

Prosecutor with grit knows the turf as she takes on the toughest cases in town

# GANG B U S T E R



Fort Worth Star-Telegram / JERRY W. HOEFER

Prosecutor Terri Moore often goes to crime scenes to get a better understanding of those she will face in court.

BY THOMAS KOROSEK  
Fort Worth Star-Telegram

**F**ORT WORTH — The language bouncing around the stark office sounds like a radio tuned to a rap station.

Tarrant County prosecutor Terri Moore is talking to a witness, preparing him on the testimony he is about to give in a tense, gang-related murder trial.

“When you’ve been bad, you’ve been bad,” Moore tells the skinny 49-year-old as the conversation somersaults from the soul food at Drake’s Cafeteria to his criminal

record, which fills the screen of Moore’s desktop computer. His 11 theft convictions — dating back to 1977 — are something the defense is certain to try to attack during his turn on the stand, she says.

“This lawyer is going to go through your record,” Moore tells her witness, stopping to fish a low-tar cigarette from her Louis

Vuitton bag. “Just own up to it, you-know-what-I-mean.”

The man’s testimony will link the young gang member on trial to a borrowed car seen leaving the scene of a 1992 robbery-murder.

Her witness may be “dirty,” she says later, but compared with the 17-year-old Crips gang member she is prosecuting on capital

murder charges, he’s a model citizen.

In the gritty calculus used to put together her case, Moore will forge temporary alliances with a cast of witnesses with unsavory pasts — some who will arrive in court from jail, some who will fear for their lives, and one who will turn up

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# Moore

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dead in what Moore suspects was an act of retaliation.

Her affinity for the work has made the 35-year-old prosecutor a fast-rising star in the Tarrant County district attorney's office, her colleagues say.

Her habit of winning the tough-to-prove "ghetto murders" and gang cases, her willingness to comb through the city's roughest neighborhoods for witnesses and her blend of street smarts and courtroom talent have propelled her, in just six years, from a legal novice to one of the top trial attorneys in the 100-lawyer office.

To watch Moore take three young gang members to court in the fatal shooting of restaurant owner Yousef Mirzadeh during a closing-time robbery is to watch a woman whose brash personality and enormous drive make her a courtroom force — and a known quantity among the gangs on Tarrant County's meanest streets.

It also offers a glimpse into the world of '90s-style prosecution of crime committed by gangs, where the language is raw, an understanding of the gangster subculture a must, and the level of violence so high that the safety of witnesses is a genuine concern.

## A courtroom natural

In November 1991, as drive-by shootings and other signs of gang violence began appearing in Fort Worth, the district attorney's office formed a three-lawyer team to take on the problem.

"To head it, we needed someone who was aggressive and willing to be persistent," said Alan Levy, chief of the criminal section. "Terri seemed to be a natural."

Arriving in the office in 1987, a few months out of the South Texas College of Law in Houston, Moore moved quickly up the ranks.

"It wasn't hard to spot early on that she's an outstanding trial lawyer," Levy said. "Here she was, a brand new lawyer, taking the marginal cases, the ones everyone else was running away from. She just wanted to be there."

By 1990, Moore was promoted to chief of a three-lawyer team in felony court, then to head of the gang unit.

She was promoted again in January 1993 to deputy chief of the criminal section, where she remains. She

is in charge of the gang unit, the juvenile section and four felony courts — 20 lawyers in all.

Still drawn more to gang-related crimes than anything else, Moore took eight such cases to trial in 1992, including the heavily publicized thrill-killing of Bedford resident Mae Goto by Charles Lamont Duncan, a 17-year-old member of the Hoova Crips.

Duncan, who described killing as "the ultimate rush," was convicted of capital murder and given an automatic life sentence.

Moore also oversaw the investigation of the November double slaying of college coeds Channing Freelove and Melanie Golchert, who authorities allege were killed by two Crips in a drug rip-off.

In the courtroom, Moore strikes other lawyers as a natural, someone completely at ease in front of a jury.

"When she talks to people, there's no barrier there," said Richard Alpert, who heads the misdemeanor section and who worked with Moore when she worked her first case.

