

Phone operators recall past

LIVING, 1B



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A GANNETT COMPANY

Judge: Suspect in slaying incompetent for trial

Ruling suspends case of Salinas man accused of killing his mother

BY SUNITA VIJAYAN
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A Salinas man accused of killing his mother was

declared incompetent to stand trial by a judge Tuesday after a brief outburst by him during the hearing that forced his removal from the courtroom.

Monterey County Superior Court Judge Mark Hood ordered Christopher Sorenson to undergo evaluation by a mental health program in San Jose follow-



Christopher Sorenson



Janet Sorenson

ing a brief court hearing Tuesday morning. Sorenson, 29, is accused of

killing Janet Sorenson, 71, whose body was found Dec. 31 in the area of Highway 129 and Highway 101 in San Benito County. Sorenson was charged in her death on Dec. 19, though she was missing at the time and was last seen Dec. 7 at her home in the 1600 block of Atherton Way in Salinas.

As he has done in previous

WHAT'S NEXT

Christopher Sorenson's case is scheduled to return to court March 29.

court appearances, Sorenson spoke directly to the judge during Tuesday morning's hearing, objecting to the news media and demanding a jury trial.

"Isn't it my option?" Sorenson said in court. "It's in the law, you know. I have a right to be tried fairly, you know. If you just say I'm incompetent that means, what? You can make up any damn thing you want because I'm the one that's crazy, right? No, I don't want that."

See SORENSON, 6A

Father gets probation in crash

Safety violations alleged in death of trimmer

Report: Worker was without a harness

BY ANDY STINY
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A Salinas tree trimmer fell 26 feet to his death in Pebble Beach last year because he was not wearing the required safety harness, according to a series of citations and penalties issued by Cal-OSHA. Equipment maintenance violations were also cited.

The Davey Tree Surgery Co. of Livermore has been issued four citations with proposed penalties totaling \$30,000 in the Sept. 28 death of Carlos Amezcua.

The citations, three of them listed as serious and one general, allege the company violated various operational safety procedures including critical inspections and lubrications of a "bucket-leveling system" on an aerial boom truck.

The most serious category violation, that employees use safety harnesses while in an elevated lift position, has been "abated," Cal-OSHA said. That "serious" violation came with an \$18,000 proposed penalty.

Amezcua, 46, was trimming trees from a boom truck at Cortez and Rhonda Roads when he fell to his death, the Sheriff's Office said at the time. Cal-OSHA conducted a five-month investigation culminating in the citations and fines issued on Feb. 24.

Coroner's detective Daniel Robison spoke with co-worker Mauricio Hernandez, Amezcua's co-worker and a witness to the accident, the coroner's report said.

See MOLINA, 5A

See TRIMMER, 5A



Luis Molina, left, listens to his sentencing, which stipulated the terms of his probation Tuesday at the Monterey County Superior Court in Salinas. Although facing a possible maximum of 13 years in prison at his sentencing, Molina was not sent to prison. Molina, 34, crashed his SUV Aug. 3 while chasing after a pickup he believed contained his stolen motorcycle on northbound Highway 101, south of Boronda Road. As a result, his 6-year-old daughter died and his wife and three other children suffered injuries. CONNER JAY/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

6-year-old daughter was killed in pursuit of a stolen motorcycle last summer

BY SUNITA VIJAYAN
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Luis Armando Molina of Salinas said he was "acting like a wild animal" when he chased a pickup truck along Highway 101 last summer, believing it was hauling his stolen motorcycle.

The pursuit ended in the crash of Molina's SUV — and the death of his 6-year-old daughter, Xitlali.

"The truth is I was in no position to be behind the wheel," said Molina, who'd suffered a blow to the head before the chase. "When I started waking up, snapping out of it, I realized

what was happening."

Molina's comments came before Monterey County Superior Court Judge Adrienne Grover sentenced him to four years of probation, ordering him to obey all laws or face time behind bars. Grover also prohibited Molina from driving while on probation and ordered him to undergo counseling and anger-management courses as part of his probation terms.

