

Opposite page: Sara Jane Olson with her husband, Fred, and their daughters, Emily, Sophia and Leila. Below: a record of Olson's former life as Kathleen Soliah, linked by US police to the Symbionese Liberation Army, the murderous extremist sect that kidnapped Patty Hearst in the mid-1970s

# ZEALOUS WIFE



**Sara Jane Olson seemed an ordinary American housewife, a pillar of her middle-class Minnesota community – until the day she was arrested by the FBI, to stand trial for terrorist violence and attempted murder in the 1970s. Investigation: Christine Toomey**



Following her arrest last summer, Sara Jane Olson, a 52-year-old respected doctor's wife, spent hours pacing her cramped cell.

Unable to run her customary 10 to 12 miles every morning, she could not burn off her energy and anxiety. The spectacular views from her cell window overlooking the upper reaches of the Mississippi in St Paul, Minnesota, were of little interest. She could not sleep. She was haunted by feelings of guilt over the people she had let down.

There was her husband, Fred, an emergency-room doctor; her three teenage daughters; the homeless she cooked gourmet dinners for; the blind she read newspapers to, and the immigrants she helped to teach English and lessons on how to be a good American citizen. None of them had known about her secret identity. They did not know her real name

was Kathleen Soliah. Or that she was a fugitive wanted by the police for a quarter of a decade.

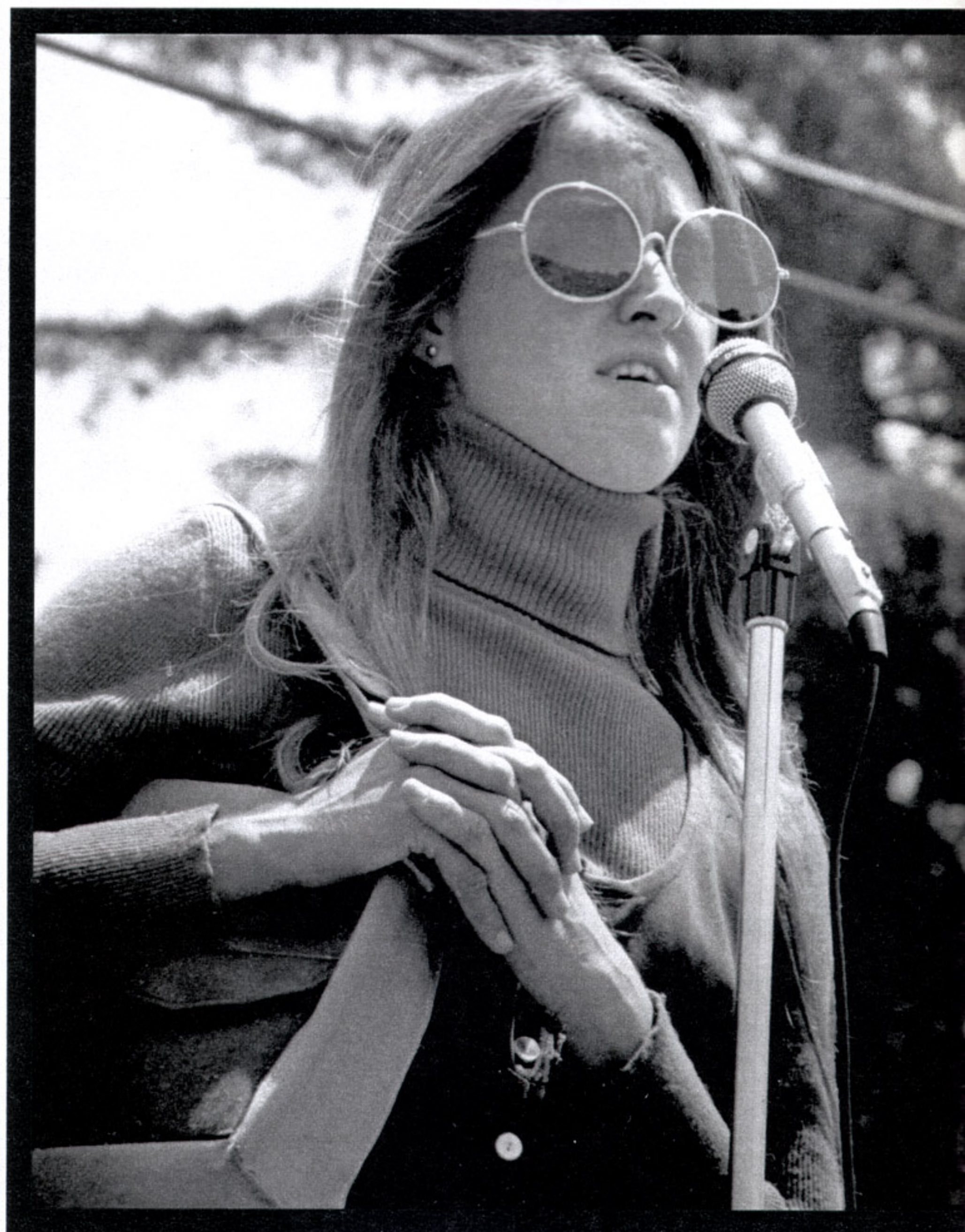
They did not know that she was accused of being a former terrorist. Or that she was once a member of a left-wing paramilitary organisation called the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) — the group responsible for kidnapping the newspaper heiress Patty Hearst in the mid-1970s — whose motto was "Death to the fascist insect that preys upon the life of the people." They did not know she was wanted on charges of attempting to murder two Los Angeles policemen and faced a sentence, if found guilty, of life imprisonment.

