

Los Angeles Tribune

Saturday, July 27, 2002

Prosecution Rests In Painseeker Murder Trial

Ex-husband: Douglass "Pulled Raychel's Strings"

BY DANNY O'ROURKE
STAFF WRITER

LOS ANGELES – On Friday, Assistant District Attorney Thomas Andrews completed the state's case in the Painseeker Murder Trial in Los Angeles Superior Court by calling the victim's husband to detail how accused murderer Laura Douglass lost control of Raychel Wagner and ultimately decided to murder her with the assistance of bodyguard Sharon Wolfe.

Lance Wagner, who created the Painseeker web site as a tribute to his late wife, testified about the relationship between himself, Raychel, and Laura Douglass. He traced their history together back to October of 1996 when he first met Laura Douglass after she had purchased her bar, Safehaven and the two began an artistic community called The Bleeders. He stated that Raychel Vanderhoff came to them in August of 1997 and immediately made an impact.

Wagner testified that from the start of his relationship with Raychel, he knew that Douglass was a problem, but was powerless to help since she was providing them with financial support. Wagner also corroborated the testimony of Kyle McAllister by stating that Raychel's drug use came as a result of her friendship with Laura Douglass. He also stated that while Raychel lived with him from August of 1997 until Kyle's "abduction" of Raychel in March of 1999, Raychel would often leave him for periods and move in with Douglass. Wagner told the jury, "Laura Douglass knew how to control Raychel.

So she just pulled Raychel's strings until she had her where she wanted her."

He stated that he had only limited contact with Raychel following her abduction in March of 1999, and the event basically ended their marriage as an active concern in Raychel's life.

Although portrayed by many on the Painseeker site as something of a patsy, Wagner proved to be one of the prosecution's best insulated weapons against the onslaught of Les Levin. When Levin, on first cross examination, attempted to hail Douglass for providing financial assistance to the Wagners, Lance cut off Levin and maintained that drug use was not defensible under any circumstances.

Levin attempted a different track by pointing out how much Wagner's situation had improved since his wife's murder. He pointed out that Wagner created the Painseeker web site and received notoriety for that, he became the new owner of Safehaven, and had a deal to write a book about his wife. In response, Wagner bristled at Levin and asked him if he was suggesting that he murdered his wife. Wagner added that if Levin was, he needed to ask himself what level of fortune or fame would justify murder.

Wagner gained a few laughs from the jurors when he stopped short and exclaimed, "Wait, don't answer that! You're a lawyer!"

When Andrews returned for re-direct, Wagner detailed the fallout from the murder of Raychel

Wagner, including the establishment of the Painseeker web site. Wagner claimed that the site was only intended as a tribute to Raychel, but that Laura Douglass turned it into a de facto murder investigation by freely involving some of her closest friends without Wagner's invitation or request.

Eventually, Wagner stated that Douglass hired a private investigator to re-evaluate the murder investigation. When asked why he believed that Douglass picked that time to admit that she lied to the police about her whereabouts on the night of the murder, Wagner said that Douglass acted at the time as if she was bulletproof. He believed that Douglass had no expectation of being discovered because she was the person who was paying the investigator's bill. However, when a reader of the site put two and two together, the investigator picked up the phone and called the police.

When Levin returned to cross examine Wagner again, Levin asked Wagner for his alibi on the night of the murder. He admitted that he had

none, but everyone knew that. "In fact, everyone has known my lack of an alibi from the first time I spoke with the police," Wagner remarked, "Can you say that of your client?"

Levin also questioned Wagner's conclusions. Wagner countered by saying that he had known Douglass for six years now, while Levin came onto the case three weeks ago. Wagner further challenged Levin to name the technique of personal discovery that he knew that could allow him to know a person better in such a short time.

All in all, it was a humiliating day for Levin, who returned to the courtroom after paying a contempt-of-court fine for his two outbursts on Thursday. Over the course of the past two weeks, Levin has found himself boring the jury, outmaneuvered by Andrews, disciplined repeatedly by Judge Rodriguez, and today outwitted by Lance Wagner.

A chance to regain lost momentum will come on Monday when Levin opens the case for the defense.