"I am urging you. It is time to step up and think about your family, to think about your children," Grover told Molina. "They were there — your wife and children were

there. They were direct victims ... Honor Xitlali by honoring your other children ... If there is anything you can do to honor your daughter's life, that is what you must do."

In deciding Molina's sentence, the judge said, she had to balance several issues, such as the impact prison may have on Molina's family, as well as the defendant's traffic record, which includes a string of offenses since 1997, including driving without a license and driving on a suspended license.

On Aug. 3, Molina, 34, crashed his SUV while chasing after a pickup on north-

bound Highway 101, south of Boronda Road. Molina believed the truck contained his motorcycle, which he had reported stolen earlier that day. Molina's 6-year-old daughter, Xitlali Molina, was pronounced dead shortly after the crash. His wife and three other children suffered minor injuries.

In December, Molina pleaded no contest to four felony counts of child endangerment, one with an enhancement for inflicting great bodily injury.

The county District Attorney's Office said that, before the crash occurred, Molina spotted the truck in east

Salinas, believing it had his stolen motorcycle. They said Molina got out of the SUV his wife was driving and tried to stop the truck from leaving Kern and Market streets. The District Attorney's Office said the driver of the pickup took off instead, hitting Molina. He then returned to the SUV, they said, and took over the wheel before pursuing the pickup as it entered northbound Highway 101 at Kern Street.

The District Attorney's Office said Molina — traveling at speeds estimated at 80 mph — lost control of his

Super Tuesday: Romney takes at least 5 out of 10 states, adds to delegate lead

Santorum sweeps 3 contests; falls just short in Ohio

USA TODAY

Mitt Romney won five of 10 Super Tuesday contests including crucial Ohio, advancing his claim on the Republican presidential nomination without ending questions about the breadth of his appeal within the party.

The former Massachusetts governor narrowly won in Ohio, the main event of the night, after earlier taking Idaho's caucuses on top of wins in Virginia, Vermont and Massachusetts primaries.



Mitt Romney



Newt Gingrich



Ron Paul



Rick Santorum

Rick Santorum countered with strong wins in three states — Tennessee, Oklahoma and North Dakota — to keep his candidacy alive despite being heavily out-



spent by the front-runner. Former House speaker Newt Gingrich won on home turf in Georgia, where he represented a district for two decades in Congress.

Results from late-reporting caucuses in Alaska were still outstanding.

Santorum, the former Pennsylvania senator, scored substantial wins in GOP primaries in Tennessee and Oklahoma and won easily in North Dakota's caucuses, where Ron Paul finished a distant second

See TUESDAY, 6A

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Trimmer

Continued from page 1A

According to that report: Hernandez said he and Amezcua were removing branches from a tree close to power lines. Hernandez was directing traffic while Amezcua raised himself with the boom.

Amezcua had only been in the bucket a few minutes "when he (Hernandez) heard Amezcua yell out and then saw him falling from the bucket. The bucket had tilted over and dumped Amezcua out head first." The tree trimmer hit several branches on the way down.

"Hernandez said that the bucket was not locked and it should have been locked in place, preventing it from tilting.... The restraint was still attached to the bucket. The bucket was swiveled and facing down," said the report.

A chain that holds the bucket in place had separated and the victim was not wearing the harness, said a Cal-OSHA report narrative. "Employer failed to enforce the use of fall protection by the employee in aerial lift equipment," the narrative states.

Contacted on Tuesday in Livermore, Davey referred calls to corporate headquarters in Kent, Ohio. A spokeswoman there said she would call The Californian back, but no call had been received by Tuesday afternoon.

Ben Johnson, an area supervisor for Davey, was at the accident scene after Amezcua was pronounced dead at Community Hospital of the

Monterey Peninsula at 11 a.m., said the coroner's report. Amezcua died of blunt force injuries to the head and neck.

Johnson said Amezcua, as the operator of the bucket, "was responsible to insure that he/she was secured to the bucket using a harness and strap provided," the coroner's report said. "The consensus at that time was that Amezcua did not use the safety harness," the report said.

