

Case against couple tossed

Teen-age daughter receives probation

By Elaine Gaston
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CONWAY — In a rare move Thursday, a judge threw out the case against a Tennessee couple charged with failing to help their newborn granddaughter who was abandoned by her teen-age mother under a hotel bed in July 1995.

Circuit Judge A. Victor Rawl issued a directed verdict for Robert Herman Wilson and his wife, Debra Wilson.

Rawl said the prosecution failed to present enough evidence to support its claim that the couple knew their daughter, Brandie Hope Wilson, was pregnant, knew she'd given birth and had participated in shoving the newborn under a bed at the Reef Resort Hotel.

Brandie Wilson pleaded guilty later Thursday to ill treatment of a child. She got a suspended sentence and probation.

The baby is living with the Wilsons at their home in Strawberry Plains, Tenn.

"This case has given me sleepless nights, a



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lot of them," Rawl told the court. Before releasing the jury from the case Thursday, Rawl explained his decision, and said the prosecution's circumstantial evidence was based on suspicion.

"Testimony saying they should have known she was pregnant, or should have seen the baby under the bed is wonderful, but it's just suspicion," Rawl said. "I know of no crime in the world that says a mother should know her daughter is pregnant."

The Wilsons, who were charged with attempted homicide by child abuse and ill treatment of a child, embraced each other and their attorneys after the ruling was announced. About 20 people, friends and family members of the Wilsons, surrounded the family and offered hugs and handshakes.

"We felt like Judge Rawl would do the right thing," Morgan Martin,

the Wilsons' attorney, said after the trial. "They had nothing to hide. It's just a strange set of circumstances."

Juror Karin Loudon of Surfside Beach said she would not have convicted the couple based on the evidence presented. Loudon and a few other jurors hugged the Wilsons before leaving the courtroom.

"We all felt a girl can hide her pregnancy if she's afraid of disappointing her parents," Loudon said. "Based on what we heard, there wasn't enough" to lead to a conviction.

Loudon said she had trouble believing the couple could knowingly leave the baby under the bed.

"Who would be crazy enough to do that and think they wouldn't get caught," she said.

Solicitor Ralph Wilson said he was disappointed in the judge's ruling.

"I think the evidence was there, but obviously the judge disagrees with me," Ralph Wilson said after the trial. "He is that 13th juror. He has the right to make that call.

"I know of no crime in the world that says a mother should know her daughter is pregnant."

Judge A. VICTOR RAWL

"It was a difficult case, and we knew that it would be a close case when we came in," Wilson added. "But it was a case I felt very strongly about. I felt that this was the kind of case that a jury or a judge or the public needed to decide."

The state's evidence included testimony from hotel workers and other vacationers that the girl looked pregnant. There was the photograph taken during the family's vacation by another family that the state said showed a pregnant Brandie Wilson in the background.

And the state claimed that the sheets the baby was wrapped in were taken from the parents' bed. That issue, however, was confusing and unclear during the scope of the two-day trial. Testimony from sev-

eral prosecution witnesses varied on what materials they remembered seeing around the baby.

The Wilsons maintained from the beginning they did not know their daughter was pregnant or had given birth. Statements they made to police were read in court Thursday.

According to the statements, the couple told police they woke about 4 a.m. after receiving a wake-up call. They were preparing to return to their home in Strawberry Plains, Tenn.

Debra Wilson said she found her daughter sitting on the floor near her bed in a pool of blood. She was pale and weak, the couple told police.

The girl told her mother she had

started her period.

"I told her, 'You're lying to me, there's too much blood,'" Debra Wilson told her daughter. "She swore nothing was wrong."

Debra Wilson said her daughter denied being pregnant and denied she was having a miscarriage.

Debra Wilson said she cleaned up the blood and insisted on going to the hospital. Debra Wilson said she called the front desk to ask for towels, and also asked for directions to the hospital.

The hotel worker testified Wednesday, confirming the call was made.

On the way to Columbia Grand Strand Regional Medical Center, the Wilsons said they stopped and asked a policeman sitting in a parking lot for directions to the hospital.

The officer testified Thursday the family did stop, and appeared calm.

Dr. Jeff Eggart, a physician at the hospital who treated Brandie Wilson, said the parents did not mention the girl possibly had a miscarriage, but appeared to be concerned

for their daughter.

The physician also testified Brandie Wilson appeared to have had a difficult and painful delivery because of the trauma to her pelvic area. He said Brandie Wilson denied giving birth, and offered no explanation.

"She was very, very quiet," Eggart testified.

About four hours after Brandie Wilson was admitted to the hospital, the baby girl was found under the hotel bed by housekeepers. She was taken to the same hospital in critical condition, according to testimony Wednesday.

"I came here on vacation," Herman Wilson told police at the hospital. "I didn't expect something like this to happen. I swear to God."

The couple said Brandie Wilson had dated a boy she had known since grammar school.

"I never dreamed something like this," Herman Wilson said. "She knows how I feel. I just wish she'd told us. I'm thankful that baby is safe."