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Duct-tape trial ends in acquittal Colleen Broe, 34, of Levittown, was accused of binding her two small foster children with tape.

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By Larry King INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

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Colleen Broe, a Levittown mother who became a national target of outrage over allegations that she illegally duct-taped her foster children, was found not guilty of child-abuse charges last night in Bucks County Court.

After more than six hours of deliberations, a jury acquitted Broe, 34, of endangering the welfare of children, false imprisonment, and conspiracy, all felonies.

The verdicts, announced at 8:20 p.m., left Broe shaking and sobbing uncontrollably on the shoulder of her attorney, Andrew Schneider. "Thank you, thank you," she murmured.

Seated behind her, Broe's loved ones wept and pumped fists in celebration as the last of the not-guilty verdicts was read.

"Quiet back there!" barked Judge Alan Rubenstein. "This is a courtroom."

After a two-week trial, the jury found that Broe had not illegally used duct tape to bind two small foster children in her care. The verdict came despite widely publicized photographs of the 1- and 2-year-old toddlers, lying like silver-wrapped mummies in a crib in Broe's home.

The digital photos were taken by Broe's estranged husband, Neil, who pleaded guilty to similar charges the day before Colleen Broe's trial began. Schneider successfully argued that Neil Broe, 42, staged the photos and submitted them to authorities in anger over the couple's pending divorce.

The motive, Schneider told the jury, "was to crush Colleen."

As she staggered from the courthouse, Colleen Broe still wept inconsolably. Since her April 16 arrest, she has been separated from three biological children.

"I've waited eight months for this week," she told reporters. "Just let me go home; I need to call my kids."

Temporary custody of two sons, ages 11 and 10, was awarded to her ex-husband, Giancarlo Cantalicio of West Chester, pending the outcome of the trial. A 6-year-old son she had with Neil Broe was placed in foster care.

Court hearings must now be scheduled to resolve both matters, Schneider said.

"I am so overjoyed by this that my mouth can hardly move," he said. "This woman has devoted her life to taking care of her children. . . . And the truth has come out."

Michelle Henry, the chief deputy district attorney, said she felt there had been enough evidence to convict.

"We think we properly charged Colleen and Neil Broe," Henry said. "Apparently the jury disagreed, but Neil Broe has pleaded guilty and faces sentencing on those charges."

No sentencing date has been set for Neil Broe. He had agreed to testify at Colleen Broe's trial, but was not called.

Before their arrest last spring, the Broes had been publicly held up by county officials as model foster parents. But officials had not thoroughly

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checked the Broes' background, which contained public records of financial difficulties and allegations of domestic violence from previous relationships.

County foster-care workers have since taken steps to tighten their screening of prospective foster parents.

Colleen Broe had acknowledged taping the children's diapers and sleepwear to keep the toddlers from removing them. Last fall, witnesses said, the children had begun pulling off their soiled diapers at night, then smearing excrement on themselves and their cribs.

But she insisted she never had bound the children with tape.

In closing arguments yesterday, Henry and Schneider clashed over whether Broe was a cruel, abusive foster mother, or a caring, guileless woman set up by her soon-to-be ex.

"She endangered the welfare of these children. She bound them up," Henry told the jurors. "Let them know that you see the real Colleen Broe."

Schneider countered that Neil Broe took most of the disputed photos on particularly emotional days. One set of the digital photos bore the date Colleen Broe filed for divorce; another set was taken the day the papers were served on Neil Broe.

"Why were they all taken on what I call 'days of rage?'" Schneider asked the jury. "Why? Because this man is obsessed with getting her."

But Henry backed up the photos with testimony from three of Colleen Broe's sons, ages 6, 10 and 11, who said they saw their mother taping the foster children.

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