Report points to boom malfunction

Johnson told the coroner's investigator "that the truck boom appeared to have malfunctioned in some way as it should have been in a locked position" but was positioned in a tree, the report said.

The "bucket automatically locks into place to prevent the user from losing his/her balance and falling from the bucket," Johnson said, according to the coroner's report.

Davey "failed to follow the manufacturer's recommended lubrication maintenance schedule" for the aerial (boom) device and did not "conduct critical component inspections" of the boom in a timely fashion as recommended even though it was operated in harsh conditions, said the Cal-OSHA citations.

The aerial truck was also not "grounded" or insulated from the voltage lines in the area and did not have an "insulated bucket liner, the citations state.

Amezcua is survived by a wife and son.

Molina

Continued from page 1A

SUV, rolling it over several times, while attempting to pass slower traffic by driving on the northbound shoulder of the highway.

On Tuesday, Gary Thelander, a county deputy district attorney, asked the judge to consider prison for Molina, saying the defendant needed to be held accountable for the choices he made which killed his daughter.

"He took it upon himself to try to capture the person he believed stole his motorcycle," Thelander said.

According to defense attorney Thomas Worthington, Molina's judgment that day had been severely affected by a blow he suffered after being knocked to the ground by the truck. Molina had stated, court documents show, that he had been trying to take down the truck's license plate number when he was hit.

Richard Lee, an investigator for the defense attorney, told the judge that a witness described Molina flying high in the air before falling hard to the ground. In speaking with Molina, Lee said, he recalled being very disoriented and experiencing blackouts. He said there was consistency in Molina's and his wife's statements that the defendant finally realized the danger he'd put everyone in when he heard the screams of his children to slow down. Lee said they stated that Molina was getting off the freeway when he hit the brakes to avoid slamming into a car in front of him,



Maria Molina, left, speaks about the positive traits of her husband, Luis Molina, bottom left, during his sentencing Tuesday. CONNER JAY/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

losing control of the SUV.

"But at that same time, when I was waking up something jammed and I lost control," Molina said during his statement in court. "People say that I snapped. Some of the people were saying that I went crazy ... The truth is I went insane, your honor. I had no idea what was going on."

Elaine Finnberg, a licensed clinical psychologist, said in evaluating the events that day, she determined that the head injury Molina received severely impaired his judgment.

Maria Molina also spoke in court Tuesday, requesting leniency for her husband. Maria Molina said her spouse is a responsible person and father who cares deeply for

his children. She also told the judge her husband had realized how dangerous his actions were in pursuing the truck and was trying to exit the freeway shortly before the crash occurred. Maria Molina said her husband had told her he was going to stop driving and have her take over the wheel.

"That's why I know he was conscious," she said in Spanish. "I was there. I lived it ... That's why I support him 100 percent. He is not the person described in the news. Only I know. He's a good man. He's a human being with feelings."

Digest

Continued from page 3A

Salinas PD ordered to hand over report

SANTA CRUZ — A judge Tuesday ordered Salinas police to hand over a report about an unsolved shooting, saying the man shot in Salinas was stabbed in Watsonville a month later, and the report might be relevant to the case.

The order by Judge Paul Burdick came after defense attorney Kristin Carter said Salinas police had not been cooperative in providing information to her that might help her defend her client, Ricardo Jimenez Rodriguez.

Rodriguez, 25, was arrested Oct. 29, 2010, after he and another man allegedly stabbed a man more than 10 times a few days earlier, on Quinn Avenue in Watsonville.

Rodriguez was arrested after police searched his Rodriguez Street home. The attack was gang-related.

On Tuesday, Burdick ordered a representative of the city of Salinas to hand over a copy of the police report under seal. He said he would read it to determine whether it should be given to attorneys. Salinas claims the records are privileged.

Rodriguez is out of custody. He has been charged with attempted murder, assault and gang participation. He is due back in court March 13 when Burdick will rule on the police report.



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