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Suspect in Felony To Represent Self

By Robin Topping

A Glen Cove man, accused of attempting to murder his former girlfriend, will represent himself against the charges, after a Nassau County Court judge refused his request to be defended by a disbarred attorney.

Ignoring the judge's warnings to hire another lawyer, Dennis Villela yesterday began his court case by telling the jury, "I didn't do it. Who did it? I don't know." In an opening statement, Villela grinned repeatedly and urged jurors to use their "common sense," adding, "It's going to be extremely hard to say 'Yes, he did it.'"

Villela, 37, is charged with using a tire iron to severely beat Theresa Nappi, 26, of Maspeth, Queens, in the back of his van on July 26, 1986, then dumping her body on a service road of the Long Island Expressway. She was found three hours later by a passerby, who took her to Community Hospital at Glen Cove, where she was treated for multiple skull and hand fractures.

Nappi had an affair with the defendant, who is married, starting in 1980 and she bore his son, according to prosecutor Kenneth Littman. The relationship ended in June, 1982, after the child's birth. Since then, Villela has refused to pay some \$11,000 worth of court-ordered child support payments to the victim, Littman said.

Last November, a Queens County Family Court judge sent Villela to the Bronx House of Detention, where he met George Sassower, a Westchester county attorney who was in jail for defying a court order. In February, Sassower was disbarred for defying court orders and filing nearly 200 frivolous lawsuits, motions and claims. Sassower, 62, took on Villela's case before he was disbarred, but acting Nassau County Court Judge Joseph Harris ruled last week that he could not represent Villela. "Just because a surgeon loses his license in the middle of an operation, it doesn't mean he shouldn't finish it," said Sassower, who sat in court yesterday in the spectator section. Villela, in an interview, said he trusts no other lawyer to represent him.

Villela refused Harris' offer of a court-appointed attorney. A 1975 U.S. Supreme Court ruling held that a defendant has a constitutional right to represent himself without counsel if he chooses, as long as that waiver is "knowing, intelligent and voluntary."

The trial continues today.