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Monday, Sep 29, 2003

# Local

Posted on Tue, Sep.  
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PIONEER PRESS

## Woman alienated everyone in her life

BY BOB SHAW, AMY BECKER and TIM NELSON  
Pioneer Press

If anyone got along with Susan Rae Berkovitz, there's little evidence of it.

She traded harassment lawsuits with her brother. Neighbors, lawyers and judges found her obnoxious and ordered her to stay away. To get away from her, one couple — her parents — actually moved to California.

Those accounts, from court records and interviews, paint a portrait of a lonesome pest who believed her relatives were conspiring against her. The issue was control of her aging father's \$170,000 estate, before and after he died in July at age 95.

The dispute came to a violent end Monday morning, when Susan Berkovitz was arrested on suspicion of shooting her cousin handling the estate, Shelley Joseph-Kordell, and Joseph-Kordell's lawyer, Richard Lee Hendrickson of Crystal.

"I hated to deal with her because she was so nuts," said Berkovitz's brother, Robert Berkovitz, of Mesa, Ariz.

Without a husband, children, any known friends or a job, the 52-year-old woman devoted much of her life to her parents, living for 41 years in their St. Paul home on Sargent Avenue. When booked into the Hennepin County jail Monday, she listed motels and shelters as her address.

Berkovitz typically wore monochromatic outfits in one of three colors: black, red or pink, with coordinating lipstick, said Lori Reese, a former next-door neighbor. On bad days, the clothes were inside out and the lipstick was smeared "all over her face," she said.

Berkovitz often kept her hair dyed jet black. She speaks with a high, childlike voice, which she sometimes used to curse people on the street, even in front of children, neighbors said.

If you were on her bad side, you were in for trouble, many former neighbors agreed.

Although she didn't drive, she got angry when people parked in front of her house. She left notes on their car windows, Reese said.

Right after Reese told the Berkovitz family that she couldn't help with a home repair, city building inspectors started coming to Reese's house.

"She would choose who she would pick on in the neighborhood and it was suddenly our turn," Reese said. "If she got fixated on a neighbor she didn't like, she'd do weird things."

Berkovitz used to walk her dog into a local grocery store and then scream at employees when they told her to leave the dog outside, said Amanda Mott, a former neighbor.

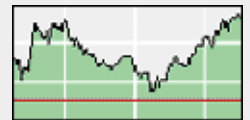
"I brought my kids inside if she was out," Mott said. "She harassed me all the time, constantly."

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Robert Berkovitz said their parents, Hyman and Anna, moved into an apartment in 2000, but Susan refused to leave the family home, which was later sold.

At that time Hyman was showing signs of age. He would often forget where he was living, and even forgot the names of his children. Robert Berkovitz said a prolonged legal battle ensued with Susan over his parents' modest home and savings, worth about \$170,000 altogether. Hyman had been a produce manager at Shopper City, a grocery store that once stood at Lexington Parkway and Larpenteur Avenue.

Susan Berkovitz resented her siblings.

"I was the caregiver for both parents, brought them groceries, took them out to restaurants, provided recreational opportunities and visited them four times a week," Berkovitz wrote in one court document.

In the 1990s, she began a steady drumbeat of lawsuits, letters and requests for help from the courts. Her file in Ramsey County District Court is more than 5 inches thick. She began to harass lawyers and judges, several of them said.

She addressed a series of faxes and letters to Hendrickson in insulting ways: "Hendrickson — a scumbag who never had a father who loved him" and "Hendrickson, a dirty scumbag of a lawyer."

She addressed letters to Joseph-Kordell as, "A dirty crooked business owner" and "A dirty liar crooked liar."

After a hearing in April, Ramsey County Assistant Chief Judge Gregg Johnson ordered Berkovitz to contact him first if she wanted to file anything or contact court staff about the legal control of the estate. The order states that Berkovitz agreed to abide by the restrictions.

"Sometimes we call them nuisance litigants, and that's essentially what she was," Johnson said.

Hyman Berkovitz's son Robert said his family had been forced to get court orders to keep his sister from his ailing father. Family members appointed a conservator — Joseph-Kordell — to look after their parents while they were regularly battling Susan in and out of court.

But mother Anna Berkovitz wanted their other daughter, Sherilee Feldman, to take control. Anna wanted to move with her husband to Los Angeles, where they would live about a mile from Sherilee's home.

Susan Berkovitz believed her relatives were stripping her of her inheritance. She said she was approaching poverty. In one court document, she said that she was unemployed and had spent a nest egg of \$43,000 down to \$1,900.

"She would write long, convoluted letters, accusing us of all sorts of things," Robert Berkovitz said. She sent and faxed them to his office in Phoenix, where he worked for the National Weather Service, and regularly traveled to California to oppose the appointment of his other sister as conservator in Los Angeles, where Sherilee lived.

Tension grew. In the spring of 2001, Susan Berkovitz was given an anti-harassment order, keeping her away from her mother.

"Susan has constantly harassed my husband and I to where I have found it necessary to file a petition for an order for protection," Anna Berkovitz wrote. "I am worried that Susan has a tendency to harass individuals such as she did with my son."

Susan Berkovitz charged that her father was "taken out of his apartment in the middle of the night" and moved to California.

But the courts ruled instead that it was Berkovitz who "drove her mother ... out of the state of Minnesota to California." The elderly pair moved to Los Angeles in July 2002. Berkovitz was notified a day later, and another flurry of court documents began.

On Monday, Joseph-Kordell, in fact, may have been trying to tie up loose ends in the matter at the time she was shot.

The Hennepin County District Court was to help decide on a "final accounting," Robert Berkovitz said.

Joseph-Kordell had reported seeing Susan Berkovitz walking down the street in front of her Minnetonka home, he said.

"But she has never physically threatened anybody that I know of," Robert Berkovitz said. "I just can't believe this."

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