She kept replaying in her mind the humiliation of her arrest: the moment on that warm June day when her gold Plymouth mini-van was surrounded by police cars as she drove through the affluent neighbourhood of Highland Park, near her home, on the way back from dropping her daughters off at school. A plain-clothes detective had stood in front of her car shouting: "FBI, Kathleen... The game's over."

She was furious that the detective had boasted to the press that she "had seemed relieved" at finally being caught. She was also galled at being depicted in the press as a "suburban soccer Mom" and an "apple-pie terrorist". There was nothing suburban about Olson and she was not relieved at being found out.

Her brother-in-law gave a more accurate account of how she had felt when her past finally caught up with her. Michael Bortin, married to her sister Josephine, had also spent years trying to evade arrest, but had gone to jail for 18 months for his association with the SLA. When asked what it was like living with such a secret, he described it as "like having a deranged relative knocking at your door every few years". After 25 years of evading the law, Olson had good reason to believe that her deranged relative was safely locked away. But that all changed when she was featured on the television show *America's Most Wanted* last May. Black-and-white photographs of Olson in her 20s, with long straight hair, flashed up on the screen alongside a computer-enhanced image of what she might look like today.

Even then, she had no idea that events were set in train that would eventually lead to what is expected to be a spectacular American show trial. Next January, she is due to appear in a California courtroom on charges of attempted murder. Appearing as a reluctant star witness will be Patty Hearst. The trial will replay one of the most painful periods in recent American history: when the 1960s desire to change the world through love and peace gave way to 1970s cynicism, disillusionment and an angrier brand of revolution. As the Vietnam war grew more violent and pointless and the country reverberated from the shock of the assassinations of John F Kennedy,



his brother Robert, and Martin Luther King, the nation's cities were aflame with racial unrest.

There was nothing about Olson's childhood that suggested the sinister events with which she would later become involved. Born Kathleen Ann Soliah less than 100 miles away from the Twin Cities of St Paul and Minneapolis, where she later chose to hide from the law, she spent most of her childhood in the quiet community of Palmdale, California, on the edge of the Mohave desert. Her father, Martin, was a high-school football coach. Her mother, Elsie, devoted herself to looking after her five children. Olson, the eldest, was active in sports and was a member of Future Teachers of America while at school. Her father claims she was "conservative, like me — Republican, too, I believe". From an early age, she dreamt of becoming famous. According to one schoolfriend, she said: "I'm going to be a famous actress and everyone will know me." After leaving school in 1965, Olson studied English and theatre at the University of California, Santa Barbara. It was at this time that her politics started to change.

As the casualty toll of the Vietnam war grew, university campuses became hotbeds of unrest. Olson was swept up in the turmoil. After graduating from Santa Barbara, she and her boyfriend, James Kilgore, the son of a wealthy timber merchant, went to live in a commune in Monterey, California. They then moved to Berkeley, where Olson worked as a part-time waitress and actress. While playing the title role in a production of *Hedda Gabler* in the autumn of 1973, she struck up a close friendship with her co-star Angela Atwood. The encounter would change the course of her life.

Atwood was a founding member of the Symbionese Liberation Army, one of the more virulent of the 1970s extremist groups. It derived its name from "symbiosis", after its declared aim of promoting greater union between black and white, rich and poor. But what began as a ragtag band of radicals with a vague philosophy to "liberate monogamous marriages and quash racism, sexism, ageism, capitalism, fascism, individualism, possessiveness and competitiveness" ultimately became a paramilitary group intent on inciting revolution.



**Left: Olson spoke up for the SLA in Berkeley, California, after her friend Angela Atwood and five other members were killed in a shoot-out with the police in 1974. Her brother Steve (below centre) was also connected with the organisation. Above: an SLA bank raid, involving the kidnapped newspaper heiress Patty Hearst (below right). Below left: in 1975, two SLA activists were convicted of killing a schools inspector using cyanide-tipped bullets**



Under the leadership of the self-styled Field Marshal Donald "Cinque" DeFreeze, an escaped convict, the SLA was shunned by other leftist groups for its fanatical ideology and increasing violence. One of the most abhorrent of its crimes was the murder in 1973 of a popular black schools inspector called Marcus Foster, who the SLA mistakenly believed had been behind a campaign to post police officers on school campuses. Foster was shot eight times with cyanide-tipped bullets.

Six months after Olson met Atwood, her friend was shot dead by police in a Waco-style gun battle between members of the SLA and 500 LA police officers. Five

## PATTY HEARST CