

## **Prison time pared for ex-school clerk Judge agrees 80-year term excessive**

**BY MIKE LINN**

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PINE BLUFF — A former school clerk who pleaded guilty to stealing more than \$800,000 from the Pine Bluff School District has persuaded a judge to reduce her 80-year prison sentence by more than half.

Lynda King, who pleaded guilty in February and was sentenced in March, wrote a letter from prison to Circuit Judge Berlin Jones asking that he reduce her term "on the grounds of excessive sentencing."

In response, Jones issued an order saying he found King's petition - which included news clippings of inmates given lighter sentences for similar crimes - to have merit. He reduced her prison sentence to 38 years. King will be eligible for parole in six years.

In her letter, King said she wants to get out of prison so she can work on trying to repay the district the \$747,000 Jones ordered her to pay back in restitution.

"I would be willing to work for the Pine Bluff School District free in order to make restitution," King wrote. "I am willing to give up all I own to repay that which I have stolen."

She pleaded guilty to 1,004 counts of felony forgery, 549 counts of felony theft of property, 23 counts of misdemeanor theft of property and one felony count of criminal attempted theft of property.

In her job, King was responsible for ordering supplies for 33 vocational teachers in the district. She submitted fictitious purchase orders through a company she created called MTC Inc., which are the same initials as a company the district did business with before 2001. She then transferred the money from the MTC account to a personal account she shared with her husband, two accounts set up for her oldest son, and an account she established for a sideline business called A Personal Touch.

King, who made \$25,400 as a data entry clerk, stole on average more than \$100,000 a year from the district between 2001 and 2008.

Prosecutors said she used the money on clothing, cars and a Jamaican vacation, among other things.

Prosecutors opposed King's petition for a reduced sentence.

"I'm disappointed," said Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Rik Ramsey. "We thought the judge had rendered a good decision when he sentenced her to 80 years originally."

Ramsey said the original sentence was fair because of the amount of money King stole and the fact that the crimes occurred regularly over a long period of time.

He said he is almost certain prosecutors will not appeal Jones' decision, which was issued last week.

In Arkansas, it's common for inmates to request sentence reductions, but uncommon for a judge to grant them, said Brian Gallini, a professor at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville School of Law.

"At first blush, the reduction of a defendant's sentence from 80 years to 38 seems more than surprising," said Gallini, who specializes in criminal law. "Interestingly, however, the Arkansas Rules of Criminal Procedure afford convicted defendants the ability to themselves petition the sentencing judge for a reduced sentence."

Included in King's letter to Jones were Arkansas Democrat-Gazette newspaper clippings, including one story involving a priest and former Catholic high school principal who was sentenced in May to up to six years for stealing \$900,000 from a school in Philadelphia.

Another news clipping, dated Jan. 4, 2006, involved a former clerk of the Union County town of Smackover, who was sentenced to 15 years on theft and forgery charges for misappropriating \$275,209.96 in town funds.

A third clipping involved a Bearden School District treasurer and bookkeeper who was sentenced in April to six months in jail for theft and forgery, and ordered to pay back \$105,000 to the school district.

"Even with the difference in some of the amounts, even if you doubled or tripled their sentence, it would still in no way compare to mine," King said in her letter.

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