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Psychologist in Prince Rams custody case paying mother \$550,000 legal settlement



By **Tom Jackman** November 8 Follow @stateofnova

The mother of a 15-month-old boy who died while on a visit to his father in Manassas in 2012 will be paid a \$550,000 wrongful death settlement from the psychologist who testified that it was safe to leave the boy with his father, Joaquin Rams.

The settlement was entered in Fairfax Circuit Court on Oct. 17, [the same day](#) that Prince William County prosecutors, who are seeking to prove that Rams killed his son, revealed that Virginia’s chief medical examiner had changed the official ruling on the cause of death from drowning to “undetermined.”

Rams has maintained [since his arrest](#) in January 2013 that he did not kill his son, [Prince McLeod Rams](#). Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty in the case.

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The boy's mother, Hera A. McLeod, has collected \$650,000 in settlements related to her son's death, although no one has been convicted of causing it.

The settlement is the [latest twist](#) in the case of Prince Rams, which in the two years since his death, has veered into confusion over how he died and allegations of insurance scams and serial murder. McLeod has since given birth to another child, a daughter, Estela.

Some mental health experts said that the wrongful-death award is troubling because predicting a person's behavior is an inexact science and that many factors go into a judge's decision in custody cases. But others said that psychologists need to be better trained in risk assessment and that standard clinical evaluations are insufficient when a child's well-being is at stake.

McLeod fought furiously in Montgomery County Circuit Court to keep her former fiance from having unsupervised visits in Virginia with their son. The couple had broken up shortly after Prince's birth in July 2011.

After lengthy hearings in the spring of 2012, Judge Michael J. Algeo awarded sole custody of the boy to the mother, but he allowed the father to have supervised visits, monitored by a former Montgomery police officer. Rams then sought unsupervised visits with Prince, and the judge ordered the father to undergo "a comprehensive psychological evaluation (with appropriate testing) by a licensed professional," court records show.

Rams chose to meet with [Margaret Wong](#), a PhD psychologist on the staff of Ashburn Psychological Services who specializes in child psychology. Wong provided a report,

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under seal, to Algeo and testified at a hearing in July 2012 that it was safe for Rams to have unsupervised visits with Prince.

Attorneys for McLeod cross-examined Wong extensively, court records show, and McLeod presented a clinical psychologist who testified that Wong's report on Rams omitted key facts and ignored others, including police suspicions that Rams was involved in the shooting death of a girlfriend and the asphyxiation death of his mother. In the two earlier deaths and that of his 15-month-old son, large life insurance policies were in effect, and Rams collected more than \$162,000 after his mother's death, which was ruled a suicide.

Algeo also heard testimony from McLeod, Rams, Rams's two housemates and Diane Tillery, the former Montgomery officer who supervised Rams's visits with Prince. According to court transcripts, the judge then said:

"I realize that there are differences of opinion regarding the nature of [Wong's] evaluation and the court's reliance upon it, but the track record that has been established with Ms. Tillery certainly supports the fact that my initial concerns about Mr. Rams, at least in terms of having unsupervised visitation, have been allayed to a great degree."

Algeo then ordered that Rams have unsupervised visits with his son for seven hours every other Saturday, with Tillery performing the handoff and pickup in Montgomery.

The visits began in August 2012. On Oct. 20, 2012, while Prince was in the Manassas house that Rams shared with his teenage son and two adults, Prince became unconscious, and he was taken to Inova Fairfax Hospital. [He died the next day.](#)

In January 2013, the chief assistant medical examiner, Constance R. DiAngelo, ruled that Prince had drowned, and Rams was arrested.

Three weeks later, McLeod and her attorney, Patrick M. Regan, [held a news conference](#) to announce that they were suing Wong and Ashburn Psychological for wrongful death. The psychologists initially fought the lawsuit, asking for a stay until the criminal case was resolved and noting that the judge placed the boy with Rams after hearing from multiple witnesses.

Ashburn settled its case for \$100,000 in July. Court records show that Regan collected \$35,000 in fees and \$17,500 in costs. Almost \$38,000 went to McLeod, and more than \$4,700 apiece went to Rams's teenage son, Joaquin Rams Jr., and to Estela, born after Prince's death but deprived of his future companionship.

Wong settled her case last month. Court records show that Regan collected \$192,500 in fees and \$10,440 in costs. McLeod received \$314,560, Joaquin Jr. and Estela McLeod received \$16,250 each, which will be placed in trust until they are 18.

Wong and her attorney did not respond to messages seeking comment. Ashburn declined to comment. Although a medical malpractice insurance company was probably involved in the legal decisions and payments, one could not be identified through court records.

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McLeod and Regan also did not respond to messages seeking comment.

The settlements were “absolutely amazing,” said Stanton Samenow, an Alexandria forensic psychologist and a nationally known expert in criminal and custody evaluations. He said psychology is not a “hard science.”

“It’s not like having a blood test,” Samenow said. “There’s an awful lot that goes into a judge’s decision.”

Samenow and Wendy Patrick, a lawyer and mental health expert in San Diego, said subjects of psychological evaluations can fool even the most experienced examiner. “Some of these guys,” Patrick said, “are able to manipulate, and they have charisma, and they are able to pull the wool over the eyes of the most practiced psychologist.”

Tom Jackman is a native of Northern Virginia and has been covering the region for The Post since 1998.
