twenty years. The trial court denied her amended motion for new trial and later resentenced her to life without parole on one felony-murder count, merging the remaining counts. Wilson appealed, and the Supreme Court of Georgia affirmed.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- State v. Jackson, 287 Ga. 646, 654 (697 S.E.2d 757) (2010)
- Davis v. State, 290 Ga. 757, 760 (4) (725 S.E.2d 280) (2012)
- Currier v. State, 294 Ga. 392, 394 (1) (754 S.E.2d 17) (2014)
- Cordero v. State, __ Ga. __, __ S.E.2d __, 2015 WL 1135281 (Mar. 16, 2015)
- Pruitt v. State, 282 Ga. 30, 34 (4) (644 S.E.2d 837) (2007)
- Wright v. State, 291 Ga. 869, 870 (2) (734 S.E.2d 876) (2012)
- Jackson v. State, 288 Ga. 213 (2)(e) (702 S.E.2d 201) (2010)

OPINION

BENHAM, J.

In the Supreme Court of Georgia Decided: May 11, 2015 S15A0340. WILSON v. THE STATE. BENHAM, Justice. Appellant Andrea Renee Wilson appeals her convictions for felony murder and other crimes related to the death of Prince Davis.¹ We affirm.

The record construed in a light most favorable to the verdict shows the victim was born in June 2004 and had no major health issues except asthma which was under control. In 2005, the victim's mother was incarcerated.

In March 2006, the child went to live with appellant, who was the mother's cousin, ¹ On February 13, 2007, a Liberty County grand jury returned a true bill of indictment against appellant on two counts of malice murder, two counts of felony murder, and two counts of cruelty to children in the first degree.

On September 14, 2009, appellant was re-indicted. The State announced it would be seeking the death penalty, but agreed to seek life without parole. Appellant was tried with co-defendant Corey Brown before a jury from October 20, 2010, to October 27, 2010.

The jury acquitted appellant on the two counts of malice murder, but found her guilty on the remaining charges. On December 13, 2010, the trial court sentenced appellant to concurrent terms of life without parole for both counts of felony murder and to concurrent terms of twenty years each for the counts of cruelty to children in the first degree. Appellant moved for a new trial on December 13, 2010, and amended the motion on June 19, 2012.

The trial court held a hearing on the motion on February 24, 2014. On May 17, 2014, the trial court denied the motion for new trial, as amended, on the substantive grounds; however it issued a re-sentencing order on July 14, 2014, wherein it sentenced appellant to life without parole for one count of felony murder and merged the remaining counts. Appellant filed a notice of appeal on July 17, 2014 and the case was docketed to the January 2015 Term of this Court for a decision to be made on the briefs. and her boyfriend, co-defendant Corey Brown.

On January 16, 2007, appellant found the victim fallen over in the car seat she had placed him in while she was cooking. Realizing he was not breathing, appellant took the unresponsive victim over to a neighbor's house and the neighbor called 911. When first responders arrived, they noted that the victim had no pulse and was not breathing and so they rushed him to the hospital.

Despite heroic measures, the child could not be revived. At trial, the medical examiner testified that the child died from battered child syndrome. The child had approximately 200 non-accidental injuries, some of which were acute and some of which were at various stages of healing. These injuries included, among other things, bruising and scarring all over the child's body, blunt force trauma to the brain, bruised kidneys, a necrotic (gangrenous) toe, which resulted from an immersion burn, and bruised and swollen genitalia.

The medical examiner testified that the child was also malnourished and had ketones which was indicative of starvation. Appellant told police that she believed the child had a devil or demon in him and that he often had seizures or "fell out" and injured himself. She also told police that she gave the child prayer oil and had others pray for him. At 2 trial, appellant testified that she and Brown both hit the child, although she stated that she only hit the child's legs and hands with a switch or a wet washcloth.² Appellant stated that Brown would hit the child hard in the back with his hands and would beat the child with a belt.

