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The other Linda

Before Diazien Hossencofft entered her life, friends say, Linda Henning was known as a trusting, grounded woman who hung all her hopes on love

By Joline Gutierrez Krueger
Tribune Reporter

Long before her life took such an extraterrestrial turn, there had been another Linda Henning.

This one kept her feet on the ground, without shackles.

This one enjoyed a good episode of "The X-Files" but had a life that didn't come straight from its scripts.

This one had friends she loved fiercely, had a home, a career, a fiance, a clean criminal record with not so much as a traffic ticket.

This one did not know Diazien Hossencofft.

Today, as jury selection begins for what is expected to be one of the most bizarre death penalty cases in recent New Mexico history, many wonder which Henning will show up for court.

"The Linda I knew was loving and caring with consistent behavioral patterns of decency," said Steve Zachary, a friend for more than 16 years. "After she met Hossencofft she became crazy as a loon, someone who believed in reptilian aliens taking over the world, cryogenic pods and government conspiracies. That was not Linda."

Henning, 48, is charged with first-degree murder, kidnapping and 18 other counts in connection with the Sept. 9, 1999, disappearance and presumed death of Hossencofft's estranged wife.

Prosecutors say an avalanche of evidence from DNA to deer hair will prove that Henning and Diazien Hossencofft masterminded an elaborate - and oddball - scheme to kill Girly Chew Hossencofft, 39, over motives that range from a fight over the divorce settlement to a battle for alien queen domination.

Hossencofft, 37, is already serving a sentence of life plus 60 years plus 364 days as part of a plea agreement that allowed him his preference to live out his days in a Wyoming prison.

A third co-defendant, Bill Miller, is awaiting trial on five lesser charges of tampering with evidence.

Now, it's Henning's turn.

Testimony could begin as soon as Thursday once a jury is seated from a pool of 200, said Chief District Judge W. John Brennan, who is presiding over the case.

Her trial is expected to last four weeks and cover hundreds of witnesses and boxes of evidence.

But the most crucial piece of evidence - Girly Hossencofft's body - has never been found.

The lack of a body and Henning's strange ideations are but two facets of a peculiar case that has taken three years to twist its way to trial.

"This is a case that is unusual on many fronts," said lead prosecutor Paul Spiers, who is as serious and studious as the case is surreal.

For one, Henning, if convicted, faces the potential of becoming only the second woman to be executed since New Mexico became a territory in 1848.

For another, quirky con man Hossencofft is expected to testify. And that could finally force him to publicly renounce his past claims of being a 2,000-year-old being, an alien, a CIA operative, a dying man and a doctor possessing the secret of eternal youth.

But perhaps most fascinating will be how prosecutors and defense attorneys Gary Mitchell and Monica Baca explain the conundrum of Henning herself – who she is and who she was before meeting Hossencofft, just six weeks before his wife disappeared.

But it could take far longer than a four-week trial to figure that out.

A gullible romantic

If a boyfriend told Henning the moon was made of green cheese, she'd believe it, Henning's mother once said.

"Then she was devastated when she learned it wasn't," Diane Booth recalled in an analysis of Henning's case conducted last year by New York attorney Robert Babcock at the behest of Zachary.

"She lived and died on the words and acts of her boyfriends," the report states.

Friends speculate such romantic gullibility came from her fervent desire to find the mystery father she lost as a child growing up in San Fernando, Calif.

The name "Henning" was his, and she had reclaimed it against the wishes of her mother, who married a successful aerospace engineer when Henning was 9.

"I think she yearned for the man who let her down," Zachary said.

But she was also bright and strong-willed and kind, visiting a friend's dying mother at a hospice and organizing grand cross-country birthday parties for those she loved.

She was a savvy businesswoman, too, they said, always looking for a new venture or creative venue such as her Running Horse clothing line, which raked in $800,000 in sales by its third year.

"She was very sharp," said Robert Harvey, Henning's former Running Horse partner, lover and friend. "You could see her mind was always thinking. She felt strongly about many things. She knew what she wanted."

