

SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT OF MAINE

Kenneth Cabral v. Danielle L'Heureux

2017 ME 50 (2017) · No. Aro-16-6 · Decided March 16, 2017

SUMMARY

The Maine Supreme Judicial Court held that a District Court erred by relying, under the doctrine of judicial notice, on testimony and exhibits from a separate protection-from-harassment proceeding in determining parental rights and responsibilities. The court vacated the judgment awarding Kenneth Cabral primary physical residence of the parties' daughters and remanded for further proceedings.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Judicial Court of Maine
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Mead, J.; Saufley, C.J.; Alexander, J.; Gorman, J.; Jabar, J.; Hjelm, J.; Humphrey, J.
JURISDICTION	Maine
DECIDED	March 16, 2017
DOCKET	Aro-16-6
DISPOSITION	vacated
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	L'Heureux appealed from a District Court judgment establishing parental rights and responsibilities and awarding Cabral primary physical residence of the parties' two daughters.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court reviewed the District Court's evidentiary use of judicial notice and whether the resulting error was harmless.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published opinion; precedential under Maine law.
PARTIES	Danielle L'Heureux v. Kenneth Cabral

TOPICS

[judicial notice](#)[evidence](#)[parental rights](#)[family law procedure](#)[appellate procedure](#)

PRACTICE AREAS

[family law](#)[evidence](#)[appellate procedure](#)

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether a court may use judicial notice to consider testimony and exhibits presented in a separate proceeding involving the same parties.
2. Whether the District Court's reliance on evidence from the separate protection-from-harassment proceeding was harmless error.

HOLDINGS

1. Judicial notice permits a court to notice the existence or content of pleadings, docket entries, orders, and other court records when germane, but it does not permit the court to sua sponte import and rely on testimony or exhibits presented in a separate proceeding.
2. The error was not harmless because the evidence from the separate proceeding appeared to have materially influenced the award of primary physical residence.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“A clear line of demarcation exists between the fact that a pleading, docket entry, or order exists in separate proceedings—all of which are subject to judicial notice if germane to an issue in later judicial proceedings—and the actual evidence submitted in the earlier proceedings.” (¶ 11)

“A court may incorporate evidence submitted in earlier, separate proceedings by agreement of the parties, or admit pertinent findings made in a different proceeding if those findings meet the requirements of collateral estoppel, but it cannot, under the rubric of judicial notice, simply sua sponte import and rely upon evidence presented in an earlier judicial proceeding.” (¶ 11)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Cabral and L'Heureux are the parents of two daughters. At the time Cabral filed the parental-rights complaint, the children were living with him, while L'Heureux lived in Auburn; the case was later transferred to the Houlton District Court. During the parental-rights proceedings, the District Court considered pleadings, testimony, and orders from a separate protection-from-harassment proceeding involving the parties, including evidence concerning L'Heureux's alleged conduct toward a man accused of abusing a child. The District Court awarded Cabral primary physical residence despite conditions in Cabral's mobile home and the older daughter's expressed wish to live with L'Heureux.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Cabral filed a complaint for determination of parental rights and responsibilities and child support in August 2012. After the matter was transferred from the Lewiston District Court to the Houlton District Court, the court entered an October 14, 2015 judgment after a hearing. The court denied L'Heureux's motion for amended or additional findings, and she timely appealed.

DISPOSITION

vacated

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The judgment establishing parental rights and responsibilities was vacated, and the matter was remanded to the District Court for further proceedings, which could include a further hearing or rehearing at the court's discretion.

CASES CITED

- Finn v. Lipman, 526 A.2d 1380, 1381 (Me. 1987)
- Union Mut. Fire Ins. Co. v. Town of Topsham, 441 A.2d 1012, 1016 (Me. 1982)
- In re Scott S., 2001 ME 114, ¶¶ 12-13, 775 A.2d 1144
- In re Jonas, 2017 ME 48, ¶ 40 n.10

OPINION

PER CURIAM.

