

Mom guilty of gambling with funds for ill son

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The mother of a cancer-stricken young man had her own idea of how to spend \$15,000 in benefit money raised to help him fight his illness:

She gambled it away.

Sherry R. Holcomb, 46, of Cortland, pleaded guilty Wednesday in State Supreme Court to a felony count of scheme to defraud.

She opened a bank account and deposited the money raised at a benefit, and even funds sent with get-well cards, for Ryan O'Donnell, her 21-year-old son. Then she used ATM cards to withdraw the money to finance her gambling at casinos across the Northeast, prosecutors said.

Holcomb and her defense attorney, Daniel DuBois, declined to comment after court.

Her written confession, however, spells out what she did with the money.

"I've spent the money at the Seneca Niagara Casino, Buffalo Creek Casino, Turning Stone Casino, Casino Niagara, Mohegan Sun casino [in Connecticut], Harrah's casino in New Jersey," she wrote in her confession.

"I'm not sure how much of Ryan's money I've gambled away, but it is virtually all gone," she said in her confession.

"I know it was wrong to spend his money and I'm sorry for doing it," she said in the confession. "I'm ashamed of myself."

O'Donnell has leukemia, and he continues to be treated in Roswell Park Cancer Institute.

Holcomb, who remains her son's primary caregiver, was released without bail but was ordered to report to the State Police barracks in the Town of Boston to be processed.

Prosecutors did not speak to O'Donnell, so they don't know whether he supported or opposed the criminal charge filed against his mother.

Her crime "really offends me," said Erie County District Attorney Frank A. Sedita III.

"This goes beyond your basic con, when it's your own mother doing this," Sedita said.

Most of the money was not raised in Western New York, but at a benefit for the Ryan O'Donnell Fund in Central New York, where the family lives, Sedita said.

Erie County prosecutors filed charges because Holcomb opened the bank account at a local First Niagara Bank branch.

Bank officials alerted Sedita's office when they noticed frequent withdrawals at ATMs at or near casinos, Sedita said.

"I would take the money out of ATMs either at or near the casinos I've gambled at," Holcomb wrote in her confession.

In addition to the benefit proceeds she took, "I've also spent money that he received in get-well cards that were sent to him to the house," she said.

The money from get-well cards totaled about \$300.

Holcomb told investigators she opened a bank account in February after the benefit for her son. Two debit cards were issued for the bank account. She kept both of them. Her son has never used the cards.

"A lot of the money I took out of the bank I spent for personal reasons, mostly for gambling," she said in her confession. "I've had a gambling addiction for the past six or seven years."

Holcomb pleaded guilty before State Supreme Court Justice John L. Michalski.

She agreed to pay \$15,000 in restitution.

Sentencing is scheduled for Nov. 16. She could receive up to four years in prison.

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