

# **Grandmother issues plea to have young man charged with supporting ISIS to get the mental health he needs**

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January 24 2019 10:43 AM



EDWARDSVILLE – On Sept. 1, 2016, Debra Thomas called emergency services on her 18-year-old grandson, Keaun Cook, as he was screaming at disembodied voices.

She said Cook's brother made a recording of the incident, which was played to authorities. In that recording, Cook was screaming expletives against the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other American law enforcement groups while also praising ISIS. Thomas said her grandson said he wanted “ISIS to come over here and chop off people's heads and fingers.” While that sounded terrifying to people in 2016 when ISIS fear was at its height, Thomas said her grandson was off of his medication was actually having a schizophrenic episode – not becoming a homegrown terrorist.

“He absorbed everything,” she said. “He would come in and I would have to turn off the news. He didn't know what he was yelling about when he was talking about ISIS. He just saw what they were doing on TV and that's what happened.”

Before calling emergency services to her Godfrey home, Thomas had called the mental health crisis line as many as four times. People on the other end of that line told Thomas to call emergency authorities if Cook was threatening to harm people. So she did. She said Wednesday she hoped for only an ambulance to come. Because of the nature of Cook's threats in tandem with the troubled times in which America found itself again with Islamic extremism, the FBI got involved.

Cook was charged with one count of making a terrorist threat and one for providing material support for terrorism. He was charged with Class X felonies and held without bail – even when Thomas said the FBI dropped the case.

“They knew there was nothing there,” she said. “The public defender knew there was nothing there. Our current lawyer knows there's nothing there. When Tom Gibbons was in the news – the national news – in front of all those people, he said thousands of lives may have been saved. Keaun didn't have guns, he has no idea how to make a bomb. He doesn't have any access to anything like that.”

In messages provided by Thomas, which were used as evidence against her grandson, Cook sent a message to someone he believed to be a member of ISIS which read as follows:

“Really, because I thought that I was being filmed in the American made movie keanu I mean after all that is how I got my name like what come on now.”

This message followed a traditional Arabic salutation, which Thomas said Cook had no way of reading, translating or understanding.

Thomas said that message was indicative of Cook's level of schizophrenic paranoia. She said the young man served time in the Madison County Juvenile Detention Home

previous to this transgression for behavioral issues. During that time, she said he suffered a lack of mental health treatment and was kept isolated – both of which she said contributed to a steady decline of his mental health.

“When he came out of there, he was taking his phone apart because he thought the FBI was watching him,” she said. “He took the battery out of my phone a few times, too. I'm worried that he is going to blame me for all of this, because I called the cops. I just wanted to get him the help he needs. When the FBI quit investigating, he was at Centerstone, and they could only hold him there for a short time. They told me – they promised me – they were giving the case to Madison County so they could get him the help he needed.”

### **Madison County's involvement**

Instead of that help, however, Thomas said her grandson was again being held in isolation without mental health treatment. In August 2018, Cook was indicted by a Madison County Grand Jury and charged with punching a county deputy while in the custody of the Madison County Jail. This action made some of the jail staff even more concerned about Cook's mental health, which Thomas said has been in a steady decline since being taken into Madison County's custody.

Gibbons said Cook has been deemed fit to stand trial based on an exam in September 2016 as well as another in October 2017. In May 2018, a judge ordered the Department of Human Services (DHS) to take Cook into its custody for treatment and another examination to see if Cook was still, in fact, fit to stand trial. As of now, however, Cook is still in the Madison County Jail with no bail.

On Dec. 20 and Dec. 26 of 2018, Cook's lawyer, Jeff Weishaupt, filed another order to remove the young man from jail and place him into the custody of the DHS, but the DHS has yet to accept Cook into its custody.

“I have no objection to it,” Gibbons said. “I think it's the correct decision. I believe he should be remanded there for an evaluation. They are the best-suited to do that. DHS is not going along with it. There are no pleadings to accompany it, so I don't know why they aren't taking him.”

Madison County Board Chairperson Kurt Prenzler said he has been made aware of the situation with the young man, adding he was going to look into it further.

Madison County Green Party Chairperson Joshua Young said he took the matter to Prenzler, adding Prenzler sent an attorney to speak with him on his behalf. Young said Cook's case falls into the Green Party's principles, adding he believes Cook needs to be

released from jail and placed into the custody of people who can care for him, adding the lack of mental health treatment for Cook is inhumane.



### **His mother's death and subsequent juvenile detention**

Unfortunately, Thomas said this is not the first time the Madison County criminal justice system has failed her grandson. When he was in the juvenile detention center, Thomas said he had failed a state-mandated boot camp program for troubled teens.

“That boot camp program is for kids who have behavioral issues, not to help them with their mental health problems,” Young said. “It’s no wonder he failed it. It wasn’t designed for kids like him. It wasn’t for his needs.”

While Cook always had behavioral issues derived from his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), his more severe mental illness of schizophrenia took hold when he was 16 and watched his mother die in front of his eyes.

“They had just had an argument,” Thomas said. “He had said he wished she would die. Then they were there in the emergency room. He went in there and they had a talk. She forgave him. He forgave her, he laid on her chest. Then, when she was dying, it happened right there in front of him. When they went at her with those paddles, he was no further from her than you are from me (I was sitting less than five feet from Thomas at this time).”

It was not long after that Cook was mandated to a youth boot camp, which he failed. Then he was taken into custody of the Madison County Juvenile Detention Center. While in there, Thomas said her grandson suffered from fights with fellow inmates as well as isolation from the staff. She was told, she said, Cook would keep talking in his cell and causing disruptions, which caused them to isolate him. It was that isolation, Thomas said, which really caused a sharp decline in his mental health – possibly even enough of a decline to offer his misguided and not fully understood support to a terrorist group like ISIS.

During his internment in the Madison County Detention Center, Thomas wrote several letters to people who could help and sought media support. While she did receive attention for her cause from local media, she was unable to get a response from people within the system. In a letter addressed to Gibbons on April 26, 2016, she said the following:

*I am worried about my grandson Keaun Cook... I went to see Keaun Sunday and all I could do when I got in my car was cry , my heart ached listening to him tell me how he felt to be locked away in a room everyday. Had I locked him in his room for having an extra book or taking a shower a little longer or not following my rules, would I not be in jail? ...*

*Tell me what has he really done to deserve this treatment. Yes, he lost his other and didn't know how to handle it. He hasn't robbed nor killed anyone, but he is treated as though he has killed someone. Keaun went into that detention as a boy, but whenever he leaves, he will be considered a man, who has not completed school. His youth has been taken away from him by the hands of the juvenile detention system, the system that has supposed to have helped him, has harmed him...*

*Because Keaun has been in isolation for so long, he is now taking pills to help him sleep, something he did not have to do before he went in there. I am begging and*

*pleading with you to please let him come home to his family, and I promise I will continue to get him the help that he needs.*

As of now, Thomas said she believes her grandson is still isolated. She also said he is not getting the mental health treatment or medication he needs while locked away in the Madison County Jail. She said Weishaupt met with prosecutors Wednesday to try to get Cook to a secure facility through DHS for treatment, but Gibbons himself said the DHS has not taken the young man into custody in spite of a court order from Madison County.

Young said he is working to get Green Party activists and anyone else who wants to see the young man get the help he needs at the February meeting of the Madison County Board on Feb. 20 at 5 p.m.