MAINE SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT Reporter of Decisions Decision: 2017 ME 50 Docket: Aro-16-6 Submitted On Briefs: July 20, 2016 Decided: March 16, 2017 Panel: SAUFLEY, C.J., and ALEXANDER, MEAD, GORMAN, JABAR, HJELM, and HUMPHREY, JJ. KENNETH CABRAL v. DANIELLE L'HEUREUX MEAD, J. [¶1] Danielle L'Heureux appeals from a judgment entered in the District Court (Houlton, O'Mara, J.) that established parental rights and responsibilities and awarded Kenneth Cabral primary physical residence of the parties' two daughters.

L'Heureux argues that the court erred in considering and relying upon evidence offered in a separate proceeding concerning the same parties. We agree and vacate the order and remand for further proceedings. I. BACKGROUND [¶2] The following facts are established in the record in this matter. L'Heureux and Cabral are the parents of two daughters, ages nine and twelve at the time of the District Court's October 14, 2015, order.

At the time Cabral 2 commenced a complaint for determination of parental rights and responsibilities and child support in the District Court at Lewiston in August 2012, the girls were residing with him at his home in Aroostook County. L'Heureux resided in Auburn, and the children had been residing with her until the month before Cabral's filing.

After multiple continuances, the case was transferred to the District Court at Houlton in March 2014. A hearing was held on the complaint on September 28, 2015, and the court issued its decision on October 14, 2015. [¶3] Cabral, his daughters, and his partner and her three children live in a mobile home that suffers from a significant lack of adequate heating and sanitation facilities, including a lack of running water in the past.

The elder daughter testified to her distress in living under the conditions in the mobile home. The mother of a friend of one of the daughters testified to the conditions within the trailer after briefly

observing them when bringing the daughter home. She reported that Cabral prohibited his daughter from visiting the friend's house after the visit. [¶4] L'Heureux resides in an apartment in Auburn.

She testified that she had been engaged in an "unhealthy relationship" that concluded three years 3 prior to the hearing. She was arrested at her apartment for disorderly conduct, but the charges were later dropped. [¶5] During the period between the filing of the parental rights complaint by Cabral in 2012 and the issuance of the court's October 14, 2015, order, Cabral obtained two protection orders against L'Heureux: an order for protection from abuse from the District Court at Lewiston, and an order for protection from harassment from the District Court at Houlton.

At the conclusion of the evidence in the parental rights case, the court announced that it was going to take judicial notice of the protection from harassment case that it had presided over in April and June 2014.¹ The October 2015 parental rights and responsibilities order includes the following statement: The court has carefully considered the evidence, and has taken judicial notice of the pleadings, testimony and orders in HOUDC-PA-14-10 and hereby renders its Judgment....

(Emphasis added.) [¶6] After the issuance of the order and the denial of L'Heureux's motion for amended or additional findings, L'Heureux timely appealed. ¹ The court's statement and the text of the parental rights and responsibilities order make reference to a protection from abuse case.

Although the record is not altogether clear, it appears that the matter was actually a protection from harassment complaint commenced pursuant to 5 M.R.S. § 4653 (2016), and we will refer to it as such throughout this decision. 4 II. DISCUSSION [¶7] The court's judgment includes three findings that could be perceived as adverse to L'Heureux on issues regarding primary residence and parental contact: (1) she was arrested on a disorderly conduct charge—which was later dismissed—for an unknown circumstance at her apartment; (2) she was involved in an "unhealthy relationship"—the circumstances of which are not elucidated in the record—that concluded three years prior to the hearing; and (3) she supported a man who reportedly was charged with abusing one of Cabral's partner's children.² [¶8] The first two findings, while adverse to L'Heureux's position, are not overwhelming or dispositive.

By contrast, the third raises profound questions regarding L'Heureux's judgment and interactions with minor children. [¶9] None of the facts supporting this third finding appear in the record of the parental rights proceedings. They are drawn, as noted in the judgment, wholly from testimony presented in the earlier protection from harassment hearing.

