

OPINION: THE DEBATE STARTS HERE

STEFANIE WOODS

Judge left system crumbled

'Cookie monster' gets undeserved second break.

She faced 15 years in prison. She has a long record, and she's only 20. She already has blown one chance from a juvenile court judge. She has shown no sign of taking the justice system seriously.

Fortunately for Stefanie "Cookie Monster" Woods, she also was facing Palm Beach County Circuit Judge Amy Smith. Back in July, when a soft plea deal on Woods' armed robbery and kidnapping charges seemed imminent, Judge Smith tried to arrange for an unadvertised hearing, to spare the poor young lady more adverse publicity.

Last week, Judge Smith compounded that error with another, by placing Woods on probation — prosecutors were asking for 15 years after Ms. Woods pleaded guilty — and sending her to a Florida Department of Corrections drug treatment program. The judge did so with an arrogance that the defendant who called her theft of \$168 from a Girl Scout an "easy crime" would appreciate. "A lot of people won't be happy about this," Judge Smith said. "But I think it's the right thing to do, and it's my decision."

To review, Ms. Woods had a juvenile

record that included burglary, battery and contempt of court even before she and a friend stole that cookie money in January 2008. Three weeks later, she skipped out on a Denny's bill. That May, when she was convicted in the cookie theft, she cursed, made an obscene gesture and shouted at a sheriff's deputy. Pleading no contest in the Denny's theft, she claimed to feel "really misunderstood." A judge sentenced her to treatment. In October 2009, she was back in court on those armed robbery and kidnapping charges.

If Stefanie Woods was a poor black woman, not a blonde who reportedly once had a modeling contract, would the system have given her this undeserved second break? Where Judge Smith sees a troubled Stefanie Woods, we see a calculating, pathological Stefanie Woods who has learned to play the system. Fortunately, Judge Smith rotates out of criminal court next month. Unfortunately, she rotates into family court.

— Randy Schultz,

for The Palm Beach Post Editorial Board