She loved animals, rescuing spiders off walls and coddling cats like the children she never bore.

She loved life, eschewing guns and weapons and embracing a rigorous health regimen of no processed food, no cigarettes, no drugs, no alcohol.

"She was a Birkenstock-wearing, organic-eating pacifist," Zachary said from his home in Long

Island, N.Y. "When we were together I used to drive her crazy with my pastrami and my cakes and my cigars. She was always into running and lecithin and wheat. She'd buy $75-a-jar skin creams and tell me, `It's very important to maintain yourself.' "

Most of her love affairs burned fiery hot then fizzled into loyal friendships.

Until Diazien Hossencofft.

Soon after Henning met the short, effeminate, eccentric con man who could inexplicably wrap women around his pointy-nailed finger, friends say she began babbling about reptilian races, government plots and her power to kill off anyone who stood in her way.

Including her friends.

"Something strange happened to her, something really bizarre," Zachary said. "Linda's state of mind was altered by Diazien Hossencofft. It's like a Manson thing."

Julie Maguire, an Aztec woman who Hossencofft had also proposed marriage to months before, said Henning appeared spacey, drugged to her. And angry.

"Linda Henning called me, she threatened me," Maguire said. "She told me to be careful what I said. She told me to get out and go to Seattle. But I'm not scared of the bitch."

Six weeks after meeting Hossencofft, Henning became a prime suspect in his wife's murder case.

`He's not real'

Zachary remembers receiving an excited phone call from Henning in Albuquerque in late July or early August 1999. She had met someone, a brilliant doctor who could cure him of his brain tumor and multiple sclerosis, which had afflicted him for 12 years.

"Even after we broke up she was always sending me books and tapes on health and things to help me get better," said Zachary, a former apparel industry broker. "Now she had this genius with a youth serum. I told her, `Send me his resume.' I wasn't about to come out there to be treated by someone I didn't know."

Zachary said Henning was already letting Hossencofft give her injections that he told her would keep her young and vibrant even as she neared age 50.

"She said she never felt better," he said.

But Zachary said Hossencofft's seven-page curriculum vitae immediately seemed suspicious.

"For such a smart guy he had a lot of typos and misspellings," he said.

Zachary enlisted a private investigator to verify Hossencofft's claims to numerous academic degrees, scientific awards and more than 40 medical research papers on topics including human viral infections and vaccine developments.

Zachary urgently faxed Henning with the investigator's findings:

Not even her genius doctor's name was authentic.

"This guy's a fraud, I told her," Zachary said. "He's Armand Chavez. He's not real."

Henning would not hear of it.

"She went berserk," he said. "Here was this girl I had known for years, swearing and cursing at me like I had never heard her before."

Henning began sending Zachary increasingly bizarre letters. Later, they would become vicious.

"Life ends on this planet," a letter dated Aug. 7, 1999, from Henning states. "The reptilians are led by a queen back on the moonbase. . . . Do you know any way at all to reach Dan Akroyd or Mel Gibson, the movie actors. They are very aware of the situation and would help, I truly believe. We have a contact to Spielberg, however, he is one of them, traitor. George Bush is a full-fledged reptilian, he maintains the visage by the use of magnetic fields to create holograms."

Harvey, too, said Henning's once mild interest in aliens and "The X-Files" became obsessions.

"She started going to these UFO meetings," he said. "She said she met this wonderful guy, and that when they made love he'd turn into a cat. I told her, `Linda, let's not go there.' "

Two weeks after meeting Hossencofft, Henning began telling co-workers at 21st Century Resources that they were getting married.

Never mind that she was already living with Greg Ott, another co-worker whom she planned to marry that November, according to Albuquerque police records.

But once Hossencofft was in, Ott was soon out.

"He called me one day totally alarmed at what was happening to Linda," Zachary said. "He thought she had a chemical imbalance and he wanted to take her for medical help."

That August, police say Hossencofft and co-defendant Miller physically forced Ott out of Henning's home and out of her life.

Ott became "scared of Linda and wanted nothing to do with her," a police report indicates.

