

# Prosecution veteran returns to serve Redondo Beach

**Stephen Kay retired after years of murder trials, including the prosecution of Charles Manson, but now he's coming out of retirement to handle municipal misdemeanors.**

**By Denise Nix**  
*Staff writer*

He was a key prosecutor in the Charles Manson family murder trials.

He sent Lawrence Bittaker, arguably the South Bay's cruelest and most heinous rapist and killer, to death row.

He gained fame while handling the trial against photographer Charles Rathbun, who murdered model Linda Sobek.

And now? Stephen Kay is coming out of retirement to do battle with alleged drunken drivers, people accused of domestic violence and taggers. As Redondo Beach's new city prosecutor, Kay will be working misdemeanors exclusively.

On Tuesday, for example, he returns to the Torrance Courthouse to prosecute a man accused of fraudulently using a state Assembly badge.

"The last misdemeanor I tried was in 1968," Kay, 63, said with a laugh. "I have a lot to catch up on."

A mixture of personal tragedy and fate brought Kay, a longtime South Bay resident, out of nearly two years of retirement.

First, his 34-year-old son, also an attorney, died suddenly of a heart attack.

"I think I just needed to get out of the house and get a job and get my mind off of what happened," Kay said.

Then he ran into a longtime friend, Redondo Beach City Attorney Mike Webb, in a jewelry store just after Christmas.

The two got to chatting about Alan Honeycutt, the last city prosecutor, who was recently appointed to the bench, leaving a vacancy in Webb's office.

"I said, 'Mike, if there's any way I can help you, don't hesitate to ask,' " Kay said.

Webb's response: "Really?"

A week later, Webb called, and Kay was on his way back to work.

He's made a one-year commitment to the job, and then he and Webb will re-evaluate.

In retirement, Kay has traveled to Russia, Alaska and New England. He kept busy helping one of his daughters with her new boutique.

Kay retired in March 2005 after 38 years with the District Attorney's Office, where he served as head deputy twice for the Torrance office, as well as the Long Beach and Compton branches. He was also head deputy of the Brady Compliance Division two times, and helped establish a

program in which prosecutors attend parole hearings for perpetrators of major crimes serving indeterminate life sentences.

When he thought about returning to law, he knew that, generally, the only place a former prosecutor can go is the other side.

"I was in a position that I didn't want to be a criminal defense attorney," Kay said. "I have respect for criminal defense attorneys and they're an important part of the system, but it's not for me.

"I don't want to use my talent to try to get a guilty person off," Kay said.

Defense attorneys that know, or know of, Kay are not threatened by his experience or reputation; on the contrary, they welcome a prosecutor widely perceived as fair and knowledgeable.

"Unfortunately, he'll be a tough adversary in court," said Andrew Thorpe, head of the Public Defender's Office in Torrance. "However, I'm hoping he will look at misdemeanors in a more favorable light."

Deputy Public Defender Richard Ewell has practiced criminal defense for less than a year, but said he is not intimidated by his formidable veteran opponent.

"Sure, he has lots of experience. But when's the last time he's tried a case?" Ewell said.

Like Thorpe, Ewell hoped that Kay's experience on serious cases will give him better perspective on the petty crimes he will now be handling.

"I hope that, as a prosecutor, he can do something to reform a little bit of the heavy-handedness that Redondo Beach prosecutors have had up to this point," said Ewell, who also represents defendants charged with misdemeanors for crimes in other South Bay cities.

Redondo Beach criminal defense attorney Ryan Okabe has worked for Kay and said he is happy to see him return.

"The good thing about Steve is he is really firm, but he's fair, and he knows how to evaluate a case," Okabe said. "And if the facts warrant it, he's able to work with the attorneys."

Webb said his office and the citizens of Redondo Beach are fortunate to have Kay as their chief prosecutor.

"The residents of Redondo Beach have consistently said that their top priority is public safety," Webb said. "Getting such a top legal talent to be a part of our office will really help further meet that priority."