



Staff Photos / Don Boomer

David and Celeste Weber play with their children Zachary, 1 1/2, and Bethany, 2, in the living room of their Fallbrook home, top. Zachary serves up some plastic pizza to his father, above. At left, Celeste reads a story to Bethany.

others like them — to help save the children and find homes for them.
 "That should show we need to reopen the doors," said Celeste, who has been providing information and support about international adoption to couples nationwide while maintaining contact with Russia. "Those kids need to go

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Once a murder suspect, former cop now a PI

By J. Stryker Meyer
 Staff Writer

Private investigator Larry Avrech enjoys working alone on cases, whether digging through court records in Vista or pulling an all-night surveillance in Del Mar.

Avrech enjoys the solitude of his career, blending in with the public far away from the glare of media attention that swirled around him nearly 10 years ago, when he was under suspicion in the highly visible death of a San Diego prostitute.

Today he's a successful private investigator, building a new career and working on a new marriage — he celebrated his first anniversary at Lake San Marcos on New Year's Eve.

All was not so rosy for Avrech in the mid-1980s.

In January 1985 he was fired as a San Diego police officer, abruptly ending a career he had dreamed of since childhood. Prostitute Donna Gentile had testified against Avrech and two other San Diego police officers, claiming Avrech had solicited sex from her while on

duty in an unmarked police car on El Cajon Boulevard.

But just when Avrech thought life couldn't get worse, it did.

A television reporter called to tell him that fingerprints from a woman's body found June 23, 1985, on a Sunrise Highway turnoff northeast of Pine Valley were those of 22-year-old Gentile.

She was strangled to death. Her mouth and throat were packed with gravel, initially interpreted as a warning to others not to testify against cops. She had been dead at

least 24 hours before hikers made the grisly discovery.

The fallen cop was now a murder suspect.

In the early days of the Gentile murder investigation, Sheriff's Department homicide detectives "tried to break Avrech because we thought he or (another officer) did her," said one former sheriff's homicide detective.

Avrech lost his house, his comic-book business, his car, his dogs and custody of his children.

The intense pressure of the

homicide investigation and constant media coverage caused him to lose jobs in construction and security. One security job ended abruptly hours after a local television station broadcast an update of the case, including Avrech's picture.

"After Avrech's termination, he was almost unbalanced by it all," said John Morrison, a retired, 25-year veteran San Diego police lieutenant who worked with Avrech first as a police reserve and later as

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New faces to preside over courts

By David Hicks
 Staff Writer

VISTA — The judges who will usher North County's courts into the crowded age of "three strikes" legislation will take their appointed positions this month.

Judge Thomas R. Murphy will supervise the North County branch of the Superior Court in Vista starting in 1995, with Judge Runston "Pony" Maino running the criminal department within the court.

The positions will prove important in the coming year, when the number of cases going to trial in North County is expected to increase



Pigeon paradise

Gregario Lopez of Oceanside feeds popcorn to some pigeons at the Oceanside pier band shell Monday afternoon. Lopez was one of many who spent the holiday at local beaches, where mild temperatures made it ideal for walking and playing games on the sand. The ideal weather conditions should come to a halt as forecasters call for a 70 percent chance of rain today. See Local Briefing,

Cop

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a sworn officer.

Throughout those dark hours, Morrison never believed Avrech killed Gentile.

"No one short of an innocent man would torture himself the way Larry did," Morrison said. "Over the years, Larry did nothing more than push for a more far-reaching investigation. He wanted all the skeletons exposed."

Finally, in 1993, Deputy District Attorney Dick Lewis, the lead prosecutor and spokesman for the San Diego County Metropolitan Homicide Task Force, announced that Ronald Porter, an Escondido man, was charged with Gentile's murder. Porter is awaiting trial following a lengthy investigation by the multi-agency task force that investigated the murders of Gentile and more than 40 other prostitutes.

Lewis said Avrech continued to work on the case on his own and contributed information that assisted in the arrest of Porter.

Shortly after Porter was arrested

in 1988 for a North County murder, Avrech gave homicide task force detectives Porter's name as a possible suspect in the Gentile murder because "I had a hunch about him," he said. When Avrech was a patrol officer in the Eastern Division along El Cajon Boulevard in San Diego, he remembered that Porter had been in the area where Gentile had worked prior to her death.

