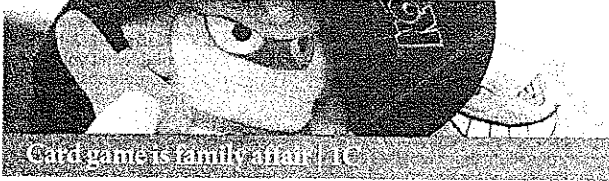


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Arson verdict: Guilty



Photos by Emily Saunders Forsyth County News

Pam Graf watches jurors leave a courtroom during her arson trial at the Forsyth County Courthouse. On Friday evening, the jury returned a guilty verdict on all counts.

Sentencing is set for May 26

By Julie Arrington
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A jury confirmed late Friday what authorities suspected all along — a January 2009 house fire near Lake Lanier was arson.

After about three hours of deliberations, jurors found Pamela Morrow Graf, 48, guilty on one count each of first-degree arson and possession of cocaine and marijuana.

Graf, who did not testify in her defense, will remain in custody at the Forsyth County Detention Center until her sentencing May 26.

Forsyth County Superior Court Chief Judge Jeffrey S. Bagley granted a request from Graf's attorney, Parker McFarland, to delay sentencing until her father and mother, who were out of town, could be present.

Graf's home at 8075 Lanier Drive, near Lake Lanier in northeastern Forsyth, burned to the ground in the early morning hours of Jan. 18, 2009.

The divorced mother of three had told authorities she and her ex-boyfriend, Steven Edward Strobel, were in Washington, D.C., that



Chief Assistant District Attorney Sandy Partridge questions a witness during the trial, which lasted all week. Below, Graf and her attorney, Parker McFarland, look over evidence.



weekend for the presidential inauguration.

Graf also claimed that she was the victim of a hate crime and a racial slur and phrase were spray-painted on a fence along her prop-

erty because of her support of Barack Obama.

Strobel was convicted April 22 of first-degree arson for his role in the incident. As part of his sentence, he must serve 10 years in prison.

The trial, which lasted all week, concluded with closing arguments Friday afternoon.

Chief Assistant District Attorney Sandy Partridge told the jury that Graf burned her house down for drugs and money.

"She had a love affair with a

See ARSON | 3A

ARSON

little white powder called cocaine and that is one expensive love affair to keep up with," Partridge said.

Referring to testimony by a claim representative from State Farm Insurance, Partridge said Graf stood to receive \$166,000 to \$267,000 if she chose not to rebuild the house.

She also reminded the jurors of testimony that some of Graf's jewelry and other belongings found during the arson

investigation were those the defendant had reported stolen in years past and for which her insurer had paid her thousands of dollars.

"The evidence in this case is overwhelming, overwhelming," Partridge said. "She absolutely did this."

Partridge also said if the fire had not been intentional then somehow it must have also "miraculously" shot a racially charged message in red spray paint across Graf's neighbor's fence.

McFarland, the court-appointed attorney whose strategy Graf had questioned in court a day earlier, argued that the prose-

cution failed to provide sufficient evidence to support its case.

"The state did not exclude all reasonable natural or accidental causes (of the fire)," said McFarland, whose role was upheld Thursday by Bagley.

McFarland pointed out that witnesses who testified for the state as experts in fire investigation weren't qualified to eliminate electrical problems that could have caused the blaze.

He also questioned why the state didn't call as a witness the electrical engineer who participated in investigating the origin

and cause of the fire.

"We didn't hear anybody say, 'I checked all the electrical receptacles,'" McFarland said. "Makes you wonder if anybody looked, doesn't it?"

While Graf's natural gas appliances were supposedly checked by the engineer, McFarland noted that man was not qualified to rule them out.

Her gas lines were checked only for leaks from the outside of the house up to the meter, not inside the home.

McFarland also questioned whether the drugs

found in Graf's possession had been tampered with, maintaining that the state failed to prove the chain of custody had not been broken.

He said there were no witnesses or cell phone records that put Graf in her house at the time of the blaze.

Evidence presented during the trial included Graf's personal items, such as baby blankets, christening gowns, photo albums, clothing and cards her children had made.

Witnesses for the state testified they found the

items in two storage units Strobel rented for Graf as well as at his house in Winder. They said they also found Graf's bed, tables and other furnishings.

Two of Graf's three children testified that a few days after the fire she gave them garbage bags that included keepsakes from their childhood.

Partridge said the items Graf removed from her house were interesting because "this is one of the most selfish human beings you will ever have contact with."