

Sometimes There Are Glitches

by Referee Cynthia Loo

When I started hearing juvenile and family law matters in the Compton Courthouse, I got a lot of suggestions.

“Take the west exit rather than the east to the judges’ parking lot,” (because one is less likely to get shot).

“It is better to leave before dark, and take Central Avenue instead of Wilmington to get to the 91 Freeway, because Central has fewer traffic lights,” (where you will have to stop).

After the list of judges’ parking places was confiscated from someone in custody, I felt reassured when everyone’s spaces were switched around.

And only once after issuing an order for child support did my clerk yell to me, “Judge, run into chambers and lock the door!”

On that occasion, I did run into chambers but didn’t know how to lock the door. So, I ran into the bathroom. After a minute, curiosity got the better of me, and I peeked into the courtroom to see eight deputies on top of a father, pepper spray everywhere.

When I moved to the Eastlake Juvenile Court, I found security to be more relaxed. Side and back

exits clearly marked for use only in emergencies were used regularly. Since I’ve been here, there was only one escape of a youth, but he was eventually caught by my bailiff, who successfully tackled him after he jumped onto a passing train.

About two years ago, the judges’ parking spaces were moved to the front of the courthouse where the deputies could better observe our cars. There was an option of parking in a structure where the public could not see you getting in and out of your



car. Being lazy, I opted instead for a parking place close to the front entrance of the courthouse.

If I arrive before 7:15 a.m., there is less likelihood I will walk past a line of juveniles waiting to get into the courthouse. A deputy often opens the courthouse door for me with a cheery "Good morning." We'll share a conversation regarding the health of my cat(s), the weather, or an acknowledgment of gratitude if the day is a Thursday or Friday.

Upon exiting the courthouse, if before 4:30 p.m., the senior deputy may ask as he looks outside, "Are you OK? Do you need an escort?" Usually, I go unescorted, careful not to have eye contact with anyone or to appear friendly and approachable.

Sometimes there are glitches. One evening, 16-year-old Roberto was pushing his mother in a wheelchair past my car. Earlier that day, I had allowed Roberto to go home after completion of a good camp program. Even though I had locked up Roberto six months earlier and had ordered him to camp, and even though his mother had cried that she had cancer "in all her bones" and needed her son home, both appeared sincerely glad to see me. With 50 or so cases on my calendar a day, I don't remember most, but I remembered this one. I worried whether she was going to pass away before Roberto got out of camp.

As Roberto pushed his mother's wheelchair past me, she looked up at me and said, "God bless you."

Roberto said, "Oh judge, I have this letter for you that my attorney forgot to give you."

He reached into his pocket and presented a folded piece of notebook paper. I unfolded it and saw in very neat handwriting he had penciled a letter to me, which started: "Dear Judge Lu."

With the words "ex-parte communication" and "CJP" swirling in the back of my head, I thanked him and told him that it was clear he had spent a lot of time writing it. I asked if he could do me a favor and bring it to court with him next time because I didn't want to lose it. As I retreated to my car, I added, "Remember what you promised."

"I will," he said.

His mother turned and gave a wave.

The next time I saw Roberto, I didn't expect him to be in custody. It was alleged that he robbed

the 7-Elevens essentially the same way each time: He'd bring a carton of orange juice to the counter. When the cashier rang up the purchase and opened the register, he pulled out a gun and demanded the money. The first couple of times he didn't take anything except money. The third time, at a 7-Eleven on Hyperion Boulevard in Silverlake, he took some chips and candy. The fifth time, at a 7-Eleven in Eagle Rock, he pulled out a gun, pointed it at the cashier's chest and asked, "Where are you from?"

The cashier said, "Hey man, I'm 40 years old. I don't bang. I have a wife and kids. Please."

As he took the money and ran out the door, he yelled, "This is Avenues!" He was apprehended that evening at a 7-Eleven on Sunset.

At the hearing in which the DA requested that Roberto's case be sent to the adult criminal court for prosecution, an LAPD officer testified about the cashier's fear that he would die that day.

The arresting officer testified about the pursuit and struggle with Roberto, and about the meth, money, cartons of orange juice and ammunition found in the van, and about the loaded gun and the belt buckle with an "A" that Roberto had when he was arrested.

I made my findings and looked directly at Roberto as I explained the basis for sending his case to adult court. I told him I was personally sorry, but the law mandated this result. He nodded his head as if he understood, and I observed that he was crying.

I set bail at \$650,000 and saw Roberto turning around to his mother and reaching his arms out to her. She moved her wheelchair closer, leaning toward him. The deputy tried to put his body between them, but Roberto pushed past him, as his mother overreached and began to slide forward, out of the chair.

The probation officer rushed over and tried to pull the mother back into the chair. I saw the backs of the probation officer and the deputy as they attempted to untangle Roberto and his mother as they tumbled onto the floor together.

Then something else happened. I heard my deputy on his walkie-talkie say "code" something ... Blue? Red? I didn't know. I watched, and ... not being sure, I pushed the emergency button under the bench.

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Almost instantly, several deputies came rushing in. Chairs were being thrown out of the way; people were running in all directions. Roberto was quickly grabbed by three deputies and whisked back into lockup.

The senior deputy came back into the courtroom and asked if I was OK. I told him I was. Roberto's attorney was still sitting at counsel table, looking very dazed.

"Are you OK?" he said to me.

"I'm OK," I said. "Are you?"

The interpreter walked in from the hall, where she had been standing next to the mother, and reported that the mother had just fainted. My clerk called the paramedics.

We were escorted one-by-one to a room to be interviewed on videotape as to what had happened. Someone asserted that Roberto had tried to get the

deputy's gun. Someone claimed a deputy threw the mother to the floor.

It was getting dark when I left the courthouse. As I walked out to my car, I noticed Roberto's mother sitting in her wheelchair at the bus stop. I thought of all the things that happened that day to ensure my physical safety in the courtroom and thought it wasn't the worry of being hurt physically that I was going to remember about that day. ■