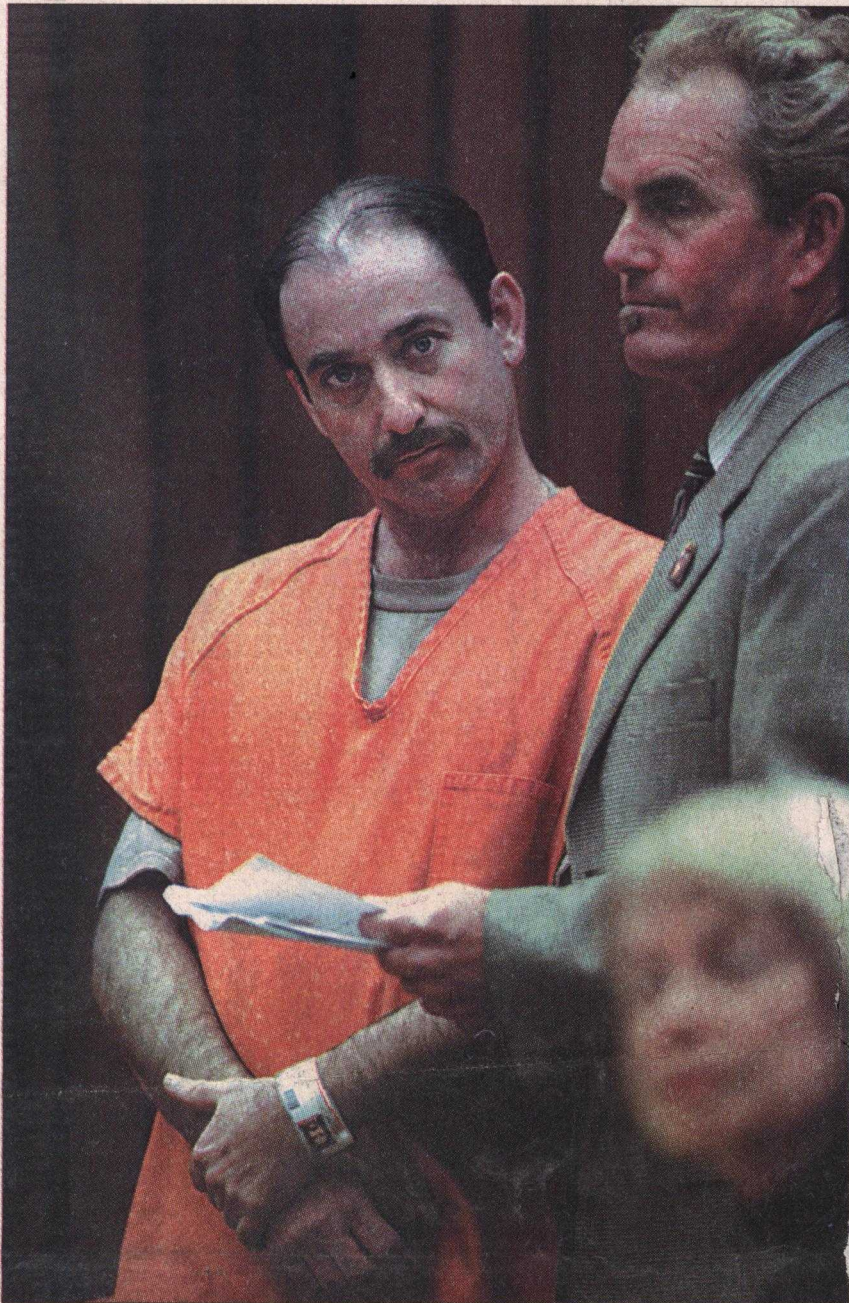


Money motive for murder?



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Robert Beckwith, left, with attorney Sean Gallagher, and Paula Burnson, right, with attorney Harry Robertson, are indicted by a grand jury Thursday for the murder of Burnson's mother in Santa Cruz.

*Murder
Crime + Criminals - 2000 -
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Grand jury indicts strangling victim's daughter, boyfriend



ELVIRA BURNSON

Told daughter she was no longer going to receive money from trust fund.

By **JASON SCHULTZ**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — More details — and a possible motive — have emerged in the case of a local couple accused of murdering a Gilroy woman.

A Santa Cruz County criminal grand jury on Thursday indicted Paula Helene Burnson, 30, of Santa Cruz, on charges she strangled her 64-year-old mother, Elvira Burnson. The daughter's boyfriend, 43-year-old Robert Charles Beck-

with, of Santa Cruz, was also indicted on murder charges in connection with Elvira Burnson's death.

Santa Cruz police Sgt. Steve Clark said investigators believe the couple strangled Elvira Burnson with a rope in Paula Burnson's Beach Flats apartment on Jan. 7. He said police do not know which defendant actually killed Burnson but believe each played a significant role in her death.

Clark said Elvira Burnson was unhappy with her daughter's rela-

tionship with Beckwith and her daughter's heroin addiction, which family members say she has battled since she was a teen. Elvira Burnson had told her daughter that if she did not stop seeing Beckwith, she would stop giving her daughter money and cut her off from a family trust fund, according to Clark.

The trust fund was established by family members of Paula Burnson's deceased father, Charles Burnson, Clark said. He was

unsure how much money was in the trust but said Paula Burnson had been receiving cash from it.

The fund was controlled by Charles Burnson's relatives, but Elvira Burnson had threatened to call the East Coast relatives who controlled the money and tell them to cut Paula off.

Clark said Paula Burnson and Beckwith continued to see each other and kept their relationship a secret from Elvira Burnson, but the

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Burnson

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mother caught Beckwith at her daughter's Kaye Street apartment on Jan. 6.

Elvira returned to the apartment the next day, Clark said, after Paula Burnson called her and asked her to come over. Police Lt. Joe Haebe said Elvira Burnson told other family members she was going to take her daughter to a drug-rehabilitation program in San Jose.

**The indictment
came just
minutes before
the couple was
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arraigned in
Santa Cruz
County
Superior Court
on the same
murder
charges.**

The rope police say was used to strangle Elvira Burnson was found around her neck Jan. 21 when her charred body was discovered in a shallow grave on a hillside near Logan Creek north of Boulder Creek.

Clark said the couple took the body to the remote spot the night of Jan. 8 and used some sort of accelerant, possibly kerosene, in an attempt to burn the body.

Prosecutor Christine McGuire said in court Thursday that she called 18 witnesses a day earlier to testify

before the grand jury. The indictment came just minutes before the couple was due to be arraigned in Santa Cruz County Superior Court on the same murder charges.

McGuire said she sought the grand jury indictment instead of letting a judge charge the couple directly because allowing the court to charge them would have required a preliminary hearing. McGuire said a preliminary hearing would have delayed proceedings several months.

With the grand jury indictment, McGuire said, Judge Art Danner can proceed directly to a jury trial.

Both defendants are scheduled to enter pleas on March 4.

Contact Jason Schultz at jschultz@santa-cruz.com.