Appellant admitted that she had observed numerous injuries on the child and noted that he was sick and not eating, but never sought medical attention for any of his injuries or any illness prior to the child's death. 1. Appellant contends that the evidence was insufficient to convict because the medical examiner could not pinpoint any one injury or act by appellant that caused the child's death.

We disagree. When construing Georgia's felony murder statute, this Court has held that causing the death of another human being means proximate causation. *State v. Jackson*, 287 Ga. 646 (2) (697 SE2d 757) (2010). 'Proximate causation imposes liability for the reasonably foreseeable results of criminal... conduct if there is no sufficient, independent, and unforeseen intervening cause.' *Id.* at 654.

We consider the elements of the felony not in the abstract, but in the actual circumstances in which the felony was committed. *Davis v. State*, 290 Ga. 757, 760 (4) (725 SE2d 280) (2012). *Currier v. State*, 294 Ga. 392, 394 (1) (754 SE2d 17) (2014).

In this case, appellant and Brown were the only caretakers of the child from March 2006 ² In her statement to police, appellant also stated she had hit the child with a flip-flop shoe. ³ until his death in January 2007. Appellant admitted that she and Brown hit the child. Appellant also admitted that she never sought medical attention for the child, although she was aware that he had injuries and was sick.

The medical examiner concluded that the totality of the 200 chronic and acute injuries caused the child's death and that the child's body itself was a "smoking gun." This evidence was sufficient to convict appellant of the crimes for which the jury returned verdicts of guilt. See *Cordero v. State*, ___ Ga. ___ (___ SE2d ___), 2015 WL 1135281 (March 16, 2015). 2.

Appellant alleges her trial attorneys were constitutionally ineffective when they failed to object, based on hearsay and Confrontation Clause grounds, to the custodial statements co-defendant Brown made to police. In particular, appellant complains about Brown's statements that appellant cared for the victim's necrotic toe, that appellant believed the victim was possessed, that appellant used prayer oil on the child, that demons were taunting the two to hurt the child, and Brown's statement that he and appellant were planning an exorcism.

Appellant argues that the admission of these statements harmed her because they were inculpatory and inflammatory. 4 In order to prevail on a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel, appellant must show counsel's performance was deficient and that the deficient performance prejudiced him to the point that a reasonable probability exists that, but for counsel's errors, the outcome of the trial would have been different.

A strong presumption exists that counsel's conduct falls within the broad range of professional conduct. (Citation and punctuation omitted.) *Pruitt v. State*, 282 Ga. 30, 34 (4) (644 SE2d 837 (2007)). If a defendant fails to meet her burden on one prong of the two-prong test, then the other prong need not be reviewed by the Court. *Wright v. State*, 291 Ga. 869, 870 (2) (734 SE2d 876) (2012).

Pretermitted whether appellant's trial attorneys were deficient in their performance by failing to make an objection to Brown's custodial statements, appellant has not shown prejudice. Appellant herself testified that she treated the child's necrotic toe by putting an ointment on it and covering it with a bandage. She also told police during her custodial statements, the transcripts of which were read to the jury, that she believed the child had a devil or demon in him and that she used prayer oil on him in that regard.

Although appellant never said demons "taunted" her to hurt the child, she did admit that both she and Brown hit the child because the child was behaving as if possessed by a devil or a demon. In addition, although appellant did not use the word "exorcism" in her discussions with police, she did say that she planned to have others in the community place their hands on the child and pray, presumably to rid him of the devil or demon possessing him.

Thus, the record shows Brown's custodial statements were merely cumulative of appellant's own properly admitted statements and testimony. The failure of trial counsel to object to such cumulative evidence does not support a claim of ineffective assistance of counsel. See *Jackson v. State*, 288 Ga. 213 (2) (e) (702 SE2d 201) (2010). Judgment affirmed. All the Justices concur.

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