

# MOM FIGHTS NOVA SCOTIA JUDGE'S RULING TO SEND CHILD HOME

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*In 2002, a Des Moines pediatrician who had disappeared at the height of her career with her 3-year-old daughter was called to court in Nova Scotia after being accused of kidnapping her own daughter. This five-part series examined a complicated case of alleged child abuse and how far the mother was willing to go to protect her daughter.*

Halifax, Nova Scotia -Cheryl Standing could see in the judge's eyes she was losing.

Over five days in May in a downtown courtroom, lawyers hired by two of her ex-husbands cast shadows on her motive, her honesty, even her sanity for abducting her daughter and fleeing from Iowa to Canada in 1995.

She had run because her daughter, then 3, told a therapist she was being sexually abused by her father, and Iowa courts had done nothing to stop him.

Standing knew the civil proceeding this spring -the first of its kind in Nova Scotia -would determine whether her 10-year-old would have to return to Iowa.

"Why aren't you defending my character?" the former Des Moines pediatrician asked her high-dollar Canadian lawyer.

It's not about you, it's about the law, the lawyer told her.

If it was, the 46-year-old pediatrician says she would never have known by Judge Walter Goodfellow's ruling a week later.

"Dr. Standing's willingness to mislead knows no bounds," the judge concluded. "That my decision carries the consequence that (she) is not rewarded for her deliberate deceit and lack of respect for the law is comforting."

Standing's family says she was despondent when the Supreme Court judge in Canada took sides with John Aulwes, a man that Iowa courts deemed a likely child molester.

Under an international treaty called the Hague Convention, Goodfellow ruled the girl would have to go home. In time, he said, the girl should be reintroduced to her father.

"That was my sister's darkest hour," says Kathy Standing-Cordero, a pediatric nurse from Pleasant Hill. "I really didn't know if she would live."

Cheryl Standing is still fighting, appealing Goodfellow's ruling in a hearing Wednesday.

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On his wooded Dallas County acreage bordering the Raccoon River, John Aulwes sits inside the shell of a cabin he hopes to one day share with his estranged daughter.

Aulwes, 47, has labored on the two-bedroom log home since his daughter disappeared. For the first time, the soft-spoken forestry worker and former Boy Scout leader has hope his daughter will actually be coming home.

"That judge's decision," he says, "was like a gift from God."

Judge Goodfellow, Aulwes says, vindicated everything he tried to say about his ex-wife, the doctor.

As the former head of pediatric emergency medicine at Blank Children's Hospital in Des Moines, Standing was well-schooled in sexual abuse. Who better than she to coach a 3-year-old into believing she had been sexually abused? Aulwes had long asked.

Standing told new friends in Canada and her fourth husband, Dr. Andrew Mai, that a therapist discovered the girl was being molested by Aulwes.

But by the time Mai and Standing separated last year, even her fourth husband, a doctor himself, had doubts.

Mai, the father of Standing's 5-year-old daughter, Emily, became an interested party in his wife's Hague Convention proceeding. Both Mai and Aulwes worried that Standing would further alienate them from their daughters, or worse, that she would run again.

In the courtroom, the Canadian doctor's attorney joined Aulwes' attorney in second-guessing the therapist's conclusion.

Were you aware the girl called her grandfather Dad? Mai's lawyer had asked.

No, the therapist answered.

You indicated today that you were unaware that Cheryl Standing was sexually abused as a child, is that correct?

That's correct, the therapist testified.

Would you have concerns if the girl's grandfather, a sexual abuser, was living in the same house as her? the lawyer asked again.

That would depend, the therapist answered.

In the end, Carole Meade, the girl's therapist, admitted in front of Aulwes and everyone else in the courtroom that she had read the girl a suggestive book about a father hurting his daughter before they talked about abuse. In fact, she said, she had read it to many children.

The therapist admitted she had asked the girl leading questions, a practice widely frowned upon by experts. Meade also conceded that she was a longtime victims' advocate.

Who was really to blame? The fathers wanted to know.

Aulwes rented a room in Nova Scotia for weeks after the trial, hoping he would be allowed to go home with his daughter. After driving nearly 2,000 miles, he says, Standing wouldn't even let him see her.

Instead, she filed the appeal that is to be heard Wednesday.

"I just really feel strongly that (my daughter) needs to get away from her mother, and the sooner, the better," Aulwes says. "She's poison."

Aulwes says he hopes that the girl will one day consider his cabin her home. He realizes she is afraid of him now. With help and time, he says, she will see there's nothing to fear.

"I really want her to have a good life," he says.

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While Aulwes prays for his daughter's quick return, Standing's family prays for another truth.

