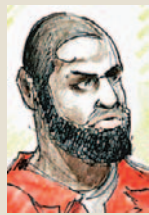


# 'Silent Night' stirs memories



**LIVING:** Former G.I. remembers party for orphans in town where carol was born. **Page 1E**

# Police: Terror plot foiled



**NATION/WORLD:** Authorities arrest muslim convert in Illinois for allegedly scheming grenade attack at mall. **Page 1B**

# Guide to electronics

**LIVING:** What to look for when buying latest tech gadgets. **Page 8E**



Today's forecast/6B  
Mostly cloudy, an afternoon shower

**59** high  
**47** low



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## COURTS

# DEFENSE LAWYER OFTEN REPRESENTS UNDERDOGS

*Worthington known for taking on sensational crime cases*

By **CHRISTOPHER ORTIZ**  
The Salinas Californian

Some might call criminal defense attorney Thomas Worthington the patron saint of lost causes.

Time and again, people accused of committing Monterey County's most sensational crimes turn to Worthington as they face the prospect of decades — or even life — behind bars.

The Salinas-based lawyer, a self-described "champion of the underdog," has handled about 10,000 criminal cases over more than 35 years of legal practice. He typically has about 100 cases open at any given time.

Some of his more sensational clients include the following:

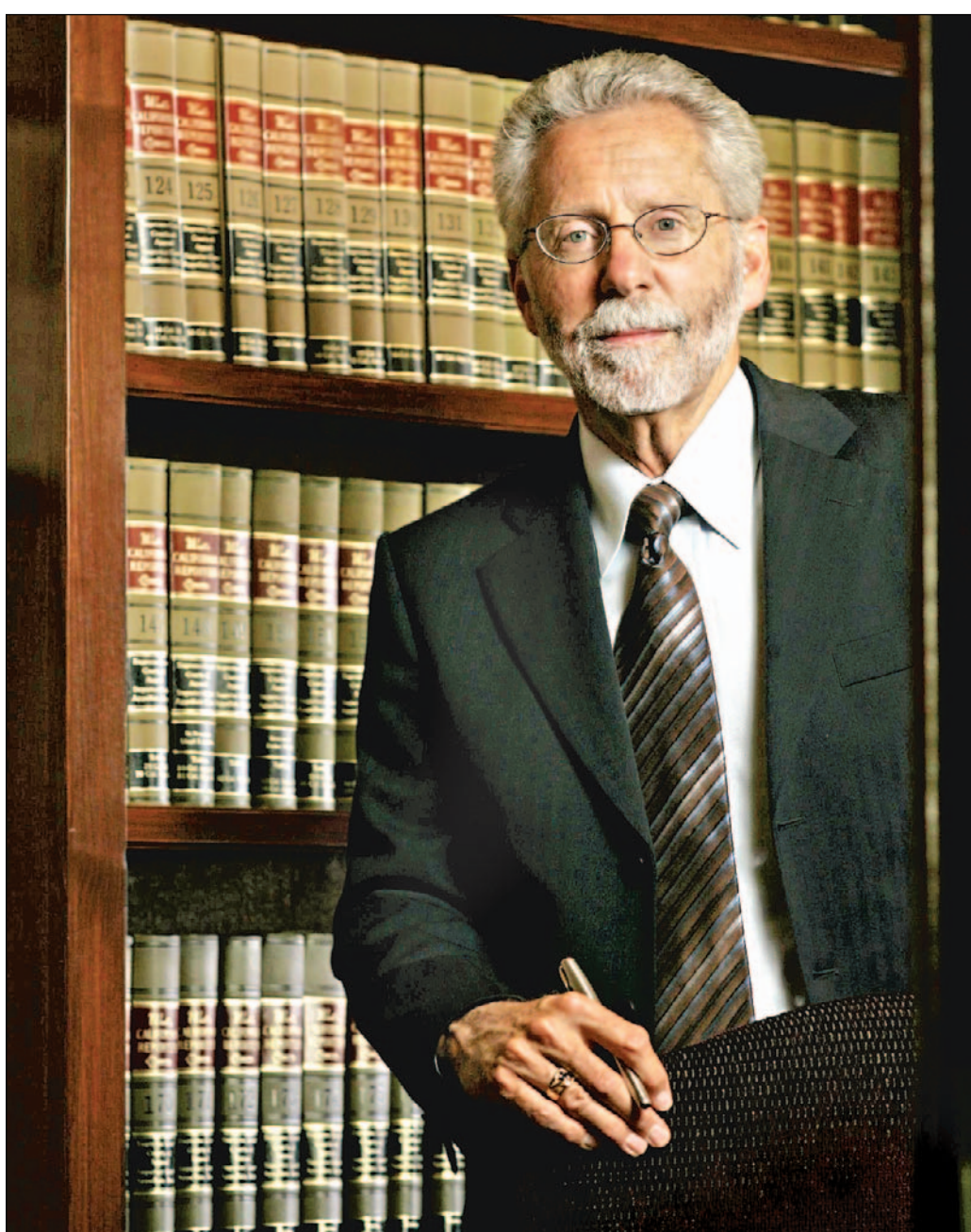
- A beautician accused of injecting cooking oil into the body of a customer who was seeking beauty enhancements to her buttocks.