She can talk streetwise, good ole gal or more formal English — and switch between them in a way that is perfectly honest, Alpert said.

Described by Levy as "no sorority girl," other co-workers say that she can be loud, profane, shockingly candid and a practical joker around the office.

"How many swear words have I heard her string together?" said prosecutor Ken Mullin, stopping for a silent count. "I think nine — nine or 10."

Many prosecutors will accent their concern for crime victims in jury arguments, but acknowledge in real life that they keep their emotional distance.

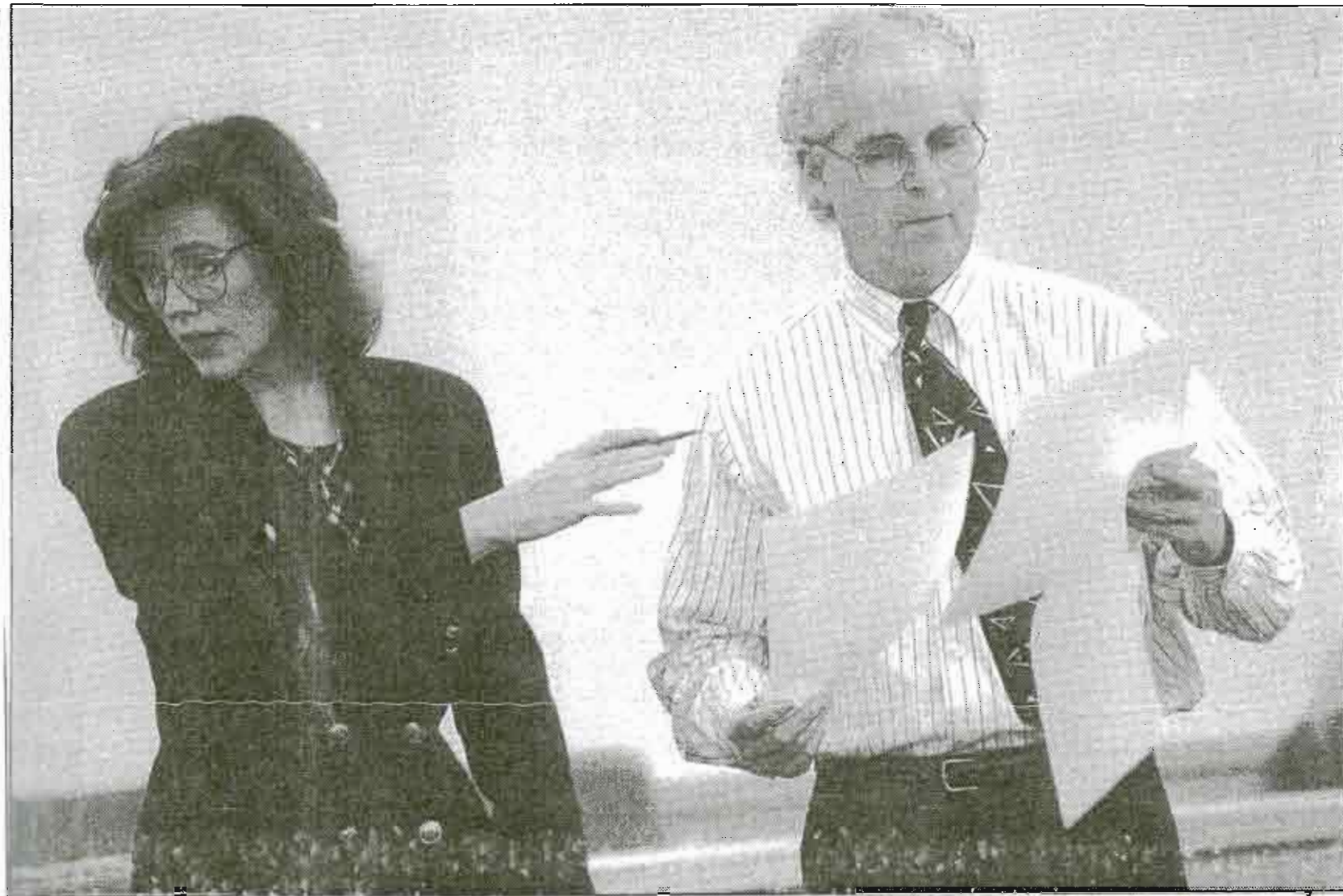
More often than not, Moore becomes genuinely attached to the families and friends of the victims at the center of her cases, family members and victims say.

