

Martella attorney defends her qualifications

By Natalie Ragus

The Kings County District Attorney's Office Thursday questioned the suitability of the defense attorney assigned to a man accused of fatally shooting a couple and setting their east Hanford home on fire to conceal evidence.

Melina Benninghoff, attorney for Steven Martella, 53, said she is qualified to served as lead counsel on the case, having successfully completed the course required of lead counsel in capital cases. Prosecutors have said they plan to seek the death penalty in the case.

Benninghoff, who was admitted to the California Bar Association in 1993, said she also has experience with such cases, on both the defense and the prosecution side.

"I just want to dot all our i's" Deputy District Attorney Keith Fagundes said in court as he requested proof that Benninghoff took the course.

Benninghoff said this was not necessary.

"I gave my oath under penalty of perjury that I took the course two years ago," she said.

Martella was arrested Sunday and charged in the deaths of Terry Gaitan, 53, and his girlfriend Anne Marie Bruce, 34. Their bodies were found after a fire broke out in the early morning hours Aug. 22 at the home on East Myrtle Street.

Officials said the fire appears to have started in a back room, which was an add-on.

The morning of the fire, rescue workers found the first body stretched out on a bed in the add-on room.

After sifting through rubble most of the day, emergency crews found the second body later that afternoon in the same general vicinity as the first body.

Dental records confirmed Gaitan's death Monday, while Bruce's dental records confirmed her death Thursday.

Officials said autopsies performed on the bodies, along with two handguns found at the scene, led investigators to the conclusion that the couple were shot first.

It remains unclear when or how Gaitan and Martella first crossed paths.

The Sheriff's Department would only say that Martella and Gaitan had an argument about Martella's romantic interest in Bruce.

During the course of the altercation, Martella allegedly threatened Gaitan.

Following a search of Martella's home, investigators arrested him Sunday evening and questioned him regarding the deaths.

Kings County Sheriff Chris Jordan said Martella "admitted involvement in the deaths" during this initial questioning.

However, Jordan declined to elaborate further.

On Thursday, Fagundes said he was simply being cautious, and did not want to create any possible grounds for appeal later on in the case.

Benninghoff said she has met all state requirements, and that her experience with capital cases backs up the specialized training course she took.

This is Benninghoff's second capital case on the defense side.

Her first case, the State of California vs. Ashley Rider, is scheduled for trial in September.

Prior to her current cases, Benninghoff served as CO-counsel for the prosecution on a third capital case.

Martella is slated to appear in court again Nov. 1 in preparation for his scheduled Nov. 15 preliminary hearing.

The reporter can be reached at 582-0471, ext. 3062.

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