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Jury Acquits Woman in Boy's Death

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A 24-year-old Los Angeles woman was ordered freed from jail Friday after a Superior Court jury acquitted her in the 1999 scalding death of a 3-year-old foster child.

The jury found Leona Hightower not guilty of all five charges against her: second-degree murder, manslaughter, assault and two counts of child abuse.

Hightower had been in custody since the boy's death in May 1999 and faced a possible life sentence if convicted.

Her attorney, Fay Arfa, said Elijah Johnson's death was a tragedy that hurt all those who were close to him.

"This little boy was loved and cared for, and happy and healthy," Arfa said in an interview.

The jury convicted Hightower's mother, Brenda Craney, 38, of a misdemeanor count of child abuse for failing to seek immediate medical care for the boy. Craney was the boy's foster mother.

Craney's attorney plans to appeal the conviction, which carries as much as a year in jail. Craney is scheduled for sentencing March 16.

The boy was living with Craney in the 1400 block of West 49th Street in Los Angeles when he suffered severe burns.

Prosecutors argued that Hightower intentionally dipped the boy into a tub of hot water on April 25, 1999. He suffered burns over 45% to 50% of his body and died that May 10. Hightower was arrested three days later.

Arfa said the boy's death was an accident that resulted from a cast iron tub and a malfunctioning water heater, which caused the water to be overly hot.

The lawyer said Hightower was watching the boy while her mother stepped out of the house for a few minutes. She was drawing herself a bath when the boy said he needed to use the bathroom, according to the attorney.

Arfa said that when Hightower turned her back, the boy disappeared. Elijah apparently climbed onto the rim of the tub and fell in, the lawyer said.

The defense brought a tub to the courtroom to show jurors how easy it was to slip into it.

"The water temperature was so hot and intense it only took a matter of seconds to inflict the burns," Arfa said.