

N.J. 'Prom Mom' Accepts Plea Agreement

Woman Who Threw Newborn Into Trash at Dance Could Be Paroled in 3 Years

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NEW YORK, Aug. 20—Melissa Drexler, who gave birth in a bathroom at her senior prom, then dropped the baby in a garbage can and returned to the party to dance and eat a salad, pleaded guilty to aggravated manslaughter today and confessed that she knowingly killed her child.

A prosecutor in Freehold, N.J., allowed Drexler, 20, to make the plea, which is likely to make her eligible for parole in about three years. If she had been convicted of murder, she faced a minimum of 30 years in prison.

In a little-girl's voice and with an impassive expression on her face, Drexler read a statement in a Freehold courtroom in which she said she concealed her pregnancy from "everyone." She said her water broke on the morning of her June 6, 1997, prom and that she began having cramps in a car on the way to the dance. When she got to the prom, she said she rushed to the bathroom.

"The baby was born alive," she said, adding that she pulled it from a toilet and wrapped it in several plastic bags before putting it in a garbage can. "I was aware of what I was doing at the time when I placed the baby in the bag and I was further aware that what I was doing would most certainly result in the death of the baby."

The extraordinary circumstances of the Drexler case made headlines around the world, leading tabloids to describe as "Prom Mom" the young woman from the middle-class town of Forked River, N.J., on the Atlantic shore 50 miles south of New York. She was tried in Freehold, 27 miles north of her home town, because the dance was in a banquet hall there.

The sensational aspects of the case have overridden what prosecutors and psychiatrists agree is a well-known pattern of psychological denial by young women who kill their babies. Each year in the United States, experts say, there are about 250 such murders. They almost always involve young women who are single, isolated and convinced that they will be punished if their parents find out they are pregnant.

The Drexler case followed another much-publicized New Jersey case in which two affluent teenagers, Amy Goldberg and Brian Peterson, were sentenced in July to about two years in prison for contributing to their newborn's death in a Delaware motel room and then disposing of it in a trash bin.

"If you take away that 'Prom Mom' aspect, it is almost the same circumstances that I have had in 12 other cases," said Monmouth County Prosecutor John Kaye, adding that he agreed to a plea bargain in the Drexler case because of her age, her lack of a criminal record and her psychological condition.

"Like the others, she was in total denial, she isolated herself, refused to face her parents and refused to acknowledge the consequences of time," Kaye said.

Forensic psychiatrists who specialize in the study of neonaticide,

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the killing of a baby on the day of its birth, say that mothers who kill their infants immediately after giving birth usually have no sense that they are taking a human life.

"They never bond or connect to

this foreign object growing inside them. It passes through them no differently than yesterday's lunch," said Neil S. Kaye, a forensic psychiatrist who teaches at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. He has treated dozens of young women who have killed their babies and has researched 200 years of history on neonaticide in 13 languages.

During pregnancy, Kaye said, pregnant young women "use denial, a very primitive defense mechanism that we learn as children. It is usually because of a fear of shame, rejection or humiliation if the baby comes to term and it usually ties back to parents in some way. Many women are afraid that if the baby is discovered, they will be thrown out of their parents' house."

Once a baby is born, Kaye said, reality shatters the denial and a woman often disposes of her baby as quickly as she can.

Phillip Resnick, also a forensic psychiatrist who has studied neonaticide for decades and who coined the term in 1970, said that mothers who kill their babies are not ordinarily "criminal types" and that many of them "go on to be good mothers."

"It is not as if they are terrible people," said Resnick, who teaches psychiatry at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. "In fact, it is because some of them have been very good girls who can't bear to see disappointment in their mothers' eyes. That is why they don't seek help."

Outside the courtroom in Freehold, Drexler's lawyer was asked to explain why his client had shown no emotion when confessing to the murder of her baby. "That is the way she is when she gets very nervous," said lawyer Steven Secare. "She becomes wooden and deadpan. There is no emotion in her statement because her emotions have been kept inside her."

After the court hearing, Drexler's parents were asked if they had forgiven their daughter.

"We are her parents and we love her greatly and we stuck by her 100 percent," said Marie Drexler.

"There's nothing to forgive," said John Drexler.

Melissa Drexler remains free on bail until her sentencing in late October.



So-called prom mom Melissa Drexler said in New Jersey court, "I was aware of what I was doing at the time when I placed the baby in the bag. . . ."

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