- A father who provided his teenage daughter with alcohol before she got drunk and crashed a sport utility vehicle, killing two people near Lake San Antonio.

- A young woman who took part in the slaying of a former police officer's son, whose body was found buried in two plastic bins.

Worthington's latest notorious client: Maria Rodriguez of Soledad, accused of fatally stabbing her husband after learning he was already married to another woman. Her preliminary hearing is Thursday.

"I can't say I look for the high-profile cases. I take cases that come to me," Worthington said during an interview at his Salinas office in July. "And I certainly never reject any of the dif-



SCOTT MACDONALD/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Salinas attorney Thomas Worthington is pictured Thursday at his Alisal Street office.

ficult ones, no matter how unpopular. In fact, those are some of the ones I feel I want to put the most effort into."

Worthington said most of his clients come to him based on his reputation for handling serious cases. He said he does often take pro bono cases.

See **LAWYER**, Page 3A

### THOMAS WORTHINGTON

- **AGE:** 62
- **EDUCATION:** Graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1966. Earned law degree from Hastings College in San Francisco in 1969.
- **JOB:** Salinas private defense attorney
- **PERSONAL:** Karen, wife of 26 years. Two sons, 32 and 22, and one daughter, 26.
- **AWARDS:** Listed in "The Best Lawyers in America," a peer review group, since 1988.

## PUBLIC SAFETY

# Van, SUV crash injures several

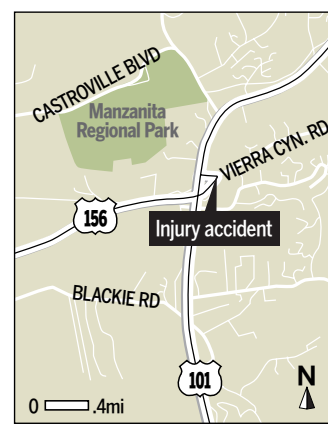
*Shuttle involved in accident, woman flown to hospital*

By **VICTOR CALDERON**  
The Salinas Californian

A van that shuttles travelers between Monterey County and two Bay Area airports crashed Friday afternoon in Prunedale, leaving several people injured, the North County Fire Department said.

The wreck happened about 4:30 p.m. at Highway 156 and Vierra Canyon Road, close to the Chevron station where passengers are dropped off and picked up.

The California Highway Patrol reported that the van was involved in a crash with a sport utility vehicle. East-



RYAN GLENN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

bound traffic was diverted or delayed during much of the evening commute, the CHP said.

The shuttle van was left partially hanging over an embankment, said North County Fire Capt. Humberto Arista, and had to be secured with chains while passengers inside were res-

See **CRASHES**, Page 4A

## ELSEWHERE IN THE NEWS

### WAR IN IRAQ

#### Poll: U.S. can't win war

Just 9 percent of Americans expect the War in Iraq to end in clear-cut victory, compared with 87 percent who expect some sort of compromise. **Page 1B**

### SPORTS

#### Lebanese PM speaks

Prime Minister Fuad Saniora accused Hezbollah's leader Friday of threatening a coup. **Page 1B**

#### Europe winter in trouble

Green fields, not white slopes, have greeted visitors to some of Europe's most popular ski resorts as December began with remarkably little snow in the region. **Page 1B**

### SPORTS

#### 49ers to play Packers

Mike McCarthy readies Green Bay to take on San Francisco 49ers at Candlestick on Sunday. **Page 1C**



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

49ers quarterback Alex Smith is sacked last Sunday.

