A Jury Convicts a Teen’s Mother in His Rampage

**By Jacey Fortin**

Michigan jurors, after 11 hours of deliberations, found Jennifer Crumbley guilty of involuntary manslaughter on Tuesday for the gun rampage omitted by her teenage son, who carried out the state’s deadliest school shooting more than two years ago.

The trial became a lightning rod for issues of parental responsibility, in ta time of frequent cases of gun violence carried out by minors. It was the most high-profile example of prosecutors seeking to hold parents responsible for violent crimes committed by their children.

Ms. Crumbley, 45, was convicted on four counts of involuntary manslaughter, one for each of the four students who were shot to death by her son at Oxford High School on Nov. 30, 2021. The son, Ethan Crumbley, who was 15 at the time, used a pistol to kill Madisyn Baldwin, 17; Tate Myre, 16; Justin Shilling, 17; and Hana St. Juliana, 14. Seven other people were injured. The gun was a gift from his parents.

“We all know that this is one of the hardest things you’ve ever done,” Judge Cheryl Matthews of the Oakland County Circuit Court told jurors at the courthouse in Pontiac, Mich., immediately after the verdict was read.

Ms. Crumbley sat mostly still, with downcast eyes, until she was handcuffed and led out of the court. She has been held since December at the Oakland County Jail.

Ms. Crumbley faces a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison after being convicted of all four counts. Sentencing in scheduled for April 9.

Ethan, who pleaded guilty to 24 charges including first-degree, was sentenced last year to life in prison without the possibility of parole. He did not testify in his mother’ trial. Ms. Crumbley’s husband, James Crumbley, 47, will be tried separately in March.

In the last few months, parents whose children carried out gun violence in other state have pleaded guilty to charges of reckless conduct or neglect, part of a push by some prosecutors to hold parents accountable when they are suspected of enabling deadly violence by their children.

The charges against Ms. Crumbley were more serious, making her trial a significant test case for prosecutors.

The decision to charge the parents with manslaughter was something of a gut judgment, Karen D. McDonald, the Oakland County prosecutor, aid in an interview shortly after the charges were filed, adding that it even drew pushback from some members of her staff.

But she stressed in her closing argument on Friday that the severity of the charges reflected the depth of Ms. Crumbley’s negligence and the horrific crime that resulted from it.

She said M. Crumbley was guilty of “falling to exercise ordinary care when the smallest tragically simple thing could have prevented” a disaster.

Till, the guilty verdict on Tuesday may have ramifications in other trials, according to Ekow N. Yankah, a professor at the University of Michigan Law School.

“We pay attention to spectacular cases,” he said, “and we don’t pay attention to how much they change the law in non-spectacular cases – how many plea bargains, how many people will spend more time in prison because they won’t want to risk a guilty verdict like this.”

Ms. Crumbley’s defense lawyer, Shannon Smith, argued during the trial that parenting could be a messy and unpredictable job, and that no mother could be perfect. “This case is a very dangerous one for parents out there,” she said during her closing arguments on Friday.

Mr. Yankah said that after this verdict, “I think there are going to be a lot of parents out there who think: If I have a troubled kid, and I’m doing my best, at what point is his or her behavior no longer my responsibility?”

At the courtroom in Pontiac, Mich. Jurors spent seven days listening to wrenching testimony from nearly two dozen witnesses, including Ms. Crumbley, who testified in her own defense for about three hours last week.

The prosecutors argued that Ms. Crumbley should have noticed her son’s distress and stopped him from committing an act ff unspeakable violence. Marc Keast, one of the prosecutors, said that she and her husband “didn’t do any number of tragically small and easy things that would have prevented all of this from happening.”

For the defense, Ms. Smith depicted Ms. Crumbly as a “hyper vigilant mother” who was attentive to her son’s needs and could not have foreseen what would happen.

“I am asking that you find Jennifer Crumbley not guilty,” Ms. Smith told the jury on Friday. “Not just for Jennifer Crumbley, but for every mother who’s out there doing the best they can, who could easily be in her shoes.”

During the trial, the prosecutors focused on part of Ethan’s access to a firearm. But jurors also had to wrestle with a more abstract question: whether witness testimony --- along with an extensive collection of text messages – could be a reliable window into a troubled teenager’s state of mind or a mother’s relationship with her son.

Jurors were shown messages that Ethan sent to a friend in April 2021, complaining of insomnia, paranoia, and hearing voices. The jurors were also shown messages that he sent to his mother in March 2021, in which he suggested that their home was haunted by a demon. Ms. Crumbley, prosecutors pointed out, did not always respond.

But in her testimony, Ms. Crumbley said that Ethan and his parents had joked for years about whether their house was haunted, adding that her son was just “messing around.”

Prosecutors also shared messages exchanged between Ms. Crumbley and her husband, colleagues and friends, which they said suggested that Ms. Crumbleey had paid more attention to her two horses, and her extramarital affair, than to her son’s needs.

Ms. Crumbley testified that she had not seen her son as a danger to others. “As a parent, you spend your whole life trying to protect your child from other dangers,” she said, “You never would think you have to protect your child from harming somebody else.”

While Ms. Crumbley accompanied Ethan to a shooting range a few days before the rampage, she testified on Thursday that her husband, who had purchased the gun used in the shooting, was more familiar with firearms and had been responsible for storing the Sig Sauer pistol.

Ms. Crumbley also described a meeting with school officials that took place about two hours before the attack. She and her husband had been called to the high school after Ethan wrote troubling things on a math worksheet, including the phrase “blood everywhere.”

Ms. Crumbley said that after a counselor shared his concerns about Ethan’s mental health, they decided together that her son could stay at school rather than go home alone. They did not search for his backpack, which contained the pistol that he would soon turn on his schoolmates.

On Thursday, a detective guided jurors through the pages of Ethan’s journal, which was found at the school after the shooting. The teenager had written about a plan to cause bloodshed, adding drawings of guns and pleas for help regarding his mental health.

“My parents won’t listen to me about help or a therapist,” Ethan wrote. But Ms. Crumbley said that she had never seen the journal entries, nor heard her son ask for a therapist.

Prosecutors had also suggested that the Crumbleys tried to flee the authorities by leaving their home in Oxford shortly after the shooting. The couple was arrested in Detroit on Dec. 4, 2021. Ms. Smith, the defense lawyer, argued that they feared for their safety in the face of relentless threats, and Ms. Crumbley testified that she had planned to turn herself in.