

Wife on deathbed accuses her husband

By STUART WEIN and LONI SMITH

A dying 18-year-old Palatine woman named her husband as the man who tied her in a chair, poured gasoline on her, then lit her on fire, according to the testimony of the physician who attended her deathbed.

David Rhoads, 23, 409 N. Northwest Highway is charged with three counts of murder and one count of arson in connection with the house fire last July 17 at 306 North Morris that took the life of his wife Vicki Jo. The fire gutted the kitchen of the home owned by Vicki Jo's parents, Marvin and Carol Reiter.

The trial opened Friday in the Evanston Cook County Circuit courtroom of Judge Brian L. Crowe.

Opening statements and testimony of prosecution witnesses painted a gruesome picture of what were described by Defense Attorney Paul Plotnick, as rather unusual sexual practices.

In the prosecution's opening statement Friday, State's Attorney Sol Rajfer told the jury, "You're about to hear of a horrible and gruesome tragedy."

"The evidence will show that Rhoads tied up his wife and lit the fire that brought about her death, then he tried to cover up the action in full knowledge of what he was doing," Rajfer said.

Public Defender Plotnick described the scene in which Vicki Jo tied her own feet and Rhoads bound the rest of her body. They were going to play a game where he'd rape her. The game was usually preceded by alcohol rub-downs, and when Rhoads couldn't find any alcohol in the house, he used gasoline, Plotnick said.

An explosion followed when Rhoads lit a cigarette Plotnick said. But he described Vicki Jo's death as accidental.

He also said Rhoads was not on trial for his sexual practices, a statement he repeatedly made to the jury.

Witnesses for the prosecution said Rhoads ran down the street saying, "Help me, my wife is burning up."

The flaming body of Vicki Jo was carried out the garage door and hosed down. She was carried, fully conscious, across the street by neighbors.

Jan Bone, 353 N. Morris, said she knelt close to Vicki Jo and asked her if her

husband had done this to her, to which she replied, "No."

Rhoads then knelt by his wife and said, "I'm sorry it was an accident," according to Bone's testimony. Vicki Jo's response was, "Later, later."

Witnesses said she repeated, "I'm going to die, I'm going to die."

After treatment by Palatine paramedics, Vicki Jo was transferred to Northwest Community Hospital. She was later taken to Evanston Hospital by helicopter, where she was attended by Dr. James Koslowski, a surgical resident, for third degree burns over 90 per cent of her body.

Koslowski told the jury that he first determined that her mental orientation was clear. After doing so, he asked her what happened.

"She responded that her husband had tried to kill her," Koslowski testified. He tied her in a chair with an electric cord, poured gasoline on her, and set it on fire. He then poured gasoline in the rest of the kitchen and then set it on fire. She said he tried to kill her."

Vicki Jo died the following day, 20 hours after the fire.

Plotnick asked the judge to declare a mistrial on the basis that Koslowski's testimony would prejudice the jury.

Judge Crowe denied the motion.

Plotnick and his assistant, Dick Kavett, said they are preparing a defense based on a plea of insanity.

In testimony Wednesday morning, Palatine fireman Robert Wright said he smelled gasoline upon entering the front door of the Reiter residence, 306 N. Morris. He followed the scent to the kitchen, where he said he found a gasoline can tipped over, with the cap off.

Damage to the kitchen area included extensive "charring," but the area where the can had been was clear, he said.

James Marton, 327 N. Lyle Drive, said he was unable to enter the home through the back door because of the force of the fire over the kitchen stove. He said he was approached in the back yard by Rhoads, who was "muttering" something about "gasoline in the outboard motor in the

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Sex game is blamed for wife's fiery death

By Richard Phillips

A PALATINE MAN, accused of murdering his estranged wife by setting her on fire, actually torched her during an "unusual" sex game, the man's attorney argued Friday.

David Rhoads, 23, a custodian in a home for delinquent boys, is charged with the arson murder of his 18-year-old wife, Vicki Jo, in her parent's Palatine home last July 17. She died the next day from burns suffered in the fire.

Public Defender Paul Plotnick told the jury in his opening statements before Associate Judge Brian L. Crowe in the Evanston Branch of Circuit Court that his client poured gasoline over his wife after he had bound her hands and ankles behind her back.

"The evidence will show my client and his wife had unusual sexual desires," Plotnick said.

THE BONDAGE "game" described by Plotnick included a rubdown, ordinarily with alcohol. On the day of the fire, however, the couple used gasoline, Plotnick said, because Rhoads was unable to

find rubbing alcohol in the bathroom of the ranch house at 306 N. Morris Dr. in the suburb.

Plotnick contended that the estranged couple, married eight months previously, were getting back together and had earlier that day taken LSD.

Prosecutor Sol Rajfer, however, argued that Rhoads set out to kill his wife. He said evidence will show that Rhoads gave three conflicting stories to authorities after his wife's death and that he wrote at least two letters last August to another woman.

In one of the letters, Rajfer said, Rhoads promised to tell the woman "what really happened" if she would not tell anyone else about his earlier letters. In the earlier letters, Rhoads wrote, "I didn't mean to kill her. I was only trying to scare her, but the damn thing went off," according to Rajfer.

IN EACH OF his accounts to authorities, Rhoads said a cigarette ignited the gasoline, but each version differed as to who had lit the cigarette, Rajfer said.

"We expect the evidence to show that he knew what he was doing that night," Rajfer said.

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garage...my fault."

Marton testified Rhoads said something about lighting a cigarette. Rhoads seemed to be "out of it," Marton said, adding that the defendant's hair and eyebrows were singed and his hands burned.

Terry Dineen, 330 N. Morris, testified he and Rhoads sat together at a picnic table in the back yard of the Reiter residence. He said he thought the manner of conversation was extremely calm, considering what was going on at the time.

According to Dineen, Rhoads said, "We were just fooling around...I love her...this wasn't supposed to happen...I love her..."