

## **Jaramillo was pressured into no-contest plea, prosecutors say** **Officials say allegedly forged papers were used as leverage, but the former O.C. assistant sheriff's attorney denies it.**

By H.G. Reza and Christine Hanley, Times Staff Writers  
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Two documents used by George Jaramillo to defend himself from corruption charges appear to be forgeries, said prosecutors, who say they used them as leverage to get the former Orange County assistant sheriff to agree to spend a year in jail as part of a plea bargain.

Jaramillo, once seen as the likely heir to the county sheriff's post, pleaded no contest Monday to single charges of perjury and misuse of public funds, bringing an abrupt end to a case that has shaped political battles and fractured friendships.

The corruption case stemmed largely from Jaramillo's relationship with a Newport Beach entrepreneur who had invented a device he said would help halt car chases. Charles Gabbard, the owner of CHG Safety Technologies Inc., allegedly paid Jaramillo to promote the apparatus to law enforcement officials around the county. Jaramillo was paid \$15,000, which he has said was a consulting fee.

The two documents — an employment contract and a nondisclosure agreement with Gabbard — were dated October 2000 and signed by Jaramillo's wife, Lisa.

But ink-dating tests show that Lisa Jaramillo's signature appeared to be only three years old, said Assistant Dist. Atty. Brian Gurwitz, a prosecutor in the case. George Jaramillo was indicted in April 2004.

The documents were important because Jaramillo told the grand jury that his wife worked for Gabbard and received \$10,000 in salary. The prosecution advanced the theory that she performed no work for Gabbard and the money was meant to be funneled to Jaramillo.

District attorney's investigator Dina Mauger said in a search warrant affidavit signed last week that George and Lisa Jaramillo had forged the documents, apparently in an effort to show that she had an employment agreement with Gabbard. Searches last weekend were conducted at the Jaramillos' home in Dove Canyon and the Orange apartment of Erica Hill, Lisa Jaramillo's sister.

When Jaramillo realized that his wife was vulnerable to possible forgery charges, he opted to plead guilty, said Dist. Atty. Tony Rackauckas. The plea ended a three-year legal battle that unearthed intimate details about Jaramillo's personal life and his one-time role as Sheriff Michael S. Carona's top subordinate.

The alleged forged documents "put additional pressure on him, because it raised a couple of problems," Rackauckas said. "His attempt to use [them] as a defense wouldn't work, and it raised the prospect of additional charges against both [George and Lisa Jaramillo] because it was her signature."

But Robert Corrado, George Jaramillo's attorney, denied that the documents played a role in his decision to enter a plea.

Jaramillo was prepared to go to trial but decided to accept a plea agreement to end the ordeal, Corrado said.

"The district attorney doesn't know what the conversations were between me and my client. I dispute it was the document," Corrado said. "I mean, how much longer could this go on? Somewhere along the line you have to decide whether the game is worth the price."

Corrado turned the documents over to the prosecution last month.

Rackauckas said prosecutors were ready to subpoena Corrado as a witness to testify about what he knew of the contracts that had been provided by George Jaramillo.

Corrado said he knew authorities would try to put him on the witness stand but insisted that the attorney-client privilege would have prevented him from testifying. He said prosecutors indicated they were going to file new charges, but "I don't have any idea whether they were going to do anything."

Lisa Jaramillo wasn't threatened with prosecution, but had the case gone to trial, she might have been charged with forgery, Rackauckas said.

Instead, Jaramillo surprised prosecutors Monday by pleading no contest to two felony counts of lying to a grand jury and misusing public funds in exchange for having nine other charges dismissed. He also agreed to spend three years on probation, one of them in jail.

The case stems from Jaramillo's work as a consultant to Gabbard, a crusty entrepreneur who tried marketing the electronic device that could disable cars pursued by police. Jaramillo went to work for Gabbard while he was still Orange County assistant sheriff.

CHG, Gabbard's company, paid him a total of \$15,000 over 2000 and 2001.

The payment to Lisa Jaramillo has been a vexing problem for George Jaramillo, who has had to prove that his wife — not he — earned the money.

Lisa Jaramillo's sister, who testified before a grand jury in 2004, said she never saw a contract between her sister and CHG, according to the affidavit filed by Mauger.

Hill worked as a secretary at CHG in 2000.

The contract that Corrado gave prosecutors last month is dated 2000 and appears to show that Lisa Jaramillo agreed to work for CHG for one year as an administrative assistant for a \$10,000 fee. The contract was supposed to be between Gabbard and Lisa Jaramillo, but it has only her signature, Gurwitz said.

Prosecutors also received a confidential disclosure agreement in which Lisa Jaramillo promised not to reveal trade secrets. That also had only her signature, Gurwitz said.

According to Mauger's affidavit, investigators seized Hill's computer on Aug. 5, 2004. It contained a Microsoft Word document of a blank CHG confidential disclosure agreement, according to the affidavit.

Gabbard's attorney, meanwhile, said his client had never seen the documents that Corrado gave to prosecutors. He said George and Lisa Jaramillo told him about two years ago that they "might" have a contract that she had signed with Gabbard.

Gurwitz said the couple told prosecutors at about the same time that they "seemed to believe" they had a contract but could not find it.