

Teen in middle of turf war

Father tries to flee, but is arrested

By Melissa Moy

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SWANSEA — Charles Washington's scheduled showdown Thursday morning with the guardians of his severely disabled, millionaire daughter led him to flee with his daughter.

Police chased him 10 miles before he stopped at his home in East St. Louis and was arrested.

The squabble began at 8 a.m. Thursday when Washington arrived in Swansea at the home of his 19-year-old disabled daughter, Sheila Denise Washington, and loaded her in a specially equipped van to take her to Mammie O. Stookey School in Belleville, said Sharon Mehrtens, Sheila's court-appointed guardian.

Mehrtens was nearby with two Swansea Police officers and several others involved in Sheila Washington's care, waiting to change the locks on the house. They were having problems with Charles Washington. He had moved his daughter out of her bedroom — the only room with a handicapped-accessible bathroom — and they could not get access to the van and other items, Mehrtens said.

"It was not intended to lock Charles out so much as we needed to get control (of the situation)," Mehrtens said.

The group waited until Charles

See CHASE/3A



News-Democrat/Tim Vizer

END OF CHASE: Rutha Washington carried Sheila from the van to a police car to be transferred back to Swansea.

Chase

Continued from 1A

Washington left to avoid a likely confrontation in Sheila Washington's presence, Mehrtens said. But Charles Washington spotted the police officers, turned the van around and returned to the home.

Charles Washington became upset and refused to hand over the van keys, Mehrtens said. Officers were unable to stop Charles Washington from suddenly taking off and fleeing with Sheila Washington in the van.

At 8:30 a.m., Swansea officer Terry Schmidt started chasing them. Schmidt was joined by officers from Swansea, Belleville, East St. Louis and the St. Clair County sheriff's department.

Charles Washington headed west on Illinois 161 through Swansea and Belleville, at times reaching speeds of 85 to 90 mph, police said. Wash-

ington stopped at his home at 427 N. 25th St. in East St. Louis, where he was taken into custody.

Sheila Washington was not harmed and relatives at the house comforted her before she was taken to her Swansea home in an unmarked police car accompanied by Swansea Police Chief Dennis Fritz.

Police then accompanied Sheila Washington to Mammie O. Stookey School in Belleville. The girl was taken into the school by Mehrtens and Rutha Washington, who is the girl's stepmother, Mehrtens said.

The van was towed because Washington apparently threw away the keys and would not talk about them, Mehrtens said.

When Sheila Washington was an infant, she suffered brain damage and portions of both arms and legs were amputated, according to court

documents. Sheila's case had been misdiagnosed, and she won settlements of several million dollars.

Sheila requires 24-hour care and has court-appointed guardians, Mehrtens said.

Mehrtens said Charles Washington has continued to be uncooperative with her and other caregivers. Although he is not supposed to live at Sheila's three-bedroom home, Charles Washington gradually took over Sheila Washington's master bedroom, Mehrtens said. He locked the room and would not allow his daughter or her caregivers access.

"(Charles Washington) has refused to cooperate with pretty much everything we've asked," Mehrtens said. "He hasn't complied with any requests."

Mehrtens said she has not had trouble with other family members.

Mehrtens said she wants the family to be involved in Sheila Washington's life, "but they cannot interfere with what is good for Sheila."

As of 2:30 p.m. Thursday, police said Charles Washington had not been formally charged.

Rutha Washington said Thursday she wanted to first talk to her husband, Charles, before commenting.

Last year, Sheila's guardians cited improper care and asked the court to remove Sheila Washington from her father's custody. But a judge ruled there would be stricter supervision and Charles Washington would receive \$5,000 a month as a caregiver.

Court records show Washington has been in and out of jail over the years. In 1992, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison for home invasion and was paroled after a few years.