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Guilty plea expected in embezzlement

'Remorseful' woman admits trying to buy love.

By **LARRY WELBORN**

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She was recently divorced, alone and behind on the mortgage.

And she had a \$40,000-a-year job as an accountant.

"I started to embezzle," Carolyn Gillette Sommerfeld said in a jailhouse interview. "I took something that didn't belong to me. It was stupid, and it was wrong."

First, she took a little money to cover her house payments. Then she took a little more and gave it to a singer in a country band.

Then, she says, she took a lot more and gave it the band's manager, Paul A. Graham, when he started showing interest in her.

Then she says she took a whole lot more money and gave it to Graham, whom she eventually started calling her boyfriend, and his mother.

She says she paid for gambling trips and a vacation in Hawaii.

And she leased herself expensive cars.

Eventually, she stole more than \$1.1 million from **Triton Chandeliers** of Santa Ana.

Now she is facing prison.

Sommerfeld, 47, of Huntington Beach is expected to plead guilty Monday to fraud, forgery and embezzlement. She will also admit to several penalty enhancements.

Superior Court Judge Gary S. Paer is expected to sentence her to anywhere from six years, four months, to a maximum of 11 years in prison.

Deputy Public Defender Mark Bruce, Sommerfeld's lawyer, said Friday that he will argue for the lower term. Anything more, he said, would be overkill.

"It's a very sad case," Bruce said. "She is truly remorseful for what she's done."

Many other embezzlers are sentenced to less time for stealing more money, he said.

"I am so ashamed," Sommerfeld said recently, dressed in an Orange County Jail jumpsuit and talking by phone on the other side of a glass partition. "If I could take it back, I would do it in a heartbeat."

The embezzling was easy, she said. Triton Chandeliers gave her the signature stamps and blank checks to pay for supplies.

She says she spent some of the stolen money on herself but gave most of it away, seeking love and attention.

Her new friends connected to the country band Killin' Time came to believe she had a trust fund from the **Gillette** razor company.

"That was what I told them," Sommerfeld acknowledged. But she says her new friends knew they were benefiting from embezzled money.

Not true, said Cosmo A. Taormina, a Whittier lawyer who represented Paul Graham and his mother, Frances, in a civil suit filed by Triton

Chandeliers. Graham and his mother were subsequently dismissed from the suit. In a deposition for the civil case, Graham said he did not know the money was stolen, and prosecutors said there was no evidence otherwise.

"(Sommerfeld) was actually trying to buy her way into the country music scene, and Paul was a part of that scene," Taormina said. "He had no clue that the money was stolen."

Sommerfeld was "a very lonely lady who was trying to buy herself friends with someone else's money," Taormina said.

Graham paid attention to Sommerfeld, but he never felt they were in a romance, Taormina said. Instead, Graham felt that he was being paid to be the manager of Killin' Time, by Sommerfeld, who was acting as the band's sponsor.

For her part, Sommerfeld insists she wanted only to be loved. But she says the more money she gave away, the more money Graham demanded.

She also says she feels they were couple even though they never slept together. She says she gave him money to gamble and paid for his apartment.

Once the money was gone, he was gone, she said.

"How pathetic is it to feel you have to pay someone money to pay attention to you?" she said. "How do I feel about all of this now? Horrible. Ashamed. Pathetic."

Sommerfeld said she has battled extremely low self-esteem since childhood, when she was molested by a relative. She said she married young primarily to get out of the family home.

When that marriage fell apart after 19 years, so did her life, Sommerfeld said.

Sommerfeld's behavior is classic for someone with low self-esteem, said Dr. Gustavo Alva, a Costa Mesa psychiatrist who is not involved in the case and was contacted by The Orange County Register to review her case.

When Sommerfeld became lonely after her divorce following a childhood of abuse, she likely developed a strong desire to be accepted, loved and cared for, Alva said this week.

"So it's no big surprise that when she is placed in a position of overseeing a great deal of money, she takes advantage of the situation," Alva said. "Not so much for monetary gain, but for emotional gain."

"She was getting the affection she craved, but she misconstrues this affection for love," Alva said.

However, none of those motivations is a legal defense against the charges, Alva said.

Nor is any of them a reason to feel sorry for Sommerfeld, said Irvine attorney Richard Millar, who obtained a civil judgment against Sommerfeld when he sued on behalf of Triton Chandeliers.

The embezzlement was planned and sophisticated, and started long before she started supporting the country band and its manager, Millar said.

Sommerfeld bled the company for several years, sending it to the brink of bankruptcy, threatening the jobs of dozens of employees, Millar said.

"It was very tight for them for a long time," Millar said about Triton Chandeliers. "It was devastating financially and emotionally because they put such trust in her."

"It's very difficult when you trust in someone for so many years, and first you find out they were stealing from you," Millar said. "And then when you find out how much she stole. It was overwhelming."

Even though he won the civil suit, Millar does not expect to get any more restitution from Sommerfeld. He said she eventually lost her house and filed for bankruptcy.

Rick Cooley, owner of Triton Chandeliers, wouldn't talk about the loss of money or the loss of trust.

"I've gotten over it, and I am pushing forward," was all he would say.

But Sommerfeld does have her supporters.

She joined the Presbyterian Church of the Covenant in Costa Mesa after the embezzlement was discovered, and she immediately told the pastors and her deacon what had happened.

"She was very remorseful, very frank about it, and she wanted me to know what she had done so I would best know how to pray for her," said Karen Byrne, her deacon.

"She is a very loving person and a good mother. She has awesome kids," Byrne said. "I think she just got caught up in something she didn't know how to get out of."

John Sommerfeld, her 20-year-old son, said his mom has always been there for him, always helped with his homework and encouraged him to do well in school.

He recently was accepted to the University of Alaska, in part because of his mother's support.

"I realize that \$1.1 million is a lot of money," the son said. "I can't expect that she won't go to prison,"

"But I want people to know that my mom is a good person and a good mom.

"She was just lonely."