The court incorporated the testimony from the separate action under the rubric of judicial notice. ² The court found, without evidence in the record of this matter, that L'Heureux called her own daughter a liar and expressed great disappointment that she would testify against the man.

The court further found that L’Heureux went to her children’s school and caused a scene that resulted in a partial lockdown of the school. 5 [¶10] The doctrine of judicial notice is well established in Maine. Rule 201 of the Maine Rules of Evidence, which codifies prior Maine practice, defines the type of adjudicative facts that may be judicially noticed as follows: (b) Kinds of facts that may be judicially noticed.

The court may judicially notice a fact that is not subject to reasonable dispute because it: (1) Is generally known within the trial court’s territorial jurisdiction; or (2) Can be accurately and readily determined from sources whose accuracy cannot reasonably be questioned. M.R. Evid. 201(b). Maine courts have historically applied judicial notice to a wide variety of indisputable facts.

See Field & Murray, *Maine Evidence* § 201.2 at 55-57 (6th ed. 2007) (providing illustrative examples). Courts may take judicial notice of pleadings, dockets, and other court records where the existence or content of such records is germane to an issue in the same or separate proceedings.³ See *Finn v. Lipman*, 526 A.2d 1380, 1381 (Me. 1987); *Union Mut. Fire Ins.*

Co. v. Town of Topsham, 441 A.2d 1012, 1016 (Me. 1982). 3 The case of *In re Scott S.*, 2001 ME 114, ¶¶ 12-13, 775 A.2d 1144, confirms a unique evidentiary treatment that is applicable only to child protective proceedings wherein a judge may consider and rely upon evidence submitted in earlier hearings—as long as the same judge heard the evidence— because such proceedings are unitary in nature.

6 [¶11] The doctrine of judicial notice, as defined in Rule 201 and our precedents, does not, however, open the door to the consideration of testimony and exhibits offered in separate proceedings. A clear line of demarcation exists between the fact that a pleading, docket entry, or order exists in separate proceedings—all of which are subject to judicial notice if germane to an issue in later judicial proceedings—and the actual evidence submitted in the earlier proceedings.

A court may incorporate evidence submitted in earlier, separate proceedings by agreement of the parties, or admit pertinent findings made in a different proceeding if those findings meet the requirements of collateral estoppel, but it cannot, under the rubric of judicial notice, simply sua sponte import and rely upon evidence presented in an earlier judicial proceeding.⁴ [¶12] Upon this record, it appears that the prior, separate body of evidence relied upon by the court loomed large in its decision to award primary physical residence to Cabral despite the circumstances in his home and the expressed wish by the older child to live with her mother.

Because the court’s 4 We note the occasional, but inaccurate, shorthand use of the term “judicial notice” by counsel who simply wish the court to accept facts or evidence that is outside the actual evidentiary record— for example, where a companion case has already proceeded to trial and incorporation of the record in that first case would create efficiencies in the second.

Although the parties may agree to submission of that record in evidence in the newer matter, it is not done through the application of judicial notice. Judicial notice is a narrow concept that requires specific findings as provided in M.R. Evid. 201(b); it should not be referenced except in circumstances that truly constitute judicial notice.

In re Jonas, 2017 ME 48, ¶ 40 n.10, --- A.3d ---. 7 error in relying upon that evidence absent the consent of the parties or another legitimate evidentiary basis cannot be deemed harmless, we vacate the judgment and remand the matter for further proceedings that may include, at the court's discretion, further hearing or rehearing.

The entry is: The judgment establishing parental rights and responsibilities is vacated and the matter is remanded to the District Court for further proceedings. Richard L. Rhoda, Esq., Houlton, for appellant Danielle L'Heureux Kenneth Cabral did not file a brief Houlton District Court docket number FM-2014-33 FOR CLERK REFERENCE ONLY