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Jury Selection To Begin In Painseeker Murder Trial

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LOS ANGELES -- After almost seven months of delays, speculation, and Internet chat, the daughter of recording industry executive Larry Douglass goes on trial today in Los Angeles Superior Court. Laura Douglass is charged with first-degree murder in the case of Raychel Wagner, a developmental talent with another recording company. Jury selection is expected to last until Tuesday.

The elder Douglass has been noticeably absent from the preliminary proceedings. Calls seeking comment have remained unreturned since charges were originally filed in January.

Dubbed the Painseeker Murder Trial, the trial has gained increasing notoriety due to the involvement of a web site in breaking open the case.

The Painseeker web site was started last year by author Lance Wagner with the stated intention of focusing attention on the creative works of Raychel Wagner, his wife who was murdered on August 17, 2000.

Wagner insists that re-opening Raychel's murder investigation was never his intention.

"When I developed the site, the police investigation was stalled, yes," Wagner stated. "But I had a difficult time dealing with it [the murder] and losing Raychel, and it seemed like a way I could both honor Raychel and give myself some closure."

Wagner enlisted the help of Raychel's friends and family to contribute written memories to the site. Over time, the unsolved murder became a larger focus of the site until December of 2001, when an alert reader notified the site's private investigator of a possible link between Laura Douglass and Raychel's bodyguard, Sharon Wolfe. That, combined with the online admission by Douglass that she had lied during her statement to police, re-started the official investigation and led to first-degree murder charges being filed against both Douglass and Wolfe.

While Wagner insists the case would not have been solved without his site, police officials and the District Attorney's office understandably downplay the role of the Internet in the case.

"A hot tip from the Internet did not solve this case," complains Sgt. William Taggart. "This case was solved by an entire police department doing the jobs they are sworn to do. The tip was nice, but it's not everything."

Superior Court Judge Michael Rodriguez is expected to deal early with Les Levin, Douglass' new defense attorney. While Douglass has previously been represented by a public defender, the chronically abrasive, high profile Levin has taken over the case with little time to prepare. Regardless, Levin is expected to dominate the courtroom unless Rodriguez effectively restrains him.

Assistant District Attorney Thomas Andrews claims that the late switch will not alter his strategy.

“I have the same case today that I did two weeks ago.” Andrews claims. “Nothing substantial about the case has changed. The defense has just become louder.”

Speculation is growing that the prosecution may call Sharon Wolfe to testify against Douglass, despite the fact that Wolfe is also charged with the crime. While no one has stated that she will certainly testify, the prosecution has kept Wolfe on their list of possible witnesses.

Levin claims the Wolfe inclusion is “pure gamesmanship” on the part of the prosecution. The prosecution remains silent on the subject, choosing instead to deflect criticism to the defense.

“I would hold off on charges of gamesmanship until at least the first day of the trial. When the defense starts questioning potential jurors, then we’ll find out what real gamesmanship looks like.”