

The Peninsula

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Man gets high-profile lawyer

BEVERLY HILLS ATTORNEY HIRED IN SLAYING OF WOMAN, UNBORN SON

By Kristen Berry
Mercury News

Unlike most murder defendants in San Mateo County, Dontae McCoy Hurd, the 18-year-old accused of gunning down a pregnant woman outside an East Palo Alto convenience store, is represented by a high-powered lawyer from Beverly Hills.

That's because Hurd's mother, grandmother and aunt flew from the Bay Area to Beverly Hills last week to beg lawyer John E. Sweeney to take his case. It took a few days, Sweeney said, but the family won him over. "The passion of his grandmother, Alberta

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Lockett, just touched my intuition and led me to believe that this is an innocent young man," said Sweeney, who has been involved in several cases that received national media attention. He added, "They're very persuasive people."

Hurd, of Menlo Park, is being held without bail in the San Mateo County Jail on two counts of first-degree murder in the deaths last month of 19-year-old Lisa Juarez Her-

nandez and her unborn son. The San Mateo County District Attorney's Office filed a special circumstance against Hurd, which might make him eligible for the death penalty if convicted.

Sweeney surprised prosecutors by making an appearance at a routine court hearing Tuesday, when he said he'd need more time to study the case before entering a plea.

It is not an everyday occurrence for an attorney of Sweeney's caliber to take on this type of case so far from home.

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Sweeney
Said man's family persuaded him to take the case.

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"It's a very unusual thing," said Steve Wagstaffe, chief prosecutor of San Mateo County. "In probably one out of every 20 cases we'll see retained counsel in murder" cases. Far fewer of those come from Beverly Hills.

But people who know Sweeney said it shouldn't be so surprising.

"John is unique in that he is tremendously skilled as both a criminal and a civil lawyer," said attorney Carl Douglas, who has known Sweeney personally and professionally for 18 years. Douglas, who was one of O.J. Simpson's attorneys during his 1995 trial, added, "It's not unusual because he gets a thrill out of tackling difficult issues and challenges. He has handled cases nationwide."

After graduating from the California College of Law in 1979, Sweeney was hired by famed attorney Johnnie Cochran, who was the assistant district attorney of Los Angeles county at the time. When Cochran left to establish a private practice, Sweeney followed.

"I soaked everything up that I could," Sweeney said of the time he spent working with Cochran. "I should have been paying him instead of vice versa. I gained a lot of experience and a lot of exposure. It put me 20 years ahead of the game."

In 1985, Sweeney established a practice of his own. His most notable case, he said, came last summer, when he hired on to represent Coby Chavis and his son, Donovan Jackson, in a lawsuit against the Inglewood Police Department.

A tourist videotaped officer Jeremy Morse slamming Jackson against a car and punching him. That case, still in the works, has received national at-

tention. Visitors to the Web site of Sweeney's law offices can access interviews he has given on CNN and "Good Morning America" about the case.

According to the site, Sweeney is a member of the "Million Dollar Verdict Club" in a personal injury trial, and has received a "not guilty" verdict in a death penalty trial.

As for Hurd, Sweeney maintains the innocence of his client, saying such a crime would be out of character for him.

"He has never been convicted of a crime, and he had no ax to grind with the victims," Sweeney said. "I believe my client has been wrongfully charged, and I want to make sure he isn't wrongfully convicted."

He added, "As an African-American man, I don't want to see another innocent person in the state prison system."

Prosecutors have said a witness identified Hurd as the suspect.

Sweeney said he did not take

on the case pro bono, but he will not disclose who is paying for his services, nor what his rates are.

Hurd's next court date has been set for Aug. 8, when he is expected to enter a plea, and a date will be established for his preliminary hearing. None of Hurd's family members could be reached for comment.

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