

120 mourn A.J.; mother indicted

Donna Jackel and James Goodman, Staff Writers

(July 28, 2005) - Arthur J. Gibson Jr. was an outgoing, energetic child who loved playing video games, attending church and having his hair braided.

About 120 tearful mourners attended the 5-year-old's funeral Wednesday. The Rochester boy died July 21. Shortly before the funeral, his 24-year-old mother, Yolanda Williams, was in court, where it was disclosed that a grand jury had voted to indict her in the boy's death, according to the Monroe County District Attorney's Office.

As a hard rain pelted down outside, a small white coffin decorated with white roses and framed by yellow and blue balloons stood in front of the pulpit of the Pentecostal Power of Deliverance Church on Weyl Street. The Rev. Melvin Cross asked the grieving to look to God for fortification. "God gives us strength when there is no strength to be found," said Cross, the pastor of Pentecostal Power.

During the 90-minute service, mourners remembered the little boy who liked to pretend to be Superman. In a highly emotional moment, Lois Walker, a cousin of Williams', said she cared for A.J. in the first three months of 2005 but had to give him back to his mother when Walker went on vacation. "I couldn't keep the baby any longer. I gave him back to her," Walker said. "I don't know what happened. I don't know what went wrong, but my heart aches. I am so, so sorry," she kept repeating as she broke down in tears. Nikita Gibson, A.J.'s aunt, also gave a tearful remembrance. "I miss him so much. He used to play with my girls. He liked to go to church a lot." When his hair was braided, relatives said, A.J. would preen in the mirror and say, "I'm cute."

The little coffin was opened and those gathered, including young children, came up to say their last goodbyes. A.J.'s father, Arthur Jamall Gibson Sr., stood over his son's casket for several minutes.

Jennifer Wolfley, director of Grace Urban Ministries' Mary Magdalene Women's Outreach Center, did not know the Gibsons before A.J.'s death, but in the days since has helped organize a candlelight vigil for the pre-schooler and comforted the family. She also accompanied Gibson, who goes by the name of Jamall, to J.C. Penney Co. to select a shirt, tie and slacks for A.J.'s final viewing. "There was a lot of crying and sobbing and talking about how much he loved (A.J.)," Wolfley said, referring to Jamall.

Mayor William A. Johnson Jr. attended the funeral. He offered his condolences to the family. "We have still not found a way to protect our children," the mayor said, noting that there is plenty of money for space shuttles and foreign wars. "We have to ensure that all children are nurtured and loved."

The details of the indictment against Williams will be made public soon. The indictment was disclosed at a preliminary hearing Wednesday before City Court Judge Stephen K. Lindley. Last week, Williams was charged by police with first-degree assault and endangering the welfare of a child. The police report alleges that the boy suffered second-degree burns resulting from his mother placing him in scalding water. Williams is being represented by Special Assistant Public Defender Jill Paperno. Neither she nor Monroe County Assistant District Attorney Douglas Randall, who is prosecuting the case, would discuss details of the indictment.

In a separate development, the Democratic Caucus of the Monroe County Legislature is calling for a review of the county Department of Human Services investigation into A.J.'s death. County Legislator Carla M. Palumbo, D-Rochester, noted this was the second person this year to have contact with social services and later "seemed to have fall through the cracks."

On Feb. 2, the remains of Charles Lyon, 63, were found in his Rochester home; he had died there alone more than three months earlier.