Dumbfounded by Goodfellow's forcefully written ruling, they say the judge disregarded sexual and physical abuse findings already upheld in Iowa's justice system. He also gave Mai temporary custody of Emily until her half-sister's fate is determined.

"I'm so afraid," says Standing-Cordero, Cheryl Standing's sister. "I'm afraid that John will have access to my niece again. I'm afraid Cheri will have to leave Emily behind. I'm afraid John will never have to face what he did. I'm afraid it's never going to end."

Standing-Cordero and her parents say lawyers twisted testimony in the Canada hearing, presenting falsehoods as facts to the judge.

The girl, for example, never called her grandfather "Dad," they say. She called him "Papa."

Interviewed in Nova Scotia, the girl stands firmly with her mother -saying Aulwes' contention that her grandfather was somehow to blame was false.

"I know . . . they made it sound like my grandfather was the one who abused me, but he didn't," she says. "He's really the only man I've ever trusted, the only man I've ever loved."

Meade says the hearing seemed one-sided.

The therapist says she believes Standing did not intend to hide the fact that her own father had said and done sexually suggestive things when she was growing up. For reasons the therapist can't remember, it hadn't come up when she began taking the girl to therapy in late 1994.

"It's made Cheryl appear to be not credible, and that's unfortunate," Meade says. "She had genuine concerns, and I had genuine concerns. Something really bad was happening to her daughter in (Aulwes') home."

Even as a toddler, Meade says, the blond-haired little girl was clear about who hurt her.

Yet, Meade still wishes she would have known more when, so many years ago, she was trying to help a little girl cope with a divorce.

"I probably could have helped Cheryl and prevented her from leaving," she says.

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Curt Scott also wishes he could have done more. A sheriff's detective in Dallas County for 32 years, he still remembers the beautiful blond, brown-eyed girl he interviewed in the mid-1990s.

"She was just a doll," he says. "Someone, obviously, you'd really want to protect."

At different times, Scott says, both Aulwes and the Standings alleged the little girl was being hurt. He believed they were right.

"I felt back then, and I still feel now, that the girl was definitely abused," he says. "But my problem has always been, I couldn't prove it in court."

Scott says both Aulwes and Standing's parents, who live just miles apart in Earlham, have been angry with him over the years for not doing enough.

As a father who at one time was barred from seeing his own children, the detective sympathized with Aulwes. After witnessing the girl's bruises, he also felt for Standing.

"I tell you what, I'm kind of glad she doesn't have to run and hide anymore," he says. "But I'm worried for the child. For the whole gamut of what's happened, the fighting between the two families."

Scott retires this year. The case, he says, is one of only a couple of regrets in his long career.

"I would have liked to make an ending to this one, and I can't do it," Scott says.

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In the end, the lawyers weren't all wrong. Standing says there were times over the years when she felt isolated, terrified, on the brink of losing her sanity.

"But I learned a long time ago that I could either make the most of this -learn what I can and make sure everybody heals -or I can go nuts," she says.

Among the many prices she has paid for running is time lost with her daughter, Emily. The girl lives with Mai and visits Standing's broad log cabin in northern Nova Scotia three times a week under the supervision of a court monitor.

For now, Standing lives off help she receives from Mai, her parents and other supporters. She cannot practice medicine until her legal troubles are decided.

In Nova Scotia, the oldest daughter's home for half her 10 years, life has not been all crises. The girl rides horses, plays the violin and piano, and excels in school.

The girl is tall and energetic and looks like her father. Like both her parents, she loves the outdoors, hiking in

the wooded hills near her home, swimming in local quarries, and sliding in the ruddy-colored mud flats of the Bay of Fundy.

The girl says she has many friends and considers several people family near her country home. And yet, she says, she knows there are problems.

Trusting men. Staying close with her half-sister. Wishing, she says, she was normal.

"Maybe when I was 5 or 6, I felt that way, when I didn't understand what was going on. But now I'm kinda tense all the time and I can't really have fun sometimes when I play with other kids," the girl says.

Standing says both she and her daughter have attended therapy for years. Although they both are doing considerably better than when they arrived in Canada, problems still crop up.

She, like Aulwes, regrets not making better choices in partners.

She still regrets she had to run.

Though Standing's ex-husbands fear she will do it again, she says she has no reason to this time.

"My job is done," she says. "Now, my daughter is old enough to speak for herself."

The girl, Standing says, is strong and intelligent and outspoken. Those who meet her, she says, "know I couldn't have coached her."

Though the road she's traveled has been hard, Standing says, she's learned a lot about herself, her daughter and life along the way. Whatever happens next, she says, she wants to handle herself with dignity.

Who knows, the doctor says, whether she would have learned as much healing other people.

"It's not like this has all been such a terrible journey," she says.