

Investigator helps county attorney's cases

By Tom Betz

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He is a new face in the county attorney's office, a full-time investigator helping get cases ready for trial, but a familiar face around the Sherman County Courthouse.

Burton Pianalto, a former sheriff's deputy, has been on the job since May and says he feels he has been able to contribute to the office.

"It ran pretty well without me," he said, "but I like to help out and can help in a few areas like valuation reports."

The idea of an investigator in the county attorney's office to help get cases ready came up last year, said County Attorney Bonnie Selby, and money was put in this year's county budget for salary and a car.

"The girls think he is Mr. Wonderful," said Selby, who said she got the idea for an investigator from Thomas County.

"I had worked with the person in Thomas County frequently," Selby said, "and after talking to the people there, they thought it was working."

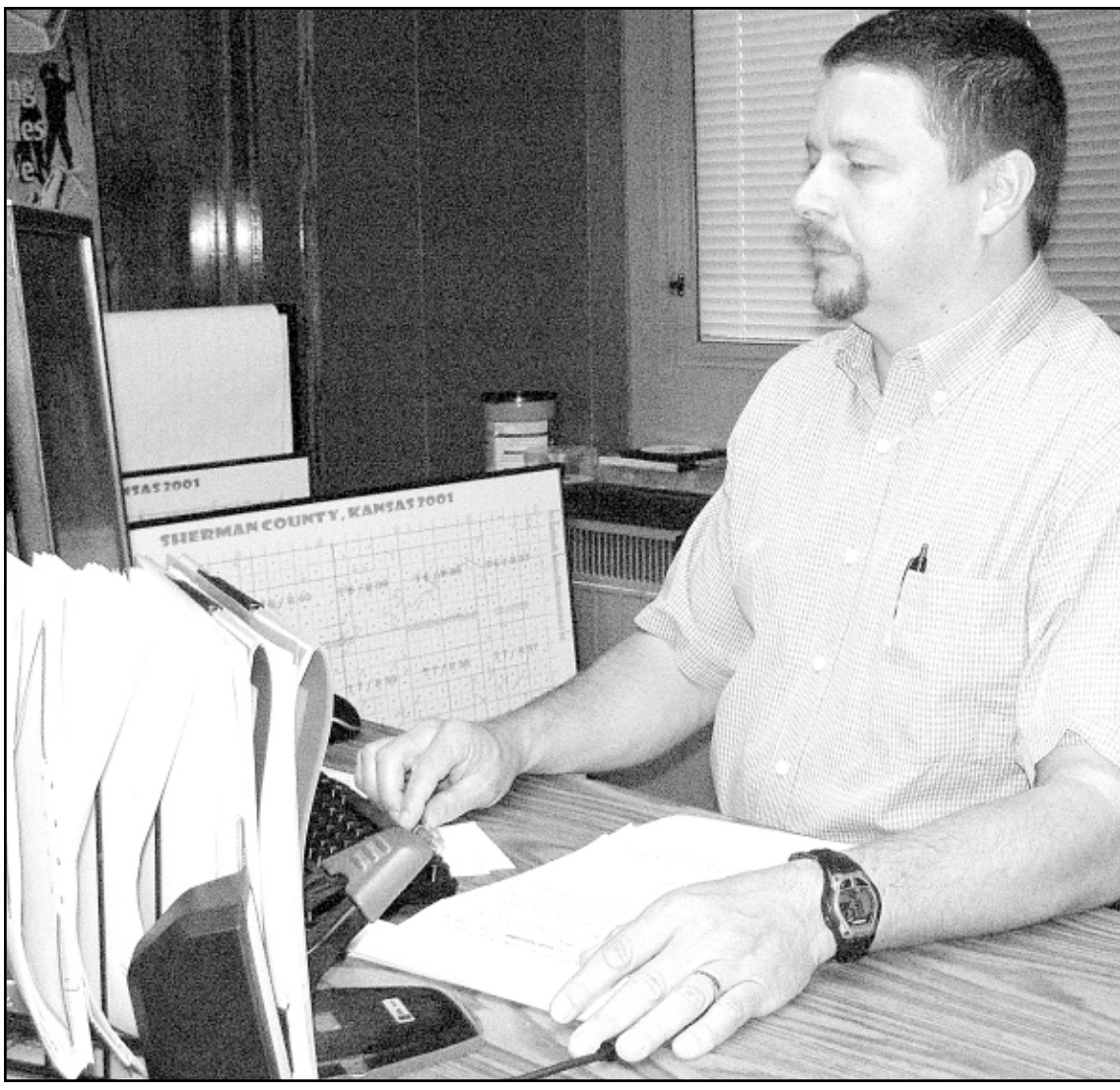
"I contacted the Sherman County commissioners and Sheriff Kevin Butts about the possibility.... It took about a year to get the position established."

She said when she and the sheriff began talking, they were setting up a job description.

"When it was first reported there



Selby



Burton Pianalto, who has been the county attorney's investigator for about three months, said he is helping the office and helping work cases for County Attorney Bonnie Selby.

Photo by Tom Betz/The Goodland Star-News

might be an investigator position, people were coming to say they

wanted that position," Selby said. "The most logical person to both of

us was Burton, because he worked the Kerri Bevington murder and did

a great job pulling that together. "He offered and I accepted."

She said she thinks Pianalto's greatest asset is his involvement with youths, through both the schools and church activities.

"There are few who haven't got a 'Hi' for me," Pianalto said, adding that working with kids has been a focus of his time in law enforcement. "I had to stop substitute teaching. I have taught in all grades from preschool to high school."

