

SUPREME COURT OF SOUTH DAKOTA

Zepeda v. Zepeda

632 N.W.2d 48 (S.D. 2001); 2001 S.D. 101 · No. Nos. 21737, 21755 · Decided August 1, 2001

SUMMARY

The Supreme Court of South Dakota affirmed a divorce judgment awarding joint legal custody and primary physical custody of the parties' son to the mother. The court upheld the denial of general alimony, rehabilitative alimony, and trial attorney's fees, finding no abuse of discretion. The court awarded the mother \$2,500 in appellate attorney's fees, and one justice dissented regarding the denial of alimony.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of South Dakota
WRITING FOR THE COURT	KONENKAMP, Justice; MILLER, Chief Justice; AMUNDSON, Justice; GILBERTSON, Justice; SABERS, Justice
JURISDICTION	South Dakota
DECIDED	August 1, 2001
DOCKET	Nos. 21737, 21755
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Jorge appealed the circuit court's custody determination, and Renee appealed by notice of review from the denial of general alimony, rehabilitative alimony, and attorney's fees. The Supreme Court reviewed the custody, alimony, and fee rulings.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Custody factual findings are reviewed for clear error, and the custody determination is reviewed for abuse of discretion. Alimony and attorney's-fee rulings are reviewed for abuse of discretion.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published opinion; precedential
PARTIES	Jorge A. Zepeda v. Leslie Renee Zepeda

TOPICS

- child custody
- alimony
- spousal support
- family law procedure
- appellate procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the circuit court adequately considered the governing custody factors, including parental fitness, stability, primary caregiving, harmful misconduct, and maintaining frequent and meaningful contact with both parents.
2. Whether Renee's marital misconduct required a different custody award because it demonstrated parental unfitness or harm to the child.
3. Whether the circuit court abused its discretion by denying general alimony.
4. Whether the circuit court abused its discretion by denying rehabilitative alimony for Renee's proposed MBA program.
5. Whether the circuit court abused its discretion by denying Renee's trial attorney's fees.
6. Whether Renee was entitled to appellate attorney's fees.

HOLDINGS

1. The circuit court properly balanced the applicable custody considerations and did not err by awarding Renee primary physical custody while granting the parents joint legal custody.
2. Marital misconduct alone is not controlling in a custody determination; it becomes relevant to parental fitness when it causes demonstrable harm to the child. The evidence supported the circuit court's finding that Renee's misconduct caused no demonstrable harm to Jorgito.
3. The circuit court did not abuse its discretion by denying Renee general alimony.
4. The circuit court did not abuse its discretion by denying rehabilitative alimony because Renee did not demonstrate an educational need requiring the proposed MBA program in order to become self-sufficient.
5. The circuit court did not abuse its discretion by requiring each party to pay their own trial attorney's fees.
6. Renee was entitled to \$2,500 in appellate attorney's fees.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“In the end, our brightest beacon remains the best interests of the child.” (53)

“To accept this argument is to ignore our statement in Fuerstenberg that a court should not isolate one consideration to the exclusion of all others when making a custody decision.” (54)

“Generally, marital misconduct alone is not a controlling consideration when making a custody determination.” (55)

“An essential prerequisite to recovering rehabilitative alimony is proof of an educational need and a plan to meet that need.” (57)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Jorge and Renee were married in 1987 and had one child, Jorgito, born in 1996. Renee was the child's primary caregiver, while Jorge worked in increasingly well-compensated computer-industry positions; the parties later lived in South Dakota and Texas. During a three-month period in 1999, Renee engaged in erotic Internet conversations and had sexual relations with another man, but the evidence did not establish an Internet addiction or demonstrable harm to the child. At trial, both parents were found fit, the child was attached to both, and Renee had provided stable and continuous care.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Jorge filed for divorce in September 1999, and Renee also requested a divorce. After a temporary custody hearing, Renee received temporary custody subject to conditions, with visitation for Jorge. Following the August 2000 divorce trial, the circuit court granted joint legal custody, awarded Renee primary physical custody, ordered Jorge to pay child support, denied Renee's alimony and trial attorney's-fee requests, and entered a divorce judgment based on irreconcilable differences. The Supreme Court affirmed all challenged rulings and awarded Renee \$2,500 in appellate attorney's fees.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Fuerstenberg v. Fuerstenberg, 1999 S.D. 35, 591 N.W.2d 798
- Price v. Price, 2000 S.D. 64, 611 N.W.2d 425
- Kester v. Kester, 257 N.W.2d 731 (S.D. 1977)
- Madson v. Madson, 313 N.W.2d 42 (S.D. 1981)
- Therkildsen v. Fisher Bev., 1996 S.D. 39, 545 N.W.2d 834
- Jeschke v. Wockenfuss, 534 N.W.2d 602 (S.D. 1995)
- Urban v. Urban, 1998 S.D. 29, 576 N.W.2d 873
- Albrecht v. Albrecht, 2000 S.D. 54, 609 N.W.2d 765
- Olson v. Olson, 1996 S.D. 90, 552 N.W.2d 396
- Fox v. Fox, 467 N.W.2d 762 (S.D. 1991)
- Evans v. Evans, 1997 S.D. 16, 559 N.W.2d 240
- Whalen v. Whalen, 490 N.W.2d 276 (S.D. 1992)
- Schwab v. Schwab, 505 N.W.2d 752 (S.D. 1993)
- Radigan v. Radigan, 465 N.W.2d 483 (S.D. 1991)
- Wolff v. Weber, 1997 S.D. 52, 563 N.W.2d 136
- Peterson v. Peterson, 2000 S.D. 58, 610 N.W.2d 69