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Jeanine Pirro's Pursuit.

(Westchester Weekly Desk) *Corey Kilgannon.*

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THE high-profile murder case of the Manhattan real-estate scion, Robert A. Durst, is approaching in Galveston, Tex., but one of the case's principal protagonists -- or as some argue, antagonist -- is right here on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard.

Westchester County's district attorney, Jeanine F. Pirro, in her investigation of the 1982 disappearance of Mr. Durst's first wife, Kathleen, has played an unusual role in the Texas proceedings. She has incurred the wrath of Mr. Durst. She has also drawn harsh criticism from Mr. Durst's lawyer, who says she may have tainted the trial with her pursuit of his client.

Even the judge in the case has singled out Ms. Pirro, asking the district attorney specifically to abide by an order of silence regarding matters in the case, an order Ms. Pirro has challenged. Finally, accusations have come from far and near that Ms. Pirro is pursuing Mr. Durst to gain publicity for herself. She has denied all of these claims and insists she merely wants some straight answers, mainly from Mr. Durst, about the disappearance of Kathleen Durst, who was a 29-year-old medical student when she disappeared in 1982. Friday was the 20th anniversary of her disappearance.

Mr. Durst, 58, has long maintained that, after a weekend at their South Salem cottage, he put his wife on a Manhattan-bound train at the Katonah station and never saw her again. Then, in December 2000, after an old rumor resurfaced suggesting that Mr. Durst had killed his wife and buried her in Westchester, Ms. Pirro reopened the investigation.

Ms. Pirro, a relentless prosecutor of domestic violence cases, has cited discrepancies in Mr. Durst's account of his last night with Mrs. Durst. She has not filed charges, but she has sought to interview Mr. Durst, the heir to a billion-dollar New York City real-estate fortune, about his first wife's disappearance. Mr. Durst, even before he was arrested in October and charged with beheading and dismembering his 71-year-old Galveston neighbor, has refused to be questioned about it.

But Ms. Pirro is tenacious. She has appeared on national news programs, including, most recently, "Today" on NBC on Jan. 25, talking about the Durst case, and has traveled to Pennsylvania and Texas to follow the case. In October,

Ms. Pirro attended Mr. Durst's bail hearing in Galveston. Mr. Durst skipped the hearing and became a fugitive; Ms. Pirro told reporters outside the courtroom: "The defendant has exhibited his contempt for the court. He is charged with murdering and dismembering an individual. I believe he is dangerous."

On Nov. 30, after a 45-day national manhunt, Mr. Durst was arrested in a Bethlehem, Pa., supermarket for shoplifting. Ms. Pirro rushed there in time to watch the search of Mr. Durst's car and then returned in January to attend Mr. Durst's extradition hearing. John M. Morganelli, the Northampton County, Pa., district attorney, said that the arrival of the district attorney from New York puzzled some of his investigators.

"We were all sort of amused by her wanting to be involved," he said last week. "We're not used to having a D.A. present, unless there's a reason to be there. I can't say her presence was unwarranted. There could've been something in the trunk that could've helped her case.

"Me personally, I wouldn't have gone to an extradition hearing," he added. "She's the first to admit she likes the press. There's nothing bad about that."

In December 2000, just as Ms. Pirro was arranging to question Mr. Durst's best friend, the writer Susan Berman, Ms. Berman was killed in Los Angeles. Mr. Durst has not been called a suspect in that killing.

Ms. Pirro promises to "get to the bottom of what happened to Kathie Durst, one way or the other." And David Hebert, a spokesman for Ms. Pirro, said last week that she would continue to "be aggressive and diligent in pursuing the disappearance of Kathleen Durst." But, he added, Ms. Pirro has no intention of interfering with the trial.

Mr. Durst's lawyers claim that he has been driven to a panicked state by Ms. Pirro's relentless pursuit over the last 14 months. Mr. Durst's lawyers, before the order of silence was issued, implied that it may become part of their defense strategy to say that Ms. Pirro is intent on wrongly convicting their client in the news media for Mrs. Durst's disappearance.

When asked about Mr. Durst's claims that she was unfairly targeting him, Mr. Hebert said simply that Ms. Pirro was concentrating on "finding answers to questions" in the case. He pointed out that Ms. Pirro has said repeatedly that Mr. Durst has never been "ruled in or ruled out" as a suspect.

Tony Castro, who unsuccessfully challenged Ms. Pirro for district attorney in November, accused her during the campaign and again in an interview this week of using the Durst case to draw media attention to herself.

"She's jeopardizing the integrity of the investigation and hampering working relationships with other law enforcement departments," said Mr. Castro, a former Bronx assistant district attorney.

Mr. Castro raised the question that Ms. Pirro's interest in this case could distract her from work here in the county.

Dick DeGuerin, a Houston lawyer representing Mr. Durst, contends that public discussion of the case may have already damaged Mr. Durst's right to a fair trial by prejudicing potential jurors against him. He accused Ms. Pirro specifically of fueling sensational media coverage. Mr. DeGuerin contends that Ms. Pirro's aggressive pursuit of Mr. Durst, with no evidence to warrant it, paints Mr. Durst as a suspect in Mrs. Durst's disappearance.

In December, Mr. DeGuerin persuaded the judge in the case, Judge Susan Criss of State District Court in Galveston, to issue the order of silence, barring anyone involved in the case from discussing it publicly. He singled out Ms. Pirro, charging her with "grandstanding" and accused her of making "egregious" and "outrageous" statements about Mr. Durst. He said that "she has implied, with no supporting evidence, that he is a suspect in his wife's disappearance and Susan Berman."

Judge Criss approved the request. Ms. Pirro was the only official mentioned by name in the order of silence. Ms. Pirro wrote to Judge Criss, countering that the order could not "control the free expression of an individual in another state." She wrote that "it is essential that I am able to appeal to members of the public who might possess information regarding the fate of Kathleen Durst."

Mr. Hebert would not comment specifically on the order of silence, but said that Ms. Pirro's efforts, far from grandstanding, were meant to bring attention to the Durst case for possible leads.

"It's crucial for law enforcement to have access to the media in order to highlight pending investigations and to encourage cooperation," he said.

Mr. Hebert would not comment on whether Ms. Pirro would attend the trial. But observers in Galveston are certainly keeping an eye out for a D.A. from New York.

"This lady's been raising hell with this other case up there," said Tad Nelson, a prominent criminal defense lawyer in Galveston and a former district attorney. "If she comes down here and stirs it up, it could cause some problems for the prosecution."