He said he taught telecommunications digital switching at the Northwest Kansas Technical School before going full time with the sheriff's department in 2002.

"He has been an on-call computer guy at the courthouse," Selby said. When asked why he wanted the investigator position, Pianalto said he thought the job suited him.

"I had to give up patrol, (to be in the office on a regular basis)" he said, adding, "but thought I would like to work with statutes and research type information. I like to deal with the paperwork."

As the investigator, Pianalto said, his job is to look over the incoming case files and look for things that might need to be followed up on.

"I evaluate the elements of the crime and the evidence presented," he said. "If follow up is needed, I contact the officers to see if they can pursue it. If they are unable, I can follow up."

"There is a misconception about the job," Selby said. "We want the officers to feel welcome to come to Burton if they need advice or help.

We don't want them to believe that they work a case while they are on duty and then bring the case over to Burton and he follows up. That is not true.

"One person cannot do all that. He can't finish everybody's case for them."

An example of where having Pianalto has helped was a recent hearing on an aggravated indecent liberties case, she said. Pianalto, who pulled all the reports together and was familiar with all the aspects of the case, was the principal witness.

"It is an advantage to have that one person on the witness stand who had all that together," the county attorney said.

A bigger case is the investigation of a hydroponic marijuana operation found near Kanorado last month, Selby said.

"Burton was put in charge of photographing and cataloging all the evidence," she said. "He has spent lots of hours pulling that together."

Selby said they need a better office for the investigator, and she'd like to find a contractor to help solve that problem.

"We need to remodel the office," she said. "The money is in this year's budget, and we have not found anyone who seems to be interested in approaching the project."

Pianalto is sharing an office with Selby for now, but she wants to give him a place to work and to be able to interview people in private.

"If anyone is interested, they can call me," Selby said.

Deputy enjoys working with kids, says crime seems to be in cycles

By Tom Betz

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Dealing with kids and domestic violence has kept the Sherman County attorney and her new investigator busy in the three months he has been working.

County Attorney Bonnie Selby said she is glad to have Burton Pianalto on her staff. She said the "great debate" might be whether Pianalto decides he wants to go back to being a full-time sheriff's deputy.

The investigator works out of the county attorney's office, but the money for his salary and car come from Sheriff Kevin Butts' budget. "He is mostly in this office,"

Selby said, "but if needed, he is out of here."

Selby, who has been in office about eight years, said she thinks the case load is about the same as always, but that the type of case seems to change about every two or three years.

"We went through the meth labs, and that loaded us down," she said. "The procedure on those has changed and we are not seeing many."

"Our bigger focus has been on juveniles, but that has been somewhat less lately."

Pianalto said he has been working on a lot of domestic and child in need of care cases in his

first few months.

"I think it is a cycle," he said about the domestic battery cases. "When the heat goes up, the violence seems to go up."

Selby said she thinks some of the kids they have had trouble with are maturing in the juvenile justice system.

"The sad part is that if we take them out of their homes and put them in a more restricted environment, they do well," she said. "Then we have to put them back to where they were and it all falls apart."

Selby thinks that is where Pianalto can help with his background as a substitute teacher in the Goodland Schools and his work

with kids through church groups.

Pianalto was born in Bird City, the youngest of eight children of Gene and Shirley Pianalto. He has five sisters, one living brother and one who died.

His dad was the manager of the Bird City Co-op, he said, and his mom was a housewife.

He attended the Northwest Kansas Vocational-Technical School in 1980, then moved away for 10 years and lived in Colorado Springs. He moved back to Goodland in 1994 to teach at the technical school.

He began his law enforcement training in 1993 in Colorado Springs, taking criminal investigation classes while working for

Ampex, an early videotape and digital electronics company.

"I worked on the first digital machine they produced," he said. "I believe they were the best, but we did not have the publicity."

He came back to teach at the then technical school.

"I taught telecommunications digital switching," he said, "and I taught every class in that group."

He joined the Sherman County Sheriff's Department part time in 1998.

"I got my goal back on track and went full time in 2002," he said.

Pianalto thinks his time as a substitute teacher has helped him relate to kids, and that many of those he has had in the classroom always say "hi."

"My wife Roberta and I have been involved in the youth groups since we moved out here," he said. They are members of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church.

His wife is a secretary at West Elementary School and a representative, or case manager, for Youth Vision, an outreach program for helping at-risk kids through the 25th Judicial District.

The mess was easier to make. . . .



Karen Juraneck (left) and Dustin Zelfer of Goodland spent Saturday morning cleaning paint marks off the bricks on Main in front of Central Elementary School as part of an agreement with city police and the municipal judge. Both had a smile and were good spirited about having to clean up the paint, the result of an

evening of fun finding out what happens when paint cans and other types of bottles come in contact with a golf club. A member of the city street crew provided barricades to keep the two safe as they scrubbed the bricks. The rain Sunday morning helped wash away traces of where the paint had been.

Photo by Tom Betz/The Goodland Star-News

correction

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should be fair and factual. We want to keep an accurate record and appreciate you calling to our attention any failure to live up to this standard.

Improvement Grants

The Sherman County Economic Development Office is offering two separate grants for Sherman County residents for exterior improvements to housing or businesses. If you are interested in this program, please stop by the office located at 104 E. 10th and pick up the requirements and an application. The deadline for applications to be turned in is Sept. 21, 2007, at 4:30. For questions, please call (785) 890-3743.

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| 926 E. 2nd.....\$319,000 | 1019 W. 13th.....\$64,900 (comm) |

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