

## Alda murder trial starts

By Carol Bryant

The Independent

Eight-year-old Anastasia Ibanez sat in a district court witness stand Thursday and told how she was awakened by a gunshot, saw her mother holding a rifle and a man falling to the floor.

Anastasia was one of two daughters who testified against their mother, Norma Lopez, who is charged with first-degree murder in the March 25 death of her 27-year-old boyfriend, Sotero Gandarilla.

The second daughter told how Lopez asked her to find bullets the night Gandarilla died.

Anastasia showed no emotion as she told the court that she still loved her mother, who was seated less than 20 feet away.

Lopez, 28, of Alda is on trial for murder and use of a weapon in commission of a felony. She allegedly shot Gandarilla in the neck after what witnesses described as a night of drinking, dancing and arguing at their Alda trailer home.

Lopez's five children also lived at the trailer and were there the night of the shooting. They are Norma Lopez, Anastasia Ibanez, Angel Meza, Marycruz Meza and Rosalinda Lopez. The children, who ranged in age from 3 to 11 at the time of the shooting, now live with an aunt in Dodge City, Kan.

One of the daughters, 12-year-old Norma, was the first to testify in the trial, which began Thursday before a jury selected two weeks ago. She said she was in her mother's bedroom the night of the shooting watching TV when she heard her mother and Gandarilla arguing. They entered the bedroom.

Lopez asked Norma to get a neighbor, Guadalupe Lindeman, and also asked Norma to find bullets. She told her mother she didn't know where the bullets were, then left with her sister Rosalinda to get Lindeman from a nearby trailer, she testified.

The daughter said she heard a gunshot from outside her mother's trailer. When she went back inside, she saw Gandarilla bleeding on the bedroom floor and her mother in the room.

Lopez and her daughters showed little emotion as the children testified against their mother.

In testimony Thursday afternoon, Lt. Rodger Williams, who heads the Hall County Sheriff Department's investigation division, said Lopez told him March 26 she shot Gandarilla.

Williams interviewed Lopez alone in his office the morning after the shooting. Lopez asked about her children, then said, "I threw my life away." Lopez told Williams she was having difficulty remembering what happened because of her drinking the day before.

She said she didn't know why she got out the rifle March 25. She said she had not gotten the rifle after her "old man" threatened to beat her in the past.

Williams said Lopez told him she shot Gandarilla "for no reason, just stupid." Williams said Lopez also admitted her drinking had nothing to do with shooting Gandarilla.

Williams said Lopez told him, "I've been that drunk before and never pulled a gun on my old man."

Williams took photographs of Gandarilla in Lopez's bedroom and saw a high-powered rifle and blood spattered on a wall in the room.

Under cross-examination by defense attorney Jerry Piccolo, Williams said he did not tape his interview with Lopez and destroyed his notes that day after completing his report.

During questioning, Williams said it was difficult to remember all the details from March. He was allowed to refer to his report as he spoke.

Witnesses Isabelle Mata and Fidel Rivas of Alda were partying with Lopez and Gandarilla March 25.

They said the sheriff's department came to the trailer at 10:30 p.m. because of loud music. The four adults then went to a back bedroom, drank and danced. Mata said Lopez danced with Gandarilla and Rivas.

Mata and Rivas said Lopez and Gandarilla began arguing and went to Lopez's bedroom. Mata and Rivas remained in the back bedroom. Mata said they heard a shot. Rivas said he went to Lopez's bedroom, saw Gandarilla on the floor and Lopez sitting on the bed.

Neighbor Guadalupe Lindeman said she had gone to bed at 9 that night. She was awakened when Lopez's children, Norma and Rosalinda, came to her door and wanted her to go to Lopez's trailer. Lindeman said she heard a shot as she stood on her porch. She went with the sisters to Lopez's trailer and saw Anastasia "jumping and hollering" outside.

When Lindeman entered, she saw Gandarilla on the floor of the bedroom and Lopez sitting on the bed. Lopez asked Lindeman to kill her and said not to call the police because Gandarilla was dead.

Sheriff's Sgt. Ron Ochsner said he responded to an 11:49 p.m. report of a gunshot in the Alda area. He asked Lopez for permission to go into the trailer. Lopez declined and said she would enter the trailer. When she returned, she told Ochsner a man had been shot and was dead. Then Lopez allowed Ochsner inside, where he saw Gandarilla on the floor in Lopez's bedroom.

At that point, Ochsner told Lopez her Miranda rights.

During cross examination by defense attorney Kevin Knake, Ochsner said Lopez was drunk and "somewhat disoriented." Ochsner said he thought Lopez understood what he said, but she was not paying attention. At one point Lopez told him, "Why don't you just go ahead and shoot me?"

First-degree murder carries maximum penalties of life in prison or death. Lopez also faces up to 20 years in prison and a \$25,000 fine for use of a weapon in commission of a felony.

The trial will resume at 9 a.m. Friday in District Judge James Livingston's courtroom at the Hall County Courthouse.