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# Neighbors, co-workers, classmates and victim were wary of Berkovitz

Curt Brown and Paul Gustafson, Star Tribune

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Susan Rae Berkovitz's former co-workers, neighbors and high school acquaintances in St. Paul would walk on eggshells around her. They never knew when she would fly into an obnoxious tirade.

But until Monday -- when authorities say she brought a loaded gun to court in Minneapolis and shot two people -- her rants were more of a nuisance than a hint of the violent outburst she is now charged with committing. Berkovitz, 52, had never been convicted of a felony or diagnosed with any mental disorders.

Yet even Shelley Joseph-Kordell, who was killed in the shooting, warned authorities about her erratic cousin's penchant for flying off the handle.

At a March 6, 2001, hearing in Ramsey County District Court, Berkovitz was objecting to limits placed on her visits to her father, who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Joseph-Kordell, president of Estates in Transition, was overseeing his affairs.

"I have seen on several occasions, the fact that Susan is not really able to control her own behavior, which makes me wonder how well she can help with her father," Joseph-Kordell told the court. "Sometimes she would be very controlled, sometimes she would be literally out of control."

Berkovitz is charged with first-degree murder and attempted first-degree murder. According to the criminal complaint, she shot Joseph-Kordell's attorney, Richard Hendrickson, at close range on the 17th floor of the Hennepin County Government Center before fatally shooting her cousin in a nearby restroom. Hendrickson is recovering at the Hennepin County Medical Center.

Joseph-Kordell acknowledged in court in 2001 that she might have been foolish to think she could solve the Berkovitz family's problems -- namely Susan. After Susan's parents moved out of the St. Paul home she shared with them into a seniors complex, Berkovitz said she had to live in shelters.

"In the beginning, I guess, I was somewhat naive," Joseph-Kordell testified. "I was bending over backwards to accommodate Susan. I felt badly about the situation she was in. I guess I thought that I was going to be the one to make a difference.

"I don't know that anyone is going to make a difference. There are just very long-standing problems in this family."

Berkovitz was the youngest of three children of Anna and Hyman Berkovitz,

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A high school photo of Susan Berkovitz

a grocer who lived in a simple home on Sargent Street near Hamline Avenue.

Berkovitz graduated from Highland Park High School in 1969 and held an assortment of mostly clerical jobs through the years. From 1976 to 1980, she was a clerk for the state driver's and vehicle services office. In the early 1990s, she was a postal clerk at the downtown St. Paul post office, Postmaster Tony Williams said.

From 1995-1998, she was a food service worker at the University of St. Thomas. After that, she worked in the file room at Conseco Finance in St. Paul and then held a clerical job at Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare.

She lived in New York City in the 1980s, neighbors say. For years, she had been active in local politics. She seldom missed a DFL caucus.

### **Library, blood ban**

All the while, Berkovitz became a well-known thorn in the side of myriad public institutions. St. Paul Library Director Gina La Force sent Berkovitz a letter five days before the shootings, banning her for six months from all city libraries for "verbal abuse, interfering with the free passage of others and disorderly, loud, disruptive behavior."

She was the 30th person to receive such a letter this year. But Berkovitz is the first person ever banned from giving blood to the American Red Cross in St. Paul. Spokesman Jon Siess said she had a series of "hostile interactions that seemed to be irresolvable" in 1996.

Those who knew Berkovitz kept their distance through the years, especially as her obsession with her family's finances began to dominate her life.

### **'World of her own'**

Richard Wanschura has known Berkovitz since the mid-1960s. They were classmates at Highland Park High School and remained acquaintances for 35 years. He said she would often call and ask him to be a character witness at various court hearings. She even invited him to observe how she interacted with her father at a senior complex so he could testify on her behalf. He went to three court hearings, but believes she was often putting on an act by being overly affectionate when they visited her father together.

"She was like a Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde type," Wanschura said. "When you were with her, you were always uneasy because you weren't sure what she would do next. If someone disagreed with her, she'd really have a tirade."

Back in high school, Wanschura said, Berkovitz "was better than she was 30 years later, but she was still withdrawn and sometimes eccentric.

"Even back then, she was different and kind of combative if she didn't get her way," he said. "She always felt everyone was picking on her. She was kind of like a loner and nobody really understood her. She thought she was pretty decent, but she'd scare people with her attitude."

Wanschura, a postal clerk and Metrodome peanut vendor, said he bumped into Berkovitz a couple weeks ago on the bus.

"I said 'hi' to her, but she didn't respond," he said. "She was in a world of her own."

### **Barking dogs**

Lori Reese lived next door to the Berkovitzes for a dozen years. Since the shootings, Reese is bothered by all the talk of why the Hennepin County Government Center lacks metal detectors. She wonders why the focus isn't on all the agencies -- from the library to the Red Cross to the police to housing inspectors to animal control workers to courthouse staff members -- who knew Berkovitz was unstable.

"Everyone knew it and nothing was done," Reese said. "Anything could set her off. She would turn a switch on and off and decide you were the person she was going to go after."

Reese ended up in court with Berkovitz, who had lodged numerous complaints about Reese's dogs barking. When the judge hollered at them for the frivolousness of the case and dismissed them, Berkovitz apologized.

"I said: 'Susie, don't be sorry, just don't bother your neighbors anymore,' " Reese said. "She was nice when she needed a favor, like a ride somewhere, which she was always asking people for."

"But you couldn't ever really be friends with her because the next minute, she'd yell and swear, push your kids out of the way and make a huge deal out of nothing," Reese said. "You really tried to avoid her."

### **Easier to ignore**

Shawnee Bailey worked in the file room of Conseco Finance until layoffs shut the office down in 2000.

"She gave everybody a hard time," Bailey said. "She was a very weird person. One day, she wouldn't leave you alone, and the next day she wouldn't talk to you."

A couple years ago, Bailey nearly bumped into Berkovitz at Cub Foods.

"But I decided just to ignore her," Bailey said. "It was better to just avoid her. It wasn't worth the confrontation."

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