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PIONEER PRESS

Posted on Tue, Oct. 14, 2003

'So I'm going to bleed to death'

BY TODD NELSON
Pioneer Press

He could feel the blood pulsing out of the gunshot wound to his neck, but he stayed calm and felt no pain.

"I'm feeling this pulse of blood as it's leaving me, running down my shoulder, running down my head onto the floor," said Crystal attorney Richard Hendrickson. "I was trying to help the prosecutors even if I was dying. I kept saying, 'My name is Richard Hendrickson, I've just been shot by Susan Berkovitz.'"

The bullet ricocheted inside his neck but caused no major damage. So Monday, two weeks after Hendrickson suffered critical injuries in a Hennepin County Government Center shooting in Minneapolis that killed one of his clients, he took time to thank those who helped him.

Hendrickson, who kept a hand over his throat during much of the news conference, spoke at Minneapolis' Hennepin County Medical Center surrounded by a number of family members.

"My joy at just plain being alive — being able to walk, being able to talk and hopefully get back to work within a relatively short period of time — is tempered by the sadness of this entire event," Hendrickson said.

In a generally upbeat 20-minute news conference, Hendrickson made his first public comments on the Sept. 29 shooting, which killed Shelley Joseph-Kordell, 56, of Minnetonka and left her cousin Susan Rae Berkovitz, 52, of St. Paul in jail facing first-degree murder and attempted murder charges.

Family members have said that Berkovitz had become obsessed with a long-running legal dispute over her father's estate, and had a history of filing frivolous lawsuits and complaints against Hendrickson and Joseph-Kordell, who had been appointed conservator.

Hendrickson, 53, said he was "one very lucky guy" to have avoided permanent or fatal injuries from the bullet that struck him in the right side of his neck, bounced off a vertebra and lodged low on the left side of his neck. He was released from the downtown Minneapolis hospital on Friday.

For now, the left side of his larynx is immobile and he has a thumb-size hole in his trachea left over from his surgery. He said he expected it to heal within a couple of weeks, and hoped to return to work at least part time then.

Doctors told him that the .38-caliber bullet could have caused disabling injuries or killed him if it had veered slightly off course in any direction, Hendrickson said.

Just after the shooting, "I remember thinking, 'So I'm going to bleed to death.' ... It wasn't screaming, 'Oh, no, I'm going to die!' It was almost like an acceptance kind of thing."

Hendrickson thanked Susan Love, a court official who helped stop his bleeding and comforted him, calling her "the first of a number of angels" who protected him during

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JOE ODEN PHOTO

Richard Hendrickson is counseled by nurse Ann Finnegan on Monday at Hennepin County Medical Center. The shooting victim visited for follow-up care.

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and after his ordeal. He also expressed his gratitude to doctors, nurses and others who treated him. "If I was going to be shot, I'd want to be shot within two blocks of HCMC."

Hendrickson said he had never suspected Berkovitz would face him down with a gun.

"The violence had slowly been escalating, in my opinion," he said. "But I never expected a gun. That seemed to be out of character."

The lawyer said he knew that Berkovitz had been upset about the dispute over her father's estate for some time.

"Over the years, many of us had talked about her — what, if anything, could be done to get her the help we thought she needed," Hendrickson said. "But there was nothing. She never crossed that line where the state could get involved. She was very intelligent from the standpoint of knowing how far she could go without crossing the line."

Hendrickson said he had been taking steps to try to rein in Berkovitz — and her tide of lawsuits, complaints and police reports — by seeking a hearing to limit her access to Hennepin County courts, backed up by 450 pages of documents she had filed against him and others. Ramsey County judges had already severely restricted her court access.

Hendrickson's sister, Lori Wachter of Maple Grove, said family members had forgiven Berkovitz and "hope she gets the help she needs."

His father, 78-year-old Harry Hendrickson of Maple Grove, said his son "was the kind of guy who said, 'I'm going to live,' and he lived."

Task force to assess courthouse security

Hennepin County officials announced Monday the creation of a six-member task force to look at security issues at the Hennepin County Government Center in Minneapolis.

The committee's creation comes two weeks after a double shooting at the downtown government center killed estate conservator Shelley Joseph-Kordell and wounded her attorney, Richard Hendrickson, on Sept. 29. Kordell's cousin, Susan Berkovitz, is accused of the shooting outside a courtroom on the government center's 17th floor.

Members of the committee are Beth Bailey-Allen, executive director of the North Hennepin Mediation Program; John Derus, St. Anthony Group of Minneapolis; Sam Grabarski, Minneapolis Downtown Council president and chief executive officer; Jean F. Holloway of the Faegre & Benson law firm of Minneapolis; John Laux, Bloomington police chief; and John Stanoch, Qwest president.

The task force will analyze security issues at the government center and develop possible strategies by Dec. 1. Their recommendations will be presented to the Hennepin County Board.

— *Paul Sand*

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