"She obviously cares and the jury can see it," said Charles Brandenburg, head of the economic crimes unit, who worked with Moore on some of her first felony cases.

Moore also "gets in the defendant's face," moving in close during the trial, making eye contact, and showing her anger and contempt, said gang unit prosecutor Renee Harris.

In the chauvinistic world of "gangs, guys and guns," where the word "woman" is used in a derogatory way, Moore's style often provokes strong reactions from the defendants, her colleagues say.

"Having a beautiful woman bring them down, they end up hating



Tarrant County prosecutor Terri Moore spars with defense attorney Jack Strickland about the charge to the jury in a recent murder trial

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in Judge Pete Perez's courtroom. Other lawyers say Moore is a natural, someone completely at ease in front of a jury.

her," Harris said.

One former defendant, Nolan Franklin, a convicted murderer brought back from jail for questioning last fall, told Moore how he often dreamed of putting his hands on her throat and strangling her, Harris recalled.

By the end of three trials, there were more than a few glaring stares across the courtroom from the three young men Moore and Harris sought to convict in the killing of restaurant owner Mirzadeh as he closed up the Monte Carlo Sea & Grill in Fort Worth.

From the Aug. 15, 1992, slaying through the last round in court, Moore and the three members of the Lake Como-based Crips subset known as the Black Villain Assassins would all be taking the case very personally.

## Working the streets

The crime was as simple as it was senseless.

Mirzadeh and a waiter were clos-

ing the Hulen Street restaurant about 12:15 a.m. when three masked gunmen confronted them near the back door.

The intruders beat Mirzadeh and the waiter, forcing them to the floor and ordering them to give the assailants their money and directions to the floor safe.

The gunmen then pushed the victims into the dining room, where Mirzadeh broke and ran through a fire door. One of the gunmen, armed with a chrome-finished .45-caliber automatic, followed Mirzadeh outside and shot at him, the waiter told authorities.

The other two intruders followed and all three were locked out of the restaurant when the fire door shut behind him.

Mirzadeh — an Iranian immigrant, successful restaurateur and father of two young children — was found outside, shot five times by bullets from two guns.

Working from a tip, police soon

had in custody 21-year-old Marlon Crosby, who had previously served about two years of a 12-year sentence for burglary and drug dealing; his brother Andre Crosby, then 17; and Ven Eric Bridgewater, a 16-year-old with a juvenile record for car theft. They were charged with capital murder in Mirzadeh's death.

Authorities had "probable cause" to arrest the three from Lake Como. Moore explained later. But turning the case into one that could stand up in court took much more.

The central problem for the prosecution, Moore explained, was that the chief tipster in the case, Marlon Crosby's mother-in-law, got her information from her daughter. Such secondhand knowledge is considered hearsay and can't be admitted as evidence.

The daughter, meanwhile, could not be forced to testify against her husband.

"You have something this horrible and you have virtually nothing

you can use in court," Moore recalled. "That's when you have to get out there and dig it out."

Over the next several months, Moore, Harris and investigator Bill Cole combed through Como for witnesses. They interviewed almost 100 people.

With the help of various law enforcement agencies, they set out looking for the car seen leaving the crime scene, described only as a burgundy with a burned-out right tail light.

That November, in a major break in the case, they found the car — and a .22-caliber shell casing in the back seat that precisely matched a casing found at the Monte Carlo Sea & Grill.

The car's owner told Moore that he saw Marlon Crosby, who had borrowed the car at the time of the crime, take a .45-caliber pistol out of the glove compartment and hand an assault-style .22-caliber gun to

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# Moore

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Bridgewater when they returned the car.

