

Grand Island woman admits she was responsible for baby's death last year



Raelynn Rose Fuller, 2, died in September 2018. (Photo courtesy of Lester Fuller)

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A Grand Island woman pleaded guilty today to first-degree manslaughter in the death of her boyfriend's 2-year-old daughter. Brianna Valenti, 27, entered the plea, in what prosecutors said was a case of "shaken baby syndrome," before Erie County Judge Sheila A. DiTullio. The judge said she has committed to a sentence of five to 15 years. The maximum under the law is 25 years. Sentencing is set for 9:30 a.m. Oct. 7. Valenti continues to remain held without bail.

Raelynn Rose Fuller died Sept. 22 in Oishei Children's Hospital after her family decided to take her off of life support. Prosecutors said Valenti was the child's caretaker from 6 a.m. Sept. 10 until she called 911 about 4 p.m. that day saying the child was unresponsive. Cody Fuller, the child's father, was not home during that period, prosecutors said. Valenti was living with Fuller in an apartment on West Park Road on Grand Island.

In court, DiTullio detailed the implications of Valenti pleading guilty to the charge and reviewed the circumstances of the crime, asking Valenti if she caused the death of the 2-year-old "by shaking her." "Yes," responded an emotional Valenti, who was in tears.

Detectives with the Erie County Sheriff's Office were called to the hospital about 10:30 p.m. Sept. 10 after Erie County Child Protective Services found what they suspected to be signs of child abuse. Raelynn was in the hospital's intensive care unit at the time, had suffered brain damage and other injuries and was in a vegetative state, according to prosecutors.



Brianna Valenti.

Doctors told investigators Valenti provided "some explanation" about the child's injuries but what she said was "not consistent" with the level of injuries observed at the hospital, Assistant District Attorney John P. Feroletto told the judge during an earlier court appearance.

"She feels horrible about this situation," defense attorney Robert Cutting said of Valenti in comments to reporters after today's proceeding. "She has cried on every occasion in which we have met with her, beginning in September of last year up until the present day."

"She loved that child as if it were her own biological daughter and she feels terrible that this situation developed the way it did," he added.

District Attorney John Flynn said Valenti initially was indicted on a murder charge because the initial medical examiner's report suggested there was a two- to four-hour gap between the time Valenti inflicted the injuries on the child and when she called 911. The charge was reduced with new information, Flynn said.

"Anytime a child dies from shaken baby (syndrome), they do a further brain scan analysis and that takes six months to get. That brain scan analysis came back and it showed there was no gap in time," Flynn said.

Valenti has been in custody since her arrest on Sept. 11, according to Sheriff's Office records. She was initially charged with two counts of felony assault as well as one count of child endangerment.