



"A unique case": A deep dive into the story of an accused terrorist sympathizer suffering from severe mental illness

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EDWARDSVILLE – A grandmother made a desperate plea for her grandson's life in front of an audience of the entire Madison County Board as well as her advocates.

Debra Thomas is the grandmother of 21-year-old Keaun Cook. Cook was arrested in the late summer of 2016 and given two terrorism-related charges. She claims her grandson is suffering from untreated mental illness and is in no way a terrorist – an assertion verified by her friends and neighbors. Cook has been in the custody of the Madison County Jail since 2016 with no trial, and was recently ordered to be remanded to the custody of the Department of Human Services (DHS), but Cook is still sitting in the Madison County Jail, despite Madison County State's Attorney Tom Gibbons saying he checks the jail population lists every morning hoping Cook has left its ranks.

As of Thursday morning, however, Cook was still in jail. But why?



An Extensive Juvenile History

To know why Cook is still in a jail cell – often kept in solitary confinement - one has to know how Cook got there in the first place. Those terrorism charges were not Cook's first experience with law enforcement. While Gibbons could not comment on Cook's juvenile record, his grandmother said Cook spent as much as 18 months within a juvenile detention facility between the ages of 14-18. Much of that time was spent in isolation, Thomas said. Gibbons, however, said Cook was given several resources during his time in juvenile confinement.

The reasons behind that confinement both as a juvenile and an adult seem to stem from Cook's untreated mental illnesses. Thomas said her grandson was diagnosed with

attention deficit hyper disorder (ADHD) and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) at a young age. She said he developed bipolar disorder as a teenager, and developed schizophrenia after seeing his mother die at the age of 14.

“He and his mom had just had a fight, and he said things like 'I hope you die' and 'I hate you,’” Thomas recalled. “They made up just before she died, and he went in and laid on her chest and they forgave each other. But he was in there – the whole family was in there – as they tried to revive her with the paddles. She died right in front of him.”

After witnessing his mother's death, Thomas said Cook was supposed to attend a boot camp through the State of Illinois, but failed out of it. After that failure, he was sent to the Madison County Juvenile Detention Home.

“That boot camp was not designed for kids like Keaun,” Madison County Green Party Chairperson Joshua Young said. Young has been advocating for Cook's case for at least the last few months, bringing it to the attention of local media as well as the Alton Branch of the NAACP. “It wasn't designed to help mental health issues like what Keaun has.”

Within the juvenile system, Gibbons said Cook was given access to several resources, but Thomas said he was kept in isolation. She said staff at the facility kept her grandson in isolation for allegedly talking to himself while telling her he was showing no signs of extreme mental illness.

During an impassioned speech at Wednesday's Madison County Board meeting, Thomas publicly alleged staff at that facility assaulted her grandson, saying she once found him with a black eye, busted lip and scratch behind his head. She read this from a letter she sent to Gibbons from when Cook was within the juvenile system.

The Madison County Board also saw testimony from a neighbor, who requested after her words to not be identified due to her proximity to some of the authorities involved. That neighbor said she had a position within a local municipality, which placed her around problematic children and adults – including drug addicts and people suffering from extreme mental illnesses. She said Cook would come to her house to stay the night when in trouble with his grandmother and the law.

She described accounts of Cook coming to her home and helping her with chores as well as chores for other neighbors when he was in trouble with his family or authorities. She once even took him to the East Alton Police Department after he failed to report to his parole officer. She said he did not tell her why he had a parole officer, but said he was arrested when she took him there.

She described Cook as a “lost soul,” adding he was quiet and introspective with eyes full of pain, but was forceful with her voice when she said he was “no terrorist” to the Madison County Board.

Regardless of the reasons Cook entered the juvenile system or was kept in isolation, Thomas said her grandson returned from the juvenile system a different and far more paranoid person.



Transitioning to Adulthood Following Juvenile Incarceration

When Cook turned 18, he was released from the juvenile system. He was placed into the custody of his grandmother who said he had changed completely. She blamed his negative change on Cook's time in the Madison County Juvenile justice system. She said he was released at the age of 18 with no chance to transition from isolation to being in the general public.