Other witnesses interviewed in the jail and elsewhere recounted how Marlon Crosby and Bridgewater had boasted of the crime — as well as about several other west Fort Worth restaurant robberies and department store burglaries that summer.

"Without her tenacity, that case never would have been made," recalled defense attorney John Linebarger, a friend of the Mirzadeh family. "I called the witnesses they turned up their 'rogues' gallery,' but in cases like that you don't have preachers and Sunday school teachers close to the crime."

Judy Mirzadeh, the victim's sister-in-law, said that Moore's doggedness was matched only by her compassion. While others were referring to Yousef Mirzadeh as "the dead guy," Moore would listen to Judy Mirzadeh for hours on the phone, the sister-in-law said. "On the other end I could hear her sobbing," Mirzadeh said.

Bringing the first case against the three men to court in February 1993, Moore and Harris took Bridgewater to trial for the August 1992, robbery of Ricks on the Bricks, a Camp Bowie Boulevard bar. Two waitresses were beaten and thrown into a trash bin at closing time.

Bridgewater, who was certified to stand trial as an adult, was convicted on the basis of a fingerprint found at the scene.

In the trial's punishment phase, the youth's attorney asked for leniency, citing the young man's jailed father and hard-working single mother.

Moore, who asked the jury for a life sentence, shot back in her closing: "I am truly sorry that he has a rotten and no-good father who has never contributed one ounce of positiveness in his life. But are we just going to take everybody that had a bad set of circumstances in their life and say, 'It's OK if you beat two women or do whatever you see fit,' and just come in and bring your good mama and bring your bad daddy and we'll let you slide?"

Bridgewater got 29 years.

In October, Moore and Harris brought Marlon Crosby to trial on capital murder charges in the Monte Carlo restaurant robbery — with no request for the death penalty — and rolled out their collection of shady

witnesses in Criminal District Court No. 2.

Pressure on witnesses from Crosby's gang associates, pressure to not testify, was so intense that Judge Lee Ann Dauphinot locked several spectators up for contempt of court when it appeared that they were intimidating witnesses. The judge and prosecutors said. The judge even put one witness in protective custody after he stepped down from the stand.

The trial, attorneys from both sides agreed, ended up turning on a botched attempt by a friend of Crosby's to provide him with an alibi.

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— Terri Moore

by's to provide him with an alibi.

But there also was the testimony of 19-year-old Elijah Ragland, Crosby's brother-in-law, who defense attorney Danny Burns later contended was the most damaging witnesses to his cause.

Ragland, who cut a deal with Moore that netted him eight months in a boot camp prison for a car theft and an aggravated assault, told of hearing Crosby and Bridgewater bragging about the crime.

The jury took less than 10 minutes to find Crosby guilty. The verdict triggered an automatic life sentence, requiring Crosby to serve a minimum of 35 years before becoming eligible for parole.

One day after the conviction, Moore completed a plea bargain with Andre Crosby, who pleaded guilty to aggravated robbery and was given 10 years' probation. In turn, he promised to testify against Bridgewater at his trial in the Monte Carlo slaying.

"Everybody said Andre was a good kid who took care of his grandmother and went to school and got led into it all by Marlon," Moore explained at the time. "He didn't fire any shots. And besides that, we didn't have much of case on him. He was so scared, he didn't flap his mouth to anyone."

Moore's sisters grill her for details about cases like the Monte Carlo killing, but they wish she had gone

into a safer branch of law — petroleum, real estate, something like that.

"She's the baby of the family, so you want to protect her," said Vivian Logan, an older sister. "But she hasn't had anything like a sheltered life."

The youngest of nine children raised in small-town Cleburne, Terri Hammond grew up in the company of boys, "throwing baseballs and footballs and getting my hair all in tangles."

Her father was a plumber; her mother raised the kids at home.

"She has the same disposition as our mother, who was a real spunky lady," Logan said.

In her late teens, she entertained thoughts of becoming a dental assistant or health-care worker.

All that changed when she met Carlos Moore, a longtime campaign organizer and confidant of former U.S. House Speaker Jim Wright.

