

# Young graduate's mother fighting for boy's custody

By JAMIE S. CACKLER  
Sentinel staff writer

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SUNNYVALE — Cathy Gunn is a shy woman. Her blue eyes dart, and her hands fidget during conversation. She does not appear to be comfortable before a tape recorder and a camera in a lawyer's office.

Gunn, the mother of 11-year-old UC Santa Cruz graduate Adragon De Mello, has gone public, two years after she fled her Santa Cruz home. She left behind Adragon and his father, a man she accuses of abusing her and of threatening to harm both her and the boy.

Fiddling with her necklace of plain black beads, which matched her simple knee-length black skirt and print blouse, Gunn said she left and did not try to take Adragon away because of fear.

"My fear was based on previous threats and veiled threats, all those conditions, and how I had

lived in that house — a lot of manipulation and control that I was under, as well as Adragon," said Gunn, 36, during two-hour interview Thursday morning at her lawyer's office.

Her friends and acquaintances around Santa Cruz have said they were told that Gunn was gone for good — a few people were even told that she was dead.

Gunn's tentative steps into the spotlight came as Adragon's life was turned upside down this month.

On Sept. 19, Santa Cruz Police arrested Adragon's father, Agustin De Mello, 58, on suspicion of child endangerment. They took Adragon to a foster home in a secret location. The District

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Adragon De Mello's mother, Cathy Gunn, talks to a reporter.

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Attorney's Office has filed no formal charges against the boy's father.

Acting on information supplied by Gunn, police confiscated 10 guns, including four loaded handguns, and suitcases of ammunition. She had told police she feared De Mello was going to use the guns to harm her, himself, or their son.

Meanwhile, Gunn pressed forward with a separate custody lawsuit, which she had been planning for more than a year, according to police and her lawyer.

"The publicity takes me aback a bit, but once I made this decision, I knew (publicity) would be part of it, based on what has come before," Gunn said.

Gunn will meet Agustin De Mello in Juvenile Court this morning, where a judge may decide whether the boy should remain in protective custody pending the outcome of the possible criminal case against him, as well as Gunn's custody suit. That suit is set to go to court in mid-October.

The elder De Mello will be represented in court by local attorney Paul Meltzer.

Gunn talked about her plans to fight for custody of her son, and described the fears of violence that she said drove her away from home. She said it took her a year to gather up the confidence to file a custody suit.

She said she asked herself, "If I did this, was I going to be hurt? Was my son going to be hurt? But I had to face my fears and stand up and do something about it."

Gunn, who was never married to De Mello, said she stayed with the family for her son's sake, until she couldn't take it anymore.

"If you're brought up in a family environment like I was, the family is really important. No matter what, you try really hard. And the child keeps you together," she said.

Gunn said she believes her son is "a really bright and wonderful child," but she wouldn't say whether she believes Adragon is a "genius," as De Mello has frequently said.

"I don't think he has had an opportunity to develop in other ways," Gunn said. He has no friends his own age, she said, acknowledging that spending the past several years under the constant, heavy load of college classes removed Adragon from his peers.

But, like Agustin De Mello, there were many questions Gunn would not answer.

She did not, for example, wish to reveal where she met De Mello, how long they were together, or where the family lived before moving to Santa Cruz when Adragon was in third grade. She grudgingly revealed that she grew up "around the (San Francisco) Bay Area," and met De Mello in California, not on

## Police seize boy's records from Cabrillo, UC Santa Cruz

SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz Police investigators this week obtained search warrants to collect the academic records of 11-year-old Adragon De Mello from Cabrillo College and UC Santa Cruz.

Police Sgt. Bill Aluffi said his seizure of the transcripts and other records was "just part of the continuing investigation" into allegations of child endangerment against the boy's father, Agustin De Mello, 58.

In affidavits filed Monday to obtain the warrants, Aluffi stated he would be investigating whether Adragon was loaded with excessive classwork, and whether his father tried to pressure teachers to change the boy's grades.

Adragon studied at Cabrillo College for two years, starting when he was 8 years old. He went on to UCSC, where he finished nearly two years' worth of work in one academic year by taking double the class normal class load.

"Adragon has told me that his father signs him up for all the classes he takes, and that each semester he attends these classes," Aluffi wrote.

"When we asked him how he felt about the workload in the classes he takes, he said it was very stressful, and a lot of times it was more than he could handle, and he

would have to drop out of some of the classes, or he would cut those classes," Aluffi wrote.

In a University Police report dated May 5, 1988, John Lynch, provost of UCSC's Cowell College and Adragon's academic advisor, was quoted as saying that they boy was doing poorly in his classes and was in danger of not graduating that spring. Lynch told University Police that he was "concerned that this type of educational program is not working for (Adragon) De Mello," the report said.

The report was part of an investigation into whether Adragon was in compliance with state law requiring students to attend school until graduation or age 18. The report does not say how the question was resolved, but it was investigated by the university's attorney, campus police, the provost and a truancy officer from Santa Cruz City Schools District.

Meanwhile, UCSC Registrar John Mobley said Thursday that the boy's academic transcripts are complete and ready to be sent out at Adragon's or his father's request.

Mobley added that De Mello has never filed a request to have UCSC send out the transcripts.

By Jamie S. Cackler

the East Coast where he lived before he came to California.

"I just don't want to get too much into our past family history," Gunn said.

Gunn also was reticent about discussing Adragon's education. She would not say where the boy attended school before he started at Popper-Keizer Advanced School in Santa Cruz. He entered Cabrillo College at age 8.

Asked whether Adragon attended public schools in Moss Landing (where the family was reported to have once lived) before they moved to Santa Cruz, she said, "I'm concerned because we're getting off into the educational area."

She reluctantly discussed a few of the statements she made to police about Adragon's schooling. According to the Sept. 19 search warrant affidavit, Gunn told police she had helped Adragon with his school work while he attended Cabrillo, and that she and De Mello occasionally had helped the boy with his homework.

"I attended some classes with Adragon that were of mutual interest. My role was as tutor," she said. But she added that she didn't believe her tutoring was any dif-

ferent than what traditional-age college students sometimes seek.

On Thursday, Gunn wouldn't answer whether Adragon had done all his own college work.

Asked about whether she believes the boy is fit to continue college work, she said she and her attorney plan to have the boy tested extensively to determine his level of education, and to find out whether he has gaps in his education from skipping junior high and high school.

Although she had told police earlier that she believed the boy belonged back in junior high, Gunn said Thursday that she would place him at whatever educational level tests showed he could handle, and wherever he felt comfortable. But she added that she would seek out programs for Adragon to spend time with children his own age.

Gunn earnestly talked about how she believes Adragon has missed out on his childhood as he has sped through his education.

"My feeling, just based on being Mom, is that there are a lot of things in his life that haven't been addressed," she said. "Being a child — I think I can offer him that."