“She couldn't even take him to Wal-Mart,” a family member said following the board meeting Wednesday night. “She couldn't even take him into public. They didn't give him a chance to transition from isolation to being around people anymore.”

Thomas said her grandson returned to her paranoid. She said he felt like he was constantly being watched and monitored by a menagerie of acronym agencies from the CIA to the FBI. She said he would constantly remove the battery from her cellphone and say he was being monitored.

“The scariest part was when he took me to the basement, which is the quietest part of the house,” Thomas said after giving her plea to the board Wednesday night. “No one else was there, it was just me and him. He took out my cellphone and took out the battery, and said someone was watching us, that he was being monitored by the government.”

Between the time of his release from juvenile detention to his terrorism charges, Thomas said she contacted a mental health crisis line as many as 18 times. She said her grandson would often spend 36 hours in the custody of Gateway Medical Center, where he was medicated, treated and returned. Once he was back, however, Thomas said Cook would often refuse his medication.

During this time, Thomas and Cook's family said Cook was attempting to get his GED through classes at Lewis and Clark Community College (LCCC) and applying for several jobs in the area in an attempt to turn his life around. Without the aid of his medication, however, Cook was unable to continue his path to wellness.

Thomas also said her grandson was smoking something often referred to as “K2,” which is popular among people who would like to smoke cannabis, but have to pass drug tests. It was sold at gas stations and other shops as “potpourri,” despite having psychoactive effects due to chemical treatments. People who used K2 often reported having increased paranoia as well as anxiety attacks.

Cook's pattern of behavior at this time set the stage for what came next.



The Terrorism Charges

On Sept. 1, 2016, Cook was charged with making terrorist threats and providing material support for terrorism – charges that, if convicted, could earn Cook as many as 70 years in the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC).

“I’m not sure if the Department of Corrections is where he belongs,” Gibbons said Thursday morning. “I think we have a lot yet to learn about him. But, based on the information and evidence collected by police officers from him and his family at the time he was taken into custody, it was the right thing to do at the time. People around him were scared, and, based on the information we gathered, they had a right to be.”

Thomas said she contacted the mental health crisis line as many as three or four times the day Cook was arrested. She said she called 9-1-1 at the advice of the crisis line and said she did not expect police to arrive, adding she only wanted to see the ambulance come for her grandson. This assertion was disputed by Gibbons as well as a recording of that call made by Thomas.

“In the call, she specifically said to send the police, because he would not want to go with them,” Gibbons said.

When authorities did arrive, Thomas said they heard a recording of Cook captured by his younger brother – initially as a joke – and made the decision to take him into custody. They used that recording as evidence against Cook. Thomas said, in the recording her grandson was yelling things such as “f**k the FBI!” “f**k the CIA!,”

“ISIS needs to come here and chop off hands and heads!” Thomas said she found the things her grandson was screaming as “nonsensical ramblings.”

There was also at least one Facebook message sent from Cook to someone he may have believed to have been a member of ISIS. In that message, a person sends a standard Arabic salutation, which Thomas said her grandson had no way of reading or understanding. Cook responds with the following message, which indicates the level of paranoia he felt:

“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.”

The person on the other end of the message again sent that salutation, and Cook responded with a graphic depiction of an ISIS beheading.

Thomas asserts her grandson was not aware of ISIS the way most Americans were in 2016 when the Islamic extremist group was terrorizing parts of Iraq and Syria left vulnerable from years of seemingly endless conflicts. She described Cook as a “sponge,” adding he may have seen something on TV about ISIS and carried it from there. She said she limited his exposure to the news for that reason.

“It was not just him sitting on a couch and screaming into the void,” Gibbons said. “Given the information we had regarding those recordings and online information regarding who he was talking to and the things that were talked about and written about, those charges were deemed necessary.”

Gibbons said he has attended several seminars regarding mass casualty events. He said one of the unifying factors between mass shooters and folks who drive vehicles into large crowds of people or release nerve gas into subway systems is a history of untreated mental illness. He said people often ask what caused things such as “lone wolf” mass shootings and other terrorist acts, and the answer is usually untreated mental illness and people around the situation ignoring the signs. Because of that, he feels like what happened with those charges and Cook's arrest was warranted at that time.

