

Florence woman will do jail time for embezzling \$180K from Missoula architect firm

A Florence woman who embezzled \$180,000 from a Missoula architecture firm was sentenced Tuesday to 10 years in the Montana State Prison, with eight years of the term suspended.

Linda Faye Harris, 51, appeared for the hearing in Missoula District Court, where she previously pleaded guilty to a felony charge of theft by embezzlement. Harris admitted taking money from CTA Architects over an eight-year period, using the company funds to buy a boat, a big-screen television and a snowmobile, among other large-scale purchases. She also used the money for travel expenses, made credit card payments, paid for her son's college education, and bought tools and boat parts.

In addition to the prison term, Harris is required to pay back \$193,000 in restitution. Besides the money she stole, the restitution amount covers \$13,000 that CTA Architects paid a forensic accounting firm to investigate the case.

"This has been a nightmare of a case," said Deputy Missoula County Attorney Betty Wing, who prosecuted Harris. "We were given 43 pages of single-spaced items that the company thought were suspicious, and the defendant admitted to eight of them. We had to prove the remaining items one by one until she gradually admitted to them."

Harris began working for CTA as a bookkeeper and administrative assistant in 2001. She resigned in June 2009 after supervisors determined she'd used a company credit card to buy gas over a weekend. CTA then looked into its records more deeply and found a history of forged signatures on business checks, as well as other questionable credit card charges and reimbursements.

Harris left the company claiming to have taken about \$15,000, but a forensic audit found considerably more money at issue. That audit showed CTA funds had been used for numerous purchases for private use, and initially estimated that \$237,000 was stolen.

Wing asked District Judge Robert L. "Dusty" Deschamps III to impose a 10-year sentence in the Montana State Prison with none suspended. She based the recommendation on "the manner of the theft, her refusal to admit the allegations, because she is a pathological liar, and because I think she will do this again given any chance, especially if she is given a light sentence."

Phillip J. O'Connell, an attorney representing Harris, asked Deschamps for a probationary sentence. He also called on the defendant's husband, Jim Harris, to testify about family hardships that preceded the theft. Jim Harris said he was laid off from his job in 2001, and later that year his mother, Dorothy Harris, was murdered along with two other women in a hair salon in Florence. The homicides remain unsolved.

"It devastated our family," said Jim Harris, who has been married to Linda for 31 years.

The defendant Harris said the experience has been hard on her family members, who watched the proceedings from the back of the courtroom; many of them cried when Deschamps imposed the prison sentence.

"I betrayed my family, I betrayed my employer. I know that," Harris said. "I don't know how to apologize to make things better and get on the road to healing and repay the money I stole."

Deschamps said he felt Harris had downplayed her responsibility in the thefts from the outset, and said she needed to be incarcerated, even if only for a brief period of time. She will be released from prison into a community-based pre-release setting once she is granted parole.

"One way to apologize is to take full accountability for your actions. It seems to me like you've been dragged kicking and screaming, and I'm not convinced you have accepted full responsibility," Deschamps said.

"You go out and steal a couple hundred thousand bucks to buy among other things toys, you don't just walk out of here with a hearty slap on the wrist. There are going to be real consequences," the judge continued.

Harris, who in November resigned from the Florence-Carlton School District's board of trustees, has been free on her own recognizance since charges were filed. She was placed in handcuffs and taken into custody immediately following Tuesday's hearing, and became hysterical while speaking to family members on her way to a jail transport vehicle.

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Posted in [Local](#) on *Wednesday, June 23, 2010 6:15 am Updated: 7:25 am*. | Tags: [Embezzlement](#), [Florence](#), [Cta Architects](#), [Linda Harris](#), [Florence School Board](#), [Dusty Deschamps](#)