

Gunrunner 'merchant of death': Crown

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PETER SMALL, COURTS BUREAU

A children's aid society youth worker acted as a "merchant of death" when she imported firearms destined for a Toronto street gang, and should be jailed for 10 years, a prosecutor says.

Sara Vilella, 27, who was arrested in the sweep that netted alleged members of Scarborough's violent Malvern Crew, was leading a double life, a judge was told yesterday.

On the one hand she seemed to be a talented and generous woman from a good Hamilton-area family, prosecutor Nevina Crisante argued at the sentencing hearing.

On the other hand, she was a greedy gun-importing kingpin who helped smuggle 23 firearms, with their magazines lethally expanded, across the U.S. border "with no other purpose than misery, death and destruction," Crisante told Justice Brian Trafford.

Vilella should be given a 10-year sentence as a deterrent to others and for her contribution to a "plague of gun violence" in the city, Crisante said.

But Vilella's lawyer, Randall Barrs, said her main fault was being too trusting, and the former Hamilton CAS worker led an unblemished life before she became involved with one of the main conspirators, Jude Hudson.

On the day the group imported the guns, Vilella was nothing more than a low-level decoy to throw off border guards, he told

Superior Court.

Barrs asked for a sentence of no more than two years less a day, so Vilella can avoid a tough federal penitentiary. One year is the minimum jail term for her crime.

When she tried to cross over from Detroit on March 22, 2004, Canada Customs officers at Windsor found traces of cocaine on her driver's licence and strip-searched her. They found a note in her bra in Hudson's handwriting indicating that 17 firearms were to go to another member of the ring, and "eight to you."

The group smuggled drugs into the U.S., then used the profits to import firearms, the judge has found.

On the day of her arrest, guards at the same border stopped a car driven by a 60-year-old jazz musician and found 23 guns hidden in the trunk.

In late July, Trafford convicted Vilella of 13 weapons charges, including possession of and importing firearms.

A pre-sentence report says the Grimsby woman was an A student at school, going on to earn a diploma in child and youth work at Mohawk College.

Her lawyer said her dream was to start a youth group home. Five months before the ring smuggled in the guns, she left her supervisor's job with Hamilton's children's aid society.

Trafford will sentence her on Oct. 27.