Thomas and Young dispute this, however. Young, who represents the Madison County Green Party and has been a political activist in the area for the better part of a decade, said the charges were “trumped up” due to 2016 being an election year and Gibbons being up for reelection. Both Thomas and Young allege the arrest of a terrorist at the height of ISIS fears was a political move for Gibbons.

“As soon as you see the signs, you have to take immediate action,” Gibbons said. “Now there is an opportunity for Cook to get the help he needs. Instead of having a whole lot

of people suffer and die and everyone asking how it happened, something may have been prevented. Often during these attacks, the person doing them does not survive either. Cook is alive and able to maybe get treatment someday.”

At the time of his arrest, Gibbons said Cook posed a threat to nearby schools. Cook and Thomas lived in Godfrey near both North Elementary School and LCCC. A family member of Cook said he walked to GED classes at the college or borrowed the neighbor's bike to get there. She said that was the basis of the fear authorities felt regarding local schools.

Thomas said her grandson did not have access to guns, bomb-making equipment, money to give terrorist cells or even the ability to drive a car. She wondered how her grandson could provide material support to terrorists without first having materials to support. Gibbons said material support could also include information, but would not comment further on the issue.

The same FBI Cook allegedly decried in the recording used as evidence against him investigated the case when Cook was first charged, Thomas asserted. No federal charges were filed, and Thomas said the FBI ceased their investigations soon after they began. She said she was told the county would get her grandson the help she believed he so desperately needed.

Gibbons said he could not comment on the FBI's investigation into the Cook case. He said the prevalence of people with untreated mental illness seeking possible affiliations with terrorist groups or methods to harm multiple people at once may allow the FBI to only investigate more widespread and connected cases. He said Cook's charges are more localized instead of a national or international scheme, meaning the FBI may have declined further investigation or further charges.

Charges, however, should be dropped altogether in the interest of Cook's mental health, Thomas said, and Young agrees.

Because of a court order, Thomas was able to review the evidence against her grandson in the presence of his defense attorney, Jeff Weishaupt. She said it was only the recording and some online messages. The full scope of the evidence against Cook will not be publicly available until the case goes to trial – something which has yet to happen, despite Cook being in the custody of the Madison County Jail for nearly three years.



Cook's Time in the Madison County Jail

Gibbons said his office assures people are ready to stand trial within 120 days of being charged. He said his office is ready to prosecute the case, and has been for a long time. So why has it not happened yet?

Cook was assigned a public defender at the time of his release. He saw a judge on Sept. 7, 2016, and a judge questioned his fitness to stand trial on Sept. 9, 2016. Cook was sent to Dr. Daniel Cuneo, who Gibbons said was universally respected among prosecutors, defenders and judges within the Madison County judicial system. Dr. Cuneo returned a report on Oct. 18, but that report was discarded when his public defender filed for a change of judges on Oct. 20. The judge was changed from a criminal judge to a civil judge, meaning the trial had to fit into that judge's schedule.

On Nov. 16, 2016, Gibbons said Dr. Cuneo found Cook fit to stand trial.

Since being incarcerated, Cook has received three charges due to alleged assaults against his fellow inmates as well as jail staff. The first of these occurred on Dec. 5, 2016, when Cook was charged with a misdemeanor for allegedly throwing a cup of urine at a person. This sort of behavior allegedly conducted by Cook while within the general populace of the jail sent him to isolation. Gibbons said Cook had to be segregated at that time.

“I've said it before, but jails are not properly equipped to handle people who need serious mental health treatment,” he said. “It's frustrating, because I want him to get treated, his family, who loves him very much wants him to get treatment, and the jail

wants him to get treatment. They don't want to be in harm's way, either, and the list of available resources is limited. We cannot put him into general population with that sort of behavior.”

On Dec. 12, 2016, the fitness finding was again vacated, and Gibbons said he was unsure why. On Dec. 16, 2016, Cook was again evaluated by Dr. Cuneo and was again found fit to stand trial.