The well-to-do and well-connected Moore, who had met her family through a Hammond brother who was active in union organizing, was 20 years older than Terri. She struck him as "smart and pretty and energetic, someone I just fell in love with," Moore recalled.

Terri went to work in Moore's office and learned about politics and campaigning. At his urging, she enrolled at Texas Christian University.

"Carlos expanded her world a lot," Logan recalled.

They married in 1981, the year she graduated.

Drawn to a legal career by close connection of law and politics, Moore quickly came to see herself more as a litigator than a book lawyer. Fresh out of law school, she went to work for Tarrant County District Attorney Tim Curry, whose office promised to give her more trial experience than any private firm.

"From the first DWI I had, I was gonna know more about my case than anybody else," said Moore.

"As a woman, you feel like you're starting out from behind the eight ball. You just have to be better."

Moore said that she decided to forgo a family in favor of her career, although her beagles — who had their photos taken with Santa Claus last Christmas — get their share of attention.

"I understand how she's had to put in extra hours to get ahead, to win," said Carlos Moore, who gave his wife a Mercedes for Valentine's

Day. "It is something I've done all my life."

## Strengthening the case

The scheduled capital murder trial of Eric Von Bridgewater early last month for his role in the Monte Carlo shooting should have been a prosecution rout, said Robert McCrerey, the young man's attorney.

That was before unexpected events narrowed the gap and raised the stakes.

Almost overnight, the case became a struggle, in Moore's view, between the power of the street gangs and the rule of law.

The first shock came five days before jury selection was to start. Moore was in her office talking to a witness when a detective called and told her that Elijah Ragland had been found dead in Cobb Park.

Ragland was a potential witness who had said he had heard Marlon Crosby and Bridgewater talking about the crime; he had been shot repeatedly in the head and neck.

"I try to keep an open mind, but I don't think it was anything but a revenge killing," said Moore a few days after the slaying. Despite those suspicions, Ragland's killing remains unsolved and Fort Worth police say they have no evidence to link it with Bridgewater or the Black Villain Assassins.

Then, when Andre Crosby took the stand on the first day of testimony, instead of implicating Bridgewater, the 19-year-old traded gang signs with the defendant and went on to tell the jury that neither he nor Bridgewater were involved.

"I was never comfortable with him as a witness," said Moore of the younger Crosby, who had promised

to testify against Bridgewater in exchange for his plea-bargained sentence. "Once he double-crossed us, all we could do was to let the jury see he was lying."

Moore put Cole, her investigator, on the stand to describe to the jury

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how Crosby had previously confessed to taking part in the hold-up.

Beyond that, two young women — whom Moore's team had been working since last year to find — testified how the younger Crosby and Bridgewater picked them up late on the night of the shooting and rode past the crime scene, which was jammed with police cars.

During the drive, one of the women testified, Bridgewater told her, "We did some gangsta —." Then they went to Denny's, the women said.

"Like everybody else in the case, they were scared to testify," Cole recounted. "But once they got on the stand they told what they

knew."

Another witness, a man who had been in jail with Bridgewater, told the jury how the defendant had told a cell full of prisoners at the Tarrant County Jail that he had had to "smoke" someone.

During closing arguments, Moore was furious.

Drawing a defense objection, she moved toward Bridgewater, pointed her finger at him and asked, "How could you stuff your belly knowing what you did?"

Looking back at the moment, she recalled, "I wanted to deck him. I could have knocked him 50 yards with one solid punch."

The jury took its time, two hours and 20 minutes, before returning its verdict: guilty of capital murder.

"If we would have lost, people might have started to get the idea that you can kill a witness and someone will walk," Moore reflected. "Putting Von away should help on that score."

For his "turncoat testimony," as Moore put it, Andre Crosby faces a petition to revoke his probation, exposing him at a hearing later this month to as much as a life term in prison.

Judy Mirzadeh, the victim's sister-in-law, said that she wondered how a Moore could generate such concern for one set of strangers after another without shorting out emotionally.

"Then I realized, she's almost nourished by it. It's a renewable strength," Mirzadeh said. "She's out there representing herself as much as the rest of us."