Task force detectives would document similarities between Gentile's murder and others, including having gravel packed in some victims' throats, Lewis said.

That same year, Avrech passed the state private investigator test and opened his one-man L.A. Investigations office in El Cajon. Since then he has quietly worked with several law enforcement agencies in the county on unrelated cases, including the San Diego Police Department, the Sheriff's Department, the FBI, IRS and U.S. Postal Service.

In 1991, National City pawnbroker David Vogel hired Avrech to help him combat anti-Semitic telephone calls and threats he and his family were receiving. Avrech worked on the case briefly before going to the FBI.

The day federal agents opened their case, they placed a tape recorder on Vogel's telephone line; within 10 minutes the first threatening call was recorded. Three suspects were arrested and prosecuted in federal court.

Avrech's detective work put two North County embezzlers behind bars, he said, one a Vista resident convicted of stealing from a Carlsbad business, the other a San Diego woman convicted of embezzling from, among several others, a Del Mar business. Police wouldn't tackle the latter case, Avrech said.

Today Avrech works out of an office on East Douglas Avenue in El Cajon. He thrives on orderly confusion. Stacks of papers fill his new office. On his large wooden desk are two separate in-and-out baskets, each stacked four high, all overflowing with paper.

A Chicago Cubs cap adorns his hatrack, along with an SDPD hat and a mailman's pith helmet he wore during an undercover assignment with the Postal Service.

Nearby are the tools of his trade: a book on clinical diagnosis, another on physics, little phone books from all over the state and county, reverse

directories, printouts of all city businesses and street addresses, and the two books he cherishes — a World Encyclopedia of Comics and his 1981 SDPD yearbook.

On the wall is a 1977 appreciation plaque for giving 621 reserve volunteer hours to the SDPD when he was in the police reserves.

When Avrech looks at the plaque, he pauses a long moment, shakes his head and readily admits he still misses police work. And yet, within moments of saying that, Avrech remembers those dark days when the media haunted him and homicide detectives pushed him to the brink.

What hurt most, he says, was the mental anguish of the ostracism, “the instant alienation” from fellow officers. He had toiled as a police reserve from 1976 until he became a sworn officer in 1980, working five years before his badge was yanked.

“One of the greatest things I had in the department was the camaraderie,” Avrech said, until “people whom I had worked on the streets said to me, ‘Hey, I don’t care, I don’t want to know. Don’t talk to me.’ That really hurt.

“If you’re a cop, everybody respects you. But once you leave the

department you’re fair game, you’re nothing, you’re nobody.”

“Larry Avrech passed three lie-detector tests,” said prosecutor Lewis, speaking about part of the investigative process that vindicated Avrech. Lewis found that the two other police officers Gentile testified against had committed more serious violations of Police Department rules and regulations than had Avrech, but they were demoted, not terminated.

“Avrech was investigating superior officers. ... He didn’t do it by the book,” Lewis said. “I think they singled him out. ... They made an example of him.”

A suitable punishment for Avrech should have been “30 days on the beach, ream him out and keep him away from patrol until he learned his lesson,” Lewis said. “I urged him to go back and reopen his case to get back into the department. In fact, he’s a damn good detective now. He’s very tenacious.

“And I’ll tell you one more thing: Avrech cooperated with the task force, while (the other officers) told us to (screw) off.”

Avrech enters 1995 “not exactly rolling in the dough, because in this

business it’s feast or famine” as he enjoys his new marriage and being a grandfather for the first time. But the ghost of Gentile still resurfaces for the former cop.

“There are still occasions when I’ll meet someone and they ask me about the Gentile case. I tell them I’ve been vindicated. I go on educating people one at a time,” he said. “It’s funny — people remember the charges because the papers played the allegations on the front page and television led their broadcasts with it then. But when I was vindicated, they didn’t care. Fortunately, I had friends like John Morrison who stuck by me throughout the ordeal.”

“I have maintained contact with Larry willingly throughout the entire fiasco,” said Morrison. “Why? Because he was always provably honest. When this occurred, he was nothing more than a young cop. ... His case was consumed by a cloud of doubt over whether he had killed a prostitute or not.

“It takes a strong man to say, ‘I won’t run, I will fight. ... A lot of innocent men would have folded up their tent and stolen away in the night. Larry never did. It was a fight many fainter hearts would have shirked.’”