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## WEATHER

# Coast marred by big waves

*Some surfers, kayakers brave bad weather*

By **ROBERT SALONGA**  
The Salinas Californian

**PACIFIC GROVE** — Strong winds and high waves marred the Monterey Bay coastline Friday at the start of what forecasters anti-

## ONLINE

**WEATHER:** Follow this news topic at [www.thecalifornian.com](http://www.thecalifornian.com).

pate to be a weekend of dangerous conditions on California shores.

The National Weather Service reports that an intense storm system in the western Pacific Ocean has generated large surf and will continue

to do so at least until Sunday. The service predicts the region could see waves as high as 14 to 18 feet during the storm system's estimated peak today.

The public needs to be cautious and keep as far from the shore as possible, said Alex Peabody, an aquatic safety specialist with the State Parks Public Safety Division. Peabody said

See **WAVES**, Page 4A



RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Kayaker Adrian Van Fraassen rides the waves Friday afternoon at Spanish Bay. High Surf due to storm conditions brought surfers and kayakers out Friday.

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# LAWYER/ Few cases go to trial

From Page 1A

"It's the right thing to do a lot of the time," Worthington said. "Those cases have a lot of merit."

The Southern California native earned his law degree in 1969 from Hastings Law School in San Francisco. Wanting to work in a small community, he found his first job as an attorney in Salinas in 1970. He began his own practice a year later and has worked in criminal law exclusively since 1974. His office, The Worthington Law Center, is in a home built after the turn of the century on the 200 block of Alisal Street, just west of the county courthouse. He works in a room with one wall packed nearly floor to ceiling with legal journals and other walls adorned with peer-recognition awards.

## Challenge inspires tenacity

Worthington, a scholarly man who bears some resemblance to CNN's Wolf Blitzer, said he made a career out of criminal defense work in part because of his fundamental belief that the accused need a strong ally within the criminal justice system.

"I just believe that people that are charged with crimes, though very unpopular, they need someone representing them who is as good as the prosecutor and the police going after them," said the lawyer, who said he works, on average, 60 hours a week.

He said the deck is stacked against his clients, a fact that inspired him to be a tenacious lawyer.

Worthington also said he enjoys a stimulating argument, and the courtroom is fertile ground.

"I've always had a gift of gab," he said. "I always like to debate and try to persuade people to my point of view."

In the courtroom, Worthington is described as well-prepared, assertive in his questioning and realistic.

Smartly dressed — often in a double-breasted suit — and distinctive with a head of salt-and-pepper hair, he is quick with his questions and hardly timid about approaching a witness or the jury box.

Worthington said he's often asked how he can represent someone he knows is guilty.

"My answer now is: After all these years, those are the easy ones," he said. "The hard ones are when they are innocent."

## 'Sleepless nights'

Defending someone he knows is accused of something they didn't do raises both the stakes and the personal strain, Worthington said.

"Those are sleepless

nights," he said.

But after all these years, Worthington said, he's never had an innocent client convicted. Also, he said, he has helped acquit some clients whose level of involvement in a crime was in doubt.

Of the thousands of cases he has been involved in, the most rewarding, Worthington said, was that of a Vietnamese refugee accused of kidnapping.

About eight years after the end of the Vietnam War, Steve Ngo sent his children to this country in hopes of joining them. When he arrived, he took his three children from a foster home in Georgia and brought them to Monterey County, unknowingly violating a placement order. He was arrested by the FBI on kidnapping charges.

Worthington, who represented Ngo, got the charges dropped and kept Ngo from being deported.

## Few cases go to trial

He said only about 10 percent of his cases go to trial while the rest are settled out of court.

Defense work, he said, is about more than establishing whether a defendant committed a crime. It often focuses more on a defendant's level of involvement in a misdeed, Worthington said, particularly when more than one person is accused.

"It's almost a gray area. It isn't a question of did you or didn't do it," he said. "It feels the best to get an acquittal when there is a lot of doubt whether the person did the crime at all."

Worthington said one of his roles as a defense lawyer is to ensure that police and the district attorney do their work well. He said it's their job to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

Defense attorney Eugene Martinez agreed, calling Worthington meticulous in his preparation for cases.

