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## Billings woman avoids prison time for embezzlement

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A 66-year-old Billings woman convicted of embezzling \$100,000 from her employer avoided prison time when she was sentenced Friday in District Court.

Shirley Richey Blome declined to speak before Judge Ingrid Gustafson gave her a 20-year suspended prison sentence for felony theft by embezzlement and forgery from the auto repair business where she was a bookkeeper. The judge also ordered Blome to pay restitution.

Gustafson rejected a recommendation for a 10-year prison sentence by Deputy County Attorney David Carter, who described Blome as a "professional thief."

Carter said Blome deserved a prison sentence because she was previously convicted of a similar crime. Blome received a deferred sentence for embezzling \$5,500 from a law firm where she also worked as a bookkeeper.

"We don't think she'll pay restitution, and if she does she'll probably be stealing it from somebody else," Carter said.

The owner of Willard's Garage on Broadwater Avenue, where Blome worked for six years, also asked the judge to impose a 10-year prison sentence.

"She's way above and beyond a thief," said Willard Myers. "She's a professional con artist."

Blome's attorney, Brad Arndorfer, said the previous charge that resulted in a deferred prosecution could not be considered because the charge eventually was dismissed. Arndorfer said the recent convictions are non-violent offenses, Blome has a large group of family and friends who support her, and the woman's income comes from a \$440 monthly Social Security benefit.

"Incarceration might be nice for vindictiveness, and it would be vindictive," Arndorfer said. "But I don't see that it would accomplish anything."

Blome was convicted at the end of a four-day trial in December. The jury acquitted her of a felony criminal mischief charge.

At trial, Carter presented evidence that Blome stole about \$80,500 from the business over

several years through a scheme to hide cash receipts and pocket other company funds. Blome also padded her payroll and forged checks. She also was accused of destroying company records.

Myers said at trial that the embezzlement nearly forced him into bankruptcy. After Myers confronted her about a missing check in May 2004, Blome walked off the job and later told police that any missing money was the result of "hush" payments Myers paid her to keep quiet about his practice of cheating customers.

Before she imposed the sentence, Gustafson said the prosecution and defense had painted very different pictures of Blome. The judge received numerous letters of support for Blome, some of which described her as very trustworthy, the judge said.

Gustafson said she could not consider the previous case that resulted in a deferred prosecution, and she noted Blome's age and "significant limitations" for future employment. The judge also noted there had been some indication that Blome suffers from a gambling addiction.

The judge said she considered restitution an important priority in the case. A prison sentence would not help Blome meet that responsibility, the judge said.

Gustafson sentenced Blome to consecutive 10-year suspended prison sentences on both counts.

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