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Monday, Sep 29, 2003

Posted on Tue, Sep.
30, 2003

PIONEER PRESS**Suspect quickly arrested at scene**

BY PHILLIP PIÑA, HANNAH ALLAM, TIM NELSON and DAVID HAWLEY
 Pioneer Press

For the first time since it opened in 1974, the open and airy Hennepin County Government Center in Minneapolis became a homicide scene Monday when a woman opened fire with a handgun outside a 17th-floor courtroom.

While bystanders fled screaming, the shots fatally wounded a Minnetonka woman with whom the shooter — the victim's cousin — had a long-running legal dispute involving the estate of a St. Paul family. The victim's lawyer also was wounded, but is expected to survive.

Susan Rae Berkovitz, 52, was held Monday in the Hennepin County jail on suspicion of murder and attempted murder. She was taken into custody following the shootings and offered no resistance, authorities said.

It was the second time in less than a week that a public place in Minnesota became the scene of a fatal shooting. On Monday, a funeral was held for Aaron Rollins, the 17-year-old victim of a shooting last Wednesday at Rocori High School in Cold Spring that also left a 14-year-old critically wounded.

The gunfire in Minneapolis erupted shortly after 10 a.m. as cases were being processed through "harassment court," a little-observed courtroom where disputes are often settled by people representing themselves.

Officials did not identify the victims, but family and friends said they were Shelley Joseph-Kordell, 56, an estate conservator from Minnetonka, and Richard Hendrickson, 53, an attorney from Crystal.

The chain of events was still being pieced together Monday, but a spokeswoman for the Hennepin County sheriff said investigators believe that Hendrickson was the first victim, shot in the hallway outside the courtroom.

Moments later, Joseph-Kordell was shot in a bathroom near the courtroom. Investigators declined to reveal how many times she was wounded, but bystanders said the bathroom floor was smeared with blood. The caliber and type of weapon used was not released.

Floyd Thurston Jr., 43, of Minneapolis, was walking out of the courtroom when he said he heard a loud noise and saw a woman fleeing while a crowd of people frantically ran in the opposite direction.

"I thought, 'No way — no one's going to get shot in the courthouse,'" Thurston said. "Then I saw a guy lying on the ground. There was an officer standing over him, telling people to stand back."

Hendrickson underwent surgery at Hennepin County Medical Center and was listed in serious condition Monday evening. The extent of his wounds was not disclosed.

A Hennepin County sheriff's deputy and a Minneapolis police officer stopped Berkovitz after she crossed one of the bridges that span the atrium and connect the two 25-story towers of the government center. The woman didn't have time to escape because the officers reached the area so quickly, said Rosanne Campagnoli, a spokeswoman for the sheriff's department.

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Hennepin County had not issued Berkovitz a permit to carry a concealed weapon, Campagnoli added.

Tara Koltes, 39, of Maple Plain, was among a number of jurors taking a break who watched horrified from the 19th floor of opposite tower, gazing downward through the glass panels and across the atrium at the events on the 17th floor.

"There were just gobs of police in the hallway," Koltes said. "They took us back into the jury room when there were guns pointing this way."

Court records showed that Berkovitz had filed petitions for restraining orders against Kordell and Hendrickson, alleging they were harassing her. The parties were at the government center Monday for a hearing on the matter.

The complaints stemmed from years-old disputes over the estate of Berkovitz's parents, Anna and Hyman Berkovitz, who had lived for most of their lives at 1331 Sargent Ave. in St. Paul.

Berkovitz's brother, Robert, said his sister had lived with her parents for most of her life and that she had refused to leave the house when her parents moved into an apartment and a conservator was appointed to look after them. Hyman Berkovitz died in July at 95 and Anna Berkovitz, 90, lives in California.

On her booking sheet Monday, Berkovitz told authorities that she had been living in motels and shelters for an unspecified period of time. She was well known to Ramsey County court officials for the overwhelming amount of court documents she attempted to file in connection with the estate conservatorship.

Robert Berkovitz described his sister as having a "serious mental illness."

Monday's shooting tragically underscored the concern that many officials have had for years about security at the government center.

When it opened in 1974, the "tuning fork" building was seen as a symbol of Minnesota's open government — a porous, crossroads gathering place where the public could move freely beneath an airy 25-story atrium.

Officials quickly realized that security could be a major problem.

"This is a building built with maximum public access designed into it," said Mike Opat, president of the Hennepin County Board of Commissioners. "We've been grappling with this for a long time."

One of the earliest efforts took place after several people committed suicide by throwing themselves from some of the open hallways and bridges above the atrium. Glass panels were installed to make those attempts more difficult.

Opat said a conscious effort was made over the years to move "more sensitive courts" into buildings that were more secure. The Family Justice Center and juvenile courts are in buildings that can only be entered by passing through metal detectors. The same is true at the new jail, where all visitors have to pass through metal detectors before entering courtrooms set up for first appearances.

The "harassment court" had only recently opened in the west, or administrative, tower of the government center, but security there was little different from the so-called "court" tower where most trials and court actions take place.

Metal detectors are sometimes set up for individual courtrooms, depending on the security dangers for particular cases. But there are no general security checkpoints for entrance to either tower.

However, the building has its own security force, along with armed Hennepin County deputies. County Commissioner Gail Dorfman said security was beefed up in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

"But there are something like 30 to 40 entrances to the building, if you count parking entrances, skyways and all the doors," Dorfman said. "The dilemma we have right now is that the estimate for putting in metal detectors at key locations and closing off others is in the range of \$5 million, plus the cost of additional security personnel."

But Hennepin County Chief District Judge Kevin Burke said Minnesota's most populous county should find a way to provide better security in the busiest courthouse in the state.

"Ramsey County can afford it," Burke said. "The federal government is broke and they can afford it."

One of the bystanders on the 17th floor, 35-year-old Kofi Desouza of Minneapolis, said he was so shaken by the shooting that he'll not return to the government center until security is tightened.

"I asked a guard why there were no metal detectors and he said they are coming soon," Desouza said. "That's not a good answer. This place is supposed to be safe."

But Commissioner Opat said making the government center totally secure is an impossible goal.

"It's never going to be a concluded effort," he said. "This person was intent on doing harm and so we end up with tragedy."

Amy Becker, Todd Nelson and Seth Rowe contributed to this report.

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