During this time, Thomas said her grandson was not being treated, adding more time in isolation without his medication was going to make everything worse. She said Cook would often refuse his medication, however, after becoming an adult. Gibbons said he could not comment on Cook's current medical regimen or lack of one.

“For having the mental illness he has without being treated, I'd say he's doing pretty good only getting the charges he has,” Young said in a previous interview with Riverbender.com.

Cook fired his public defender in a handwritten letter in March 2017. He also asked to represent himself, requesting a speedy trial in April 2017. It was also at this time Cook expressed his wishes to no longer speak to court doctors, saying explicitly he would refuse to do so.

Attorney Jeff Weishaupt took the case in Sept. 2017, and he asked for another evaluation for Cook's fitness to stand trial in Oct. 2017. Cook was again evaluated by Dr. Cuneo.

Shortly after this, Thomas was allowed to review the evidence in the presence of Weishaupt, from Jan-Feb. 2018.

Following that, Weishaupt ordered another fitness determination in April 2018. On May 1, 2018, an order for temporary detention and examination of DHS was filed. DHS was asked to do an independent evaluation and examination, but the department did not adhere to this order. On May 21, 2018, Weishaupt asked the Madison County State's Attorney's Office why DHS had not complied with that order. Gibbons said his office was not made aware of why.

More charges were filed against Cook in Aug. 2018. He was accused of striking a deputy in the face and spitting on them while in custody of the jail. Thomas said she was told by someone close to the jail staff her grandson was provoked by that deputy before striking them. Gibbons said he could not comment further on the matter. Those charges were felony assault and battery against a peace officer.

On Dec. 20, 2018, Weishaupt filed a petition for the DHS to honor the May order. On Dec. 26, 2018, that motion was amended to include a fitness review. Gibbons said DHS did not want to do the fitness exam.

Cook was eventually found unfit to stand trial on Feb. 6, 2019. Gibbons said “everyone agrees” with this ruling. He said he met with members of the Alton Branch of the NAACP, who Thomas said had previously rejected her pleas for help, showing rejection letters from the national branch saying just that, following that finding.

It would seem at that time Cook would be sent to a maximum security DHS facility for as long as one year, or until he could be deemed fit to stand trial. Young described such a facility as “a prison for crazy people.” During Wednesday's Madison County Board meeting, Young demanded Cook be sent to a medium-or-low security facility, adding the charges against the young man should also be dropped.

When asked why Cook has yet to be remanded to the custody of the DHS, Gibbons said the DHS sent a social worker to meet with Cook for a required evaluation. Gibbons said the DHS employee reported Cook would not cooperate with the DHS's initial intake evaluation.

“If he won't talk to the person there to help him, the jail cannot force him into DHS custody,” Gibbons said. “I hope everyday someone he trusts can talk him into cooperating with them. I pray every day for Cook and his grandmother and their family. I know they love him very much, and I know this can't be easy on any of them.”

Thomas said her grandson is being treated unfairly, and even insinuated the situation was magnified due to the color of Cook's skin. She said white people charged with calling in bomb threats are often charged with felonies and then have lesser charges filed – often getting probation or short-term sentences.

“It is unfair to compare this to any other case,” Gibbons said. “This is a very unique case. This is definitely an example and a case study of how someone suffering with mental health issues is treated with that condition.”

Both Gibbons and Thomas lamented the unavailability of mental health treatment for people who are suffering from mental illnesses. Thomas described the fact her grandson's mental health was not taken into account by the authorities until he “did something stupid” as “a shame,” adding something should have been done by the system sooner.



So What Happens Next?

After delivering public addresses to the county board, Young said he hopes to get on the agenda of the Madison County Judicial Committee so he and Thomas can present to them a timeline of events from their perspective. He said he will not rest until Cook is either sent to a medium or a low security facility with DHS, and has the charged levied against him dropped.

Gibbons said he hoped Cook would cooperate with DHS staff and attain the treatment he needs to attain fitness to stand trial. Once that fitness is attained, however, Gibbons

said the four felony charges and one misdemeanor are currently standing. How that trial goes, however, will be greatly affected by how Cook responds to treatment through DHS.