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Painseeker Trial Adjourns After Early Fireworks

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LOS ANGELES -- Lawyers in the first-degree murder trial of Laura Douglass failed to impanel a single member of the jury on the first day of jury selection, as the anticipated confrontation in Los Angeles Superior Court between defense attorney Les Levin and Judge Michael Rodriguez upstaged and interrupted the day's events.

The first fireworks in the "Painseeker Murder Trial" came far earlier than most expected, as Levin's tactics drew the ire of Judge Rodriguez, then devolved into a series of hostile exchanges between the two.

The heated argument was sparked by the prosecution's objection to Levin's automatic rejection of any juror who admitted to spending a significant amount of time surfing the Internet. Those who passed Levin's initial inquiries were asked their feelings as to the reliability of news posted on the Internet.

Levin responded sharply to the objection and ignored several requests to yield by Judge Rodriguez. The exchange intensified as Levin asserted that his ability to properly defend his client was under attack by the judge. An immediate sidebar was called to quell the hostilities, and all legal parties proceeded to the judge's chambers.

Minutes later, however, courtroom observers could hear Rodriguez and Levin again locked in an angry war of words. Rodriguez could clearly be heard threatening to place a gag order on the case if Levin did not act with restraint in the

future. Fifteen minutes later, the court came to order just long enough to adjourn until the following morning.

Requests for immediate comment from Levin or Assistant District Attorney Thomas Andrews were unsuccessful.

Those familiar with the conservative Rodriguez expected him to attempt to restrain the usually abrasive Levin early in the trial in an effort to establish control of his courtroom. Regardless of whether or not today's events were simply a part of that strategy, Levin clearly is aware that his latitude in this court is limited.

Despite the lack of progress in the trial, a key element of Levin's strategy was exposed.

In light of today's proceedings, Levin is heavily expected to make an issue of the Painseeker web site in his defense of Laura Douglass, who along with Sharon Wolfe is charged with the first-degree murder of Raychel Wagner.

The Painseeker web site is credited by many as having been instrumental in the prosecution of the case against Douglass. Designed as a tribute site for the victim, friends of Raychel Wagner -- including Douglass and Wolfe -- used the site to post memories and to answer questions about their slain friend.

The arrests were made as a result of an alert reader notifying police officials to the possibility of a conspiracy involving Douglass and Wolfe, pointing out Douglass' own confession on the site that she materially lied in her police interview.