

Couple gets first day in court during murder trial



Oakland Press photos/TIM THOMPSON

Michelle Bazzetta's lawyer contends she is an accessory after the fact, but not a murderer in the slaying of Helen Bazzetta

Prosecution scripts a grisly tale as Bazzettas go on trial

By STEPHEN W. HUBER
Of The Oakland Press

Joseph and Michelle Bazzetta planned and executed the 1983 slaying of Joseph's stepmother, Helen Bazzetta, because she was getting in the way of the couple's romance, an Oakland County prosecutor argued Tuesday.

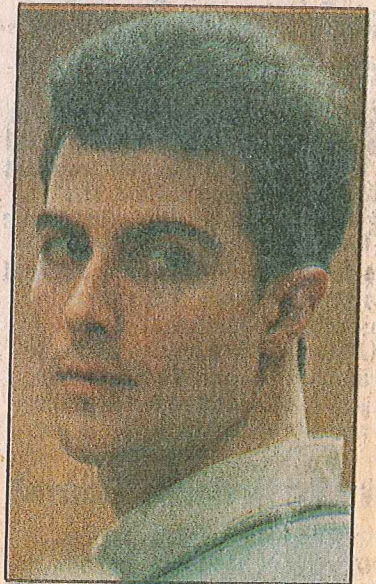
In separate opening statements before two Circuit Court juries, Assistant Prosecutor

Michael Stern unloaded on both defendants with often graphic and gruesome detail, bringing tears to the eyes of Helen Bazzetta's family.

The prosecutor portrayed Joseph Bazzetta as a "monster" who had planned to kill his stepmother for months. Stern contended Joseph Bazzetta participated in a satanic Mass, hoping a plane in which his stepmother was a passenger would crash. Police believe she was killed a day

later, on Aug. 1, 1983. Her body was found buried in a shallow grave in Highland Township in April 1988.

The couple is charged with open murder and being tried by separate juries in a case before the same judge. Michelle Bazzetta did not escape Stern's wrath. He said she did not like Helen Bazzetta and thought her then-boyfriend



Joseph Bazzetta

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BAZZETTA

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Prosecution claims pair killed mom because she stood in way of romance

Joseph was better off without his stepmother.

The couple married days before they were arrested in June 1988.

Stern likened the murder to overkill, even by horror movie standards, and told the jury to be wary of Michelle Bazzetta's attempts to shift responsibility to her estranged husband. Michelle Bazzetta filed to annul the marriage shortly after.

Birmingham attorney Lawrence Kaluzny, who represents Michelle Bazzetta, admitted to the jury his client lied to the police, helped bury the body and helped cover up Helen Bazzetta's death. She was not, however, guilty of planning or committing a murder, only being an accessory after the fact, he said.

"Love, fear, shock, horror, death, terrified, beaten — these are some of the emotions Michelle went through," Kaluzny said. "She went through an emotional roller coaster ... The horror you heard about, she had to live through and deal with."

As Kaluzny spoke, his client

wiped away a few tears. Several times during the day, she looked back at some friends, smiling and mouthed the words, "I love you."

Kaluzny said his client was afraid of Joseph Bazzetta and lied to police because of that fear.

"Joey told her, 'You're just as guilty as I am,' and she believed him," Kaluzny said.

Troy attorney Ronald Solomon, who represents Joseph Bazzetta, reserved the right to give an opening statement until the prosecution rests its case.

Stern said Joseph Bazzetta told police a week ago that he had struck his stepmother in the head with a baseball bat and then tied a noose around her neck with a belt from a bathroom robe. He then handcuffed her as she lay on the floor.

Stern said the victim's body was put in the trunk of her stepson's car and then taken 46 miles from her Warren home to the Highland Township grave site where it was found.

Michelle Bazzetta helped plan the slaying, Stern contended.

Two of Helen Bazzetta's sisters testified they searched their sister's home for clues to her disappearance on Aug. 3, 1983, but found few. They said they found the kitchen floor had been cleaned, but the rest of the house had not been. Damp rags were found in a dryer.

The trial resumes today before Judge Gene Schnelz.