"He was weak," Henning would later explain.

Ott did not return phone calls to his home in Phoenix.

`Mated to the death'

Neither prosecutors or Henning's attorneys say they expect to bring up the question of Henning's competency or sanity.

Nor do they appear eager to introduce Henning's beliefs in reptilian aliens and world domination.

"A lot has been made of all the information about extraterrestrials and that sort of thing, but I'm just and old-time criminal defense attorney," said Mitchell, a folksy, well-respected Ruidoso attorney who has represented some of the state's most high profile defendants, including Byron "Robin the Hood" Chubbuck and convicted - and executed - child killer Terry Clark.

"I look at witness and facts and motive and whether anybody has done this stuff," he said. "I look at my client as a good businesswoman. She had a good life."

But Zachary remains firm in his belief that Henning was drugged, brainwashed, changed somehow at the hands of Hossencofft.

Since his attempt to expose Hossencofft's fraudulent resume, Henning has refused to accept Zachary's attempts to write her, to send money, to send attorneys and investigators, to pay for mental health care.

"I don't know what else I can do," he said. "My love for her is stronger than her hatred of me. She needs help."

But Henning is caustic in her comments of the people she once held dear, including Zachary, Harvey and her mother.

"My dear friends are state's witnesses against me, and they have stolen all my personal belongings, including money, jewelry, furs, clothes and collectible dolls," Henning wrote in a March 1 letter to The Tribune.

In the end, which is near, she professes in the letter, none of it will matter.

"You all are about to be cast into a Holocaust of such proportion that the remembrance of WWII's concentration camps of Germany will be Playskool in comparison to what is about to happen," she writes.

Despite the appearance on Hossencofft's part to lay a trail of clues leading directly to Henning, including planting a vial of her blood at his estranged wife's home, Henning appears resolute in her devotion.

"Dee is the kindest, most protective, caring person I have ever met," Henning wrote to her mother from her jail cell on Aug. 1, 2000. "He is also the most important scientist in the world. None are smarter than he is, and we have mated, as is his custom with his own people. We are mated to the death. It is much, much more than marriage. It cannot ever be broken."

As for the man friends say conned her down this road, to that courtroom, that jail cell, that "other" Henning, Hossencofft admits in a Jan. 15 interview with Albuquerque police detectives that all the alien stuff she holds dear is "utter nonsense."

It was a way, he said, to get Henning to do what he wanted.

"Whatever it is that you want to do in your life, I can know it, I can feel it, I can believe it and I can make you believe that I believe it," Hossencofft said in the interview. "And if that's so then it happens."

Hossencofft later added:

"I'm not above using any woman at any time."

THE HOSSENCOFFT CASE

Girly Chew Hossencofft, 39: She was reported missing Sept. 10, 1999. Co-workers and an FBI agent said she feared her estranged husband, Diazlen Hossencofft, was trying to kill her. Blood was later found in her Albuquerque apartment and on clothes strewn along U.S. 60 west of Magdalena. Her body has never been found. Witnesses say she might have been killed either over a custody battle or for the more bizarre proposition that she was a space alien queen who had to be destroyed.

Diazien Hossencofft, 37: Girly's husband and the boyfriend of co-defendant Linda Henning is serving a life sentence plus 60 years and 364 days in a Wyoming penitentiary under a plea agreement reached last January in his wife's presumed death. Has alternately been called an alien, an NSA or CIA agent, a doctor, a 2,000-year-old being or a dying man with a youth serum.

Bill Miller, 52: Once romantically linked to Henning and a member of the UFO group she and Hossencofft attended. Originally thought to have been the hit man in the killing, but a second grand jury indicted him only on five counts of tampering with evidence. No trial date has been set.

Linda Henning, 48: One of at least three women engaged to Diazlen Hossencofft at the time his estranged wife went missing. Accused of being Hossencofft's accomplice, charged with 20 counts, including first-degree murder, kidnapping, criminal solicitation, seven counts of conspiracy, six counts of tampering with evidence and four counts of perjury. The death penalty is being sought against her.

