Colette Cribari reflects on 26 years of prosecution

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BOULDER, Colo. -

Fresh out of law school in November 1983, Colette Cribari landed a dream job as a prosecutor for the Boulder County District Attorney's Office.

In the 26 years that followed, Cribari moved her way through county court, paid her dues trying drunken drivers and found her niche prosecuting crimes against children.

Cribari has had her tough days -- like her first visit to see 9-week-old Tanner Dowler in the hospital, shortly before he died.

Tanner had 15 broken bones, burns on his feet and bleeding of the brain -- the result of being shaken and abused by his father, who is serving a 60-year prison sentence. When Cribari saw the baby, she said, he was wearing only a diaper and lying in an adult-sized hospital bed in a room by himself.

"In the corner of one eye, there was a teardrop," she said. "I wept myself when I saw it."

But Cribari has had her good days too.

Recently -- during the years-long investigation and prosecution of Alex and Molly Midyette for their infant son's death -- Cribari received a timely e-mail from a sex-assault victim she'd worked with years earlier.

"She said that we had made a difference in her life," Cribari said. "That e-mail touched me and energized me."

On July 31, Cribari will clean out her desk and move on to "what lies ahead." She was terminated earlier this year -- before Alex Midyette was sentenced to 16 years in prison -- as part of a change in leadership at the District Attorney's Office. District Attorney Stan Garnett hasn't given specific reasons for why he's terminated eight prosecutors -- including Cribari and long-time prosecutor Bryan Quiram.

Cribari said she's not been given an explanation for her departure.

"He said it's not based on work," she said. "He just didn't see me as part of the future."

Cribari has worked under three district attorneys for two and a half decades and said, "I'm not finished serving Boulder County."

"I really had hoped to retire here," she said.

But, Cribari said, she's open to what this closed door means for her life. She's compiling research material on head injuries, which she developed expertise on while prosecuting the Midyette case. And she might go into private practice to help juveniles on the other side of the system.

"I'm not ready to leave," she said. "But it's OK."

'Plea bargains happen for a reason'

Like many new prosecutors, Cribari started at the Boulder County District Attorney's Office handling drunken driving cases, assaults and indecent exposures in county court. A few years later, she was promoted to district court, where she grew into her specialty -- prosecuting cases involving juveniles.

"I was really good at dealing with the victims," Cribari said. "It's easy to be an advocate for them."

She said her first boss, former District Attorney Alex Hunter, ran an office geared toward resolving cases in a fair way for both the victim and the defendant. When Mary Keenan -- now Mary Lacy -- took office, Cribari said, Lacy wanted to try more cases.

"I agree you need to be ready to go to trial," she said. "But some plea bargains happen for a reason."

Take the James Leach case in 2003 -- one of Colette's toughest. One morning, after Leach's girlfriend left for work, he got high on methamphetamine and woke up his girlfriend's 7-year-old son by stabbing him in the chest. The knife hit the boy's sternum, and the child got away. Leach then turned to the boy's 4-year-old brother, who also was in bed, and stabbed him repeatedly.

The 7-year-old ran for help, and police arrived minutes later and in time to stop Leach from killing the 4-year-old. Lacy wanted to try the case and involve the community, Cribari said. But family members feared it would "destroy" the 7-year-old to testify and face his attacker.

Cribari worked on a plea deal that sent Leach to prison for 44 years. A judge later told her that Leach wouldn't have gotten that much time had a jury convicted him, Cribari said.

'Heart and soul into the Midyette case'

There are benefits, of course, to taking cases to trial, Cribari said. Proof is in her most high-profile case, which recently wrapped up. Cribari started poring through documents surrounding baby Jason Midyette's death soon after the infant died March 3, 2006.

In May 2007, nearly a year after convening a grand jury, Alex and Molly Midyette were indicted on charges of child abuse resulting in death. Cribari said it was one of her most difficult cases because of the money the Midyettes spent on expert witnesses.

"They spent so much money, we're lucky we got a conviction at all," Cribari said. "Most people can afford three expert witnesses. They had 11."

Cribari had to research what each of the experts would be talking about, and she now considers herself somewhat of an expert on infant head injuries and rare diseases.

"I know more about rare metabolic disorders than my doctor," she said.

Molly Midyette was convicted of child-abuse resulting in death and Alex Midyette was convicted of criminally negligent child abuse resulting in death. They're both serving 16-year prison sentences, and Cribari said, "I'm happy with the outcome."

As tough as it is to leave Boulder County, Cribari said, she feels like she's going out at the height of her career.

"I put my heart and soul into the Midyette case," she said, adding that there are two types of prosecutors: the type who are in it to do quick trials and get experience and the type who are passionate about the victims and serving the community.

"We do it for the greater good," she said.