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Renowned psychiatrist to verify murder suspect's competency
By Joline Gutierrez Krueger
Tribune reporter

A leading forensic psychiatrist who has probed the minds of Jeffrey Dahmer and Erik Menendez will be one of two experts tapped to evaluate an Albuquerque woman accused in the 1999 disappearance and presumed homicide of Girly Hossencofft.

State District Judge Richard Knowles on Tuesday granted a motion by state prosecutors, ordering that Linda Henning, 47, undergo an evaluation to determine whether she is competent to stand trial.

Knowles also ordered that Henning be evaluated separately by a court clinic psychiatrist.

Henning and her boyfriend, Diazien Hossencofft, 35, are facing the death penalty on a multitude of charges, including kidnapping and first-degree murder for the September 1999 disappearance of Hossencofft's estranged wife, Girly Hossencofft. The woman's body has not been found.

Henning's former public defender, Trienah Meyers Gorman, had told the court that she had legitimate reasons to doubt Henning's competency -- much to the dismay of Henning.

Assistant District Attorney Paul Spiers, who is prosecuting the case, had opposed labeling Henning as incompetent to stand trial and had filed a motion seeking an independent evaluation.

"Our position is she's entirely competent," Spiers said Tuesday.

The man prosecutors expect to have perform their competency evaluation is Park Elliot Dietz, a forensic psychiatrist from Newport Beach, Calif., who has been a prosecution witness in several high-profile cases.

Besides Dahmer and Menendez, his subjects have included John Hinckley Jr., convicted of the assassination attempt on President Reagan, and Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski.

"He is perhaps the foremost forensic psychiatrist," Spiers said.

Dietz is credited with helping to convince a jury that Dahmer, who dismembered his victims and kept and sometimes devoured their body parts, was legally sane and responsible for his actions.

As a consultant for the FBI, Dietz warned that Branch Davidian leader David Koresh would choose death over losing power, foreshadowing the fiery ending of Koresh and 79 of his followers after federal agents tried to end a siege at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, in 1993.

Dietz was also the first to coin the phrase "fan obsession syndrome" as a defense for Robert Bardo, accused of killing actress Rebecca Schaeffer in 1992.

The evaluations are expected to cause postponement of Henning's Feb. 5 trial date, Knowles said.