



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Ariadne Symons is all smiles as she cleans out her office at the Santa Cruz County District Attorney's Office on Friday.

# Symons steps into new role as judge

## District Attorney's Office recruiting new prosecutors

*Courts*  
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✓ SANTA CRUZ — On her last day with the District Attorney's Office, prosecutor Ariadne Symons was in one of her favorite places: the courtroom.

Symons, who will be sworn in as a Santa Cruz County Superior Court judge next month, argued that Mateo Marquis should be punished for fatally stabbing an Arizona teen at a 2006 beach bonfire. Marquis will spend seven years in state prison.

Symons has 25 years of courtroom experience

and spent the past dozen in the District Attorney's Office, where she started the Cold Case Unit and was the top violent crimes prosecutor.

"This leaving is hard," Symons said Friday morning as she sorted through files on her desk and conferred with one of the prosecutors taking over some of her casework. "I live and breathe this office."

Symons said her tenure as a prosecutor in Santa Cruz has been interesting and challenging, thanks in part to the "nutball factor."

"When I first came here, I remember telling (then District Attorney) Art Dan-

ner I might not be busy enough," Symons said Friday, conceding she was wrong.

Symons has handled 33 homicide cases in her career, winning all of them, and tried more than 200 cases in front of juries. In all, she's lost twice.

"It's because I prepare really, really extensively, and because I love what I do," she said.

She still recalls those two unsuccessful trials — a rape case and a misdemeanor child molestation case, adding "I've agonized over those."

# Symons

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Perhaps the case that still weighs on her the most is that of Diane Steffy, a UC Santa Cruz student who was beaten and strangled on Thanksgiving Day in 1979. Hikers found her body just off Graham Hill Road on a narrow path in Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park minutes after her killer had fled.

A task force of local law enforcement and the District Attorney's Office reopened the case in 1999 and investigators used technology that was not available when Steffy, a 21-year-old from Santa Ana, was killed. The new probe, however, didn't result in an arrest.

Symons said the case is frustrating because "I have a personal opinion of who did it."

## Filling Symons' shoes

Files of unsolved cases like Steffy's are among the stacks of paperwork organized in four five-drawer file cabinets that Symons handed to other prosecutors last week.

District Attorney Bob Lee has not said who will replace Symons as head of trial operations.

"We've been preparing for that transition for almost a year," Lee said in an interview earlier this month. "Her cases have been reassigned for months and months. She hasn't been touching any new cases since she's been elected, therefore she doesn't have that conflict."

Symons is one of four felony prosecutors who have left the District Attorney's Office since the end of the summer.

George Dunlap, a former top prosecutor in San Joaquin County, stepped down in September after he was put on administrative leave; the state Bar Court had recommended his license to practice law be suspended for two years due to professional misconduct.

Also in September, prosecutors Sam Dalesandro and Heather Jones, who are married, resigned to take positions elsewhere in the state.

Lee said even though his office has 4.5 vacant attorney positions — they are budgeted for 34 prosecutors —



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

Ariadne Symons in Judge Tom Kelly's courtroom during a June 1999 hearing for child killer Donald Schmidt.

it's the strongest staff he's seen in nearly three decades.

"We set the bar pretty high here," Lee said. "People want to work for us."

He was reluctant to tout the accomplishments of any new prosecutors or prospective hires, but spoke generally about several.

New prosecutor Rob Wade headed the homicide unit at the San Francisco County District Attorney's Office. He inherited from Symons the trial of the final two suspects in a July 2004 gang robbery and slaying on Spruce Street in Santa Cruz.

Another attorney recruit lives in Santa Cruz County but worked for the Monterey County District Attorney's Office for years. Lee said, "he always wanted to work here." Then there's a highly experienced, respected prosecutor from another large California county who wants to work in Santa Cruz.

"We don't just take the people who knock on our doors," Lee said. "We search and find excellence."

At a Thanksgiving gathering, Lee said he told the whole office he was thankful for his employees.

"It's hard to think of an office being fun while you're doing our business, but I think it's definitely an office — knock on wood, of course — that's very professional and doing super work," Lee said. "The community should be proud of the people who represent the people."

## A new role in the courtroom

Losing Symons, who was a federal prosecutor before Danner recruited her in 1996, and her years of experience will impact the office, but Lee was optimistic about the change.

"She was obviously an invaluable asset to us. It's always difficult to lose someone of that quality but in return we get an excellent judicial officer," said Lee, who supported Symons' candidacy for judge. "We've very pleased with the prospects of her being on the bench."

Symons won 24,024 votes, or about 60 percent of the total in a county-wide election in June. Her opponent, defense attorney Steve Wright, captured just under 40 percent in the

race for the seat currently held by Judge Samuel Stevens. Stevens will retire at the end of the month after 20 years on the bench.

In addition to her changed role in the courtroom, Symons is preparing for other, smaller shifts, like not calling other judges "your honor" — she's never addressed a member of the bench by his or her first name. Also, she will curtail socializing with attorneys and law enforcement officers to avoid the appearance of impropriety, Symons said.

"I'm completely aware that I'm no longer an advocate. ... I have to sift through both sides and do what's right," Symons said.

After her investiture Jan. 2, Symons will begin in one of the county's three misdemeanor courtrooms. She said she's excited about new challenges and participating in aspects of the judicial system beyond criminal law, such as family or civil courts.

"I'm looking forward to it," Symons said.