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Court scene: chaos, calm

BY PHILLIP PIÑA, LISA DONOVAN and DAVID HAWLEY
Pioneer Press

Pandemonium erupted outside a busy Minneapolis courtroom after attorney Richard Hendrickson collapsed with a bullet wound in his neck.

But one person remained calm.

Susan Berkovitz allegedly shot Hendrickson on Monday morning at the Hennepin County Government Center, then walked purposefully around the corner of a hallway, toward a women's bathroom.

"Her demeanor appeared to be rather calm," said Rosanne Campagnoli, a spokeswoman for the Hennepin County Sheriff's Department.

Then more shots.

As others ran for cover, Susan L. Love, a court division supervisor, rushed into the hallway and saw Hendrickson lying on the floor, bleeding profusely from the neck. She grabbed a woman's blazer that someone had left draped over a counter, got down on her knees and pressed the garment against the wound with all her strength.

Hendrickson looked up at her and surprised her by deliberately saying his name and his attorney identification number.

"Please go find my client," Love said he told her. "This is really going to traumatize her. She'll need someone to comfort her."

The account of the shooting was among new details that emerged Tuesday in the aftermath of the incident that left one woman dead and her lawyer injured.

Hendrickson, 53, and his client, estate conservator Shelley Joseph-Kordell, 56, had requested a security officer to accompany them for what was expected to be yet another round in their long-running legal dispute with Berkovitz about her father's estate.

When they arrived on the 17th floor, Joseph-Kordell asked the unarmed officer to accompany her to the restroom and wait outside the door. But when the shot that wounded Hendrickson rang out, the guard rushed toward the sound.

Berkovitz and the unnamed security officer passed by each other in the hallway, authorities believe.

At about the same time that Berkovitz allegedly entered the restroom, Sheriff's Deputy Catherine Christman arrived in the hallway. Campagnoli said the deputy drew her pistol and stood over Hendrickson as she radioed for assistance.

Seconds later, a series of shots rang out in the restroom and Berkovitz emerged, heading toward a pedestrian bridge that connected with the twin tower of the 25-story building.

But she didn't get far. Deputy Tracey Loucks and Minneapolis police officer David Shotley arrived on the scene, quickly disarmed Berkovitz and took her into custody. She did not resist, Campagnoli said.

"It was over in just a few minutes," Campagnoli said of the incident, the first

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homicide to take place inside the government center since it opened in 1974.

Joseph-Kordell, who was Berkovitz's cousin, died two hours later of multiple gunshot wounds at Hennepin County Medical Center.

But Hendrickson lived — thanks, in part, to Love, 34, of Centerville.

"I was with him for five to 10 minutes before the medical team arrived to take over," Love said. "The whole time I was pushing for all it was worth on that poor little neck of his."

Hendrickson remains hospitalized at HCMC, where his condition was upgraded to satisfactory on Tuesday evening.

This morning, the Hennepin County attorney's office plans to charge Berkovitz, 52, of St. Paul with the death of Joseph-Kordell and the attempted killing of Hendrickson, a spokesman said.

Members of Hendrickson's family have been with him constantly since the shooting, said Steve Gawron, who attended William Mitchell College of Law with Hendrickson in the 1970s and was once his partner in a law practice.

"He looked strong," Gawron said after visiting him Tuesday. "We have every confidence that he's going to bounce back entirely."

Hendrickson's immediate family declined interviews, but issued a brief statement late Tuesday.

"Our family would like to thank all those who risked their lives and responded quickly to save Rick's life," the statement said.

A Crystal resident, Hendrickson is single and childless after a marriage that ended in divorce many years ago, Gawron said, adding that his friend was an independent attorney — a "general practitioner," who handled a variety of legal cases.

"He was just a decent human being," Gawron said. "It might seem odd to say this, but he didn't seem to have an enemy in the world — until that moment yesterday."

A Minnetonka resident, Joseph-Kordell was the daughter of Geri Joseph, an influential figure in Minnesota's DFL Party and a former ambassador to the Netherlands during the administration of President Jimmy Carter.

On Tuesday, Joseph-Kordell's next-door neighbor, Lorraine Frame, reflected on the grief the two women had shared more than a decade ago when they both became widows.

"Shelley and I took care of one another," Frame said. "We had some parallels in our lives."

During 10 years, the two women shared cooking chores for family gatherings, vacation trips — and, a few years ago, new marriages.

Members of Joseph-Kordell's family declined to be interviewed Tuesday. Among her survivors are her husband, William Grandstaff, a daughter, two stepdaughters, two brothers and her parents, Geri and Burton Joseph, along with a large extended family.

Her funeral will be at 11 a.m. Thursday at Temple Israel, 2324 Emerson Ave. S. in Minneapolis.

On Tuesday, business at the government center was resolutely normal. On the 17th floor, the only reminder of the violence of the previous day was the taped-off women's bathroom.

Some of the employees who had witnessed the shootings attended counseling sessions during the day and others will be receiving services in the coming weeks under the county's Employee Assistance Program, said human resources officer Murray Harber.

The Hennepin County Board of Commissioners opened its meeting with a brief statement on the incident read by President Mike Opat. He praised the performance of employees and security officers, yet acknowledged that the shootings would prompt more deliberations about the security needs of a building that was designed three decades ago for maximum public accessibility.

On average, between 10,000 and 13,000 people pass through the downtown government center every day, according to official estimates. Those numbers appeared undiminished Tuesday.

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AFSCME Council 14, which represents many of the building's 3,000 employees, called for increased security measures.

"The union believes that measures must be taken to improve the safety of the public and county workers," a statement said.

Roberta Haight, security manager for Hennepin County, said the routine of the day carried its own sense of comfort and continuity.

"It's a wonderful outpouring by people going back to work," she said. "They'll never forget, but they're going back to work, doing their jobs and taking care of the public. That's our job."

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