"He has a reputation of making prosecutors work hard to prove their case," Martinez said.

## An overloaded system

Worthington said an overburdened criminal justice system makes fairness for defendants more difficult to achieve.

"There is just too much pressure, too many cases," Worthington said. "It's too hard to get justice. It's too hard to get district attorneys and judges to slow down and give some real consideration to each case."

On the other hand, he said, many of Worthington's cases are resolved through plea bargains to help keep the wheels of criminal justice turning.

## AT A GLANCE

A sampling of high-profile defendants whom Thomas Worthington has represented and the outcomes of their cases:

### Martha Mata Vasquez



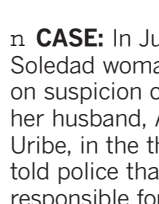
Martha Vasquez

**n CASE:** Earlier this year, Vasquez, a Salinas beautician, was accused of injecting clients with corn oil, claiming it was a beauty treatment. One of her clients, Maria Olivia Aguirre-Castillo, 46, of Castroville, died after prosecutors say Vasquez injected corn oil into her buttocks.

**n CHARGES:** Second-degree murder, four counts of grand theft under false pretense and two counts of practicing medicine without a license. She was facing a maximum sentence of 15 years to life in prison.

**n OUTCOME:** In October, in a deal with prosecutors, Vasquez pleaded no contest to a reduced charge of involuntary manslaughter and to charges of practicing medicine without a license and fraud in exchange for 15 years in prison.

### Maria Rodriguez



Maria Rodriguez

**n CASE:** In July, Rodriguez, a Soledad woman, was arrested on suspicion of fatally stabbing her husband, Adolfo Coronel Uribe, in the throat. She had told police that intruders were responsible for Uribe's death.

**n CHARGE:** Murder. She was facing a maximum sentence of 15 years to life in prison.

District Attorney Dean Flippo, who has known Worthington for 30 years, said he remembers appearing in court against him as a deputy district attorney.

"He's a formidable opponent," Flippo said. "His clients will be well served by him. He's realistic; he will do what is necessary to serve his clients' interests."

He said one of Worthington's strengths is his knack for evaluating a case and determining what's best for his client, whether it's going to trial or brokering a deal with prosecutors.

Flippo said his office wins between 85 and 90 percent of its cases, so a victory for the defense isn't necessarily an acquittal — it could mean reaching a favorable plea agreement or receiving a reduction in charges. "That doesn't mean you win," Flippo said.



Maria Rodriguez

**n OUTCOME:** She is scheduled for a second preliminary hearing on the charges Thursday.

### Cain Beltran



Cain Beltran

**n CASE:** In 2004, Beltran, a 19-year-old Salinas man, was arrested in the stabbing death of Brenden Tsukimura, 18, at a Prunedale Taco Bell during a botched robbery. He left him to die in a restaurant refrigerator.

**n CHARGE:** Felony murder

**n OUTCOME:** In November 2005, Beltran was sentenced to life in prison without parole after pleading guilty to the murder charge.

### Jonathan Boyer



Jonathan Boyer

**n CASE:** In 2002, Boyer, a former Tour de France cyclist, was accused of molesting a 16-year-old girl over the course of several years.

**n CHARGES:** 10 felony counts of child molestation. He faced a maximum sentence of 80 years in prison.

**n OUTCOME:** After pleading guilty, Boyer was sentenced to one year in jail and probation for five years.

Jonathan Boyer

After pleading guilty, Boyer was sentenced to one year in jail and probation for five years.

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RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Dennis McCormick, right, sits in court with his attorney Thomas Worthington in Nov. 2005. McCormick was sentenced for providing his daughter with alcohol before she caused a car crash.

he enjoys skiing, swimming, traveling and reading, especially about World War II and one of its heroes — Winston Churchill.

It's the former British prime minister's perseverance Worthington admires most.

"He would never give up," he said of Churchill. "I have found many, many times that sometimes there seems to be no hope, but we keep fighting. He said, 'We'll fight on the beaches, we'll fight on the streets, we'll fight in the fields, we will never surrender.' That is how I feel about some of the cases I handle. No matter how unpopular, how difficult, you can't give up."

Contact Christopher Ortiz at [chrisortiz@thecalifornian.com](mailto:chrisortiz@thecalifornian.com).

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