

Gang against gang

Colors, signals, taunts, challenges

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A Watsonville Police Department officer, crucial to the Santa Cruz County District Attorney's attempt to try a landmark case involving local gangs, was declared an expert on the subject in municipal court yesterday, which may have saved the day for the prosecution.

In the Watsonville courtroom of Judge Richard Kessell, Assistant District Attorney Catherine Gardner is attempting to link two Watsonville men, who are charged with attempted murder during an April drive-by shooting, of being affiliated with local gangs.

Twenty-one year-old Amado Richard Hernandez has been identified by several witnesses as the gunman in the incident. And yesterday, during the second day of the preliminary hearing, Edward Desmond Arrata was identified as the driver of the truck from which Hernandez allegedly opened gunfire.

If Kessell determines enough evidence exists to set the case for trial, and if the two men are found to be gang members, a new state law being invoked for the first time in Santa Cruz County would allow the addition of three years in prison to any sentence imposed. If they are convicted of attempted murder, they face a maximum prison term of 15 years each without the possibility of parole.

But as defense attorneys objected in court to detective Eddie Rodriguez's qualifications as an expert on gangs, Gardner's plan to apply the special conspiracy stat-

ute to the sentence hung in the balance.

"Basically he's a technician, a police officer," Arthur Dudley said to Kessell after a half hour grilling of Rodriguez, a five-year veteran of the Watsonville Police Department, on his work and educational credentials.

By overruling the objection, Kessell set the stage for the introduction of evidence that the prosecution says will prove the two men's involvement in gang activity in the current case and in

territory.

Self admission, tattoos, hand signals, association and gang drawings are among the criteria law-enforcement officials rely on to identify gang members, Rodriguez said. When members "show colors," they wear clothing, such as bandanas, sweatshirts or baseball caps, in colors their particular gangs are associated with, Rodriguez told the court. Northsiders, for example, wear red, and Poorsiders wear blue.

Within the gangs, officers cate-

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previous incidents, Gardner said outside the courtroom.

If Rodriguez had not qualified as a witness, however, "the special allegations would not have been allowed," Gardner said.

Under questioning by Gardner, Rodriguez presented an overview of the characteristics common to the three primary gangs that inhabit Watsonville: Northside, Poorside and City Hall.

Their gang territories or "barrios" are the areas of Clifford Manor Apartments, 101 West Front Street, and the City Hall and City Plaza, respectively, he testified, adding that on a casual basis, gang members don't enter rival

gorize participants as members, associates or affiliates. And when rival gang members cross paths, they signal each other through hand gestures and shout their gang affiliations at each other, Rodriguez said, noting that gangs also communicate through the use of graffiti.

Several times during the investigator's testimony, family members of the defendants scoffed and giggled at his responses.

The detective said a rival will paint an X over the graffiti put on a structure by another gang and, by initialling his affiliation next to it, issue a challenge. Through local research, Rodriguez determined

Poorsiders use the initials PSW, PSL and PSC; Northsiders are identified with NSW and NSC; while City Hall uses CHW and CHL. Gangs throughout the state, as well as locally, also use numbers to identify themselves. Northsiders use 14 and Poorsiders, 13, Rodriguez said.

Monikers given to gang members, which are sometimes the only names their colleagues know them by, are often based on appearances and personalities, Rodriguez said.

The prosecution's testimony placing Arrata behind the wheel of the burgundy truck allegedly involved in the shooting at Walker and Second streets April 5 surfaced during the defense's cross-examination of Jesus Rocha. No one was injured during the fracas in which an allegedly shirtless Hernandez stood in the back of a truck and fired several rounds from a handgun at the red vehicle in which Rocha was a passenger.

Rocha, also called Jose Rocha during court testimony, identified himself as a member of the Poorside gang and is known by fellow members as "Lalo." He also testified in his native Spanish that Hernandez is a member of the Northside gang, a rival of Poorsiders.

For the second time in this court testimony, Rocha told the court that Northsiders "hate Mexicans." Later in the proceedings, Rodriguez said Poorside gang members are primarily from Mexico while Northsiders identify themselves as being from *el norte*, the north.