

Former school district employee pleads no contest to embezzlement, forgery

By Samantha Yale/Staff Writer

A former business manager for the Los Olivos School District pleaded no contest Thursday morning in Santa Barbara County Superior Court in Santa Maria to grand theft by embezzlement and forgery.

Gina Gandall, 43, of Los Alamos, took about \$85,000 from the district, said Senior Deputy District Attorney Jerry Lulejian, the prosecutor on the case.

He said Gandall agreed as part of the plea deal to spend 10 years on probation for the crime - which he said is a long probation sentence - but will not spend time in state prison. Gandall will also be required to pay restitution to the school, and could spend up to a year in county jail.

"I don't think she would have been a state prison candidate anyway for the most part," Lulejian said. He explained that Gandall had no previous criminal record, and had complimentary letters written on her behalf.

Gandall is due back in court for sentencing June 6.

She was charged Feb. 28 by the Santa Barbara County District Attorney's Office with four felony counts of grand theft by embezzlement, alleged to have happened between Feb. 1, 2003 and Sept. 30, 2006. She was also accused of one felony count of forgery of a document, alleged to have taken place between Feb. 1, 2003 and Dec. 31, 2006.

Laura Cleaves, senior criminal investigator for the District Attorney's Office, has said that Gandall was the keeper of checkbooks and records for the district, and handled payroll. Cleaves said the forgery charge stemmed from checks forged with the signature of Los Olivos School District superintendent and principal, Anjanette Winckler.

Gandall has not been employed by the school district this year, Winckler has said.

She said Kelly O'Neill currently serves as business manager for the district.

The district has implemented a system of more checks and balances as a precaution, she said.

Winckler said she's pleased Gandall will be paying back the embezzled funds to the district.

"I'm just glad it's over and behind us, and we can just concentrate on the students now," she said.

Gandall's attorney, Santa Ynez-based Kay Kuns, declined to discuss the case in detail Thursday, but said she will be happy to talk about the case after sentencing.

"I honestly believe that the best place to resolve criminal matters is within the judicial forum," she said.

Kuns said that Gandall has a lot of support behind her.

Gandall family members declined to comment Thursday.

Lulejian said it's important to set up a system in which employees check each other's work to avoid embezzlement situations.

“You can never trust one person to do the right thing. It's just not a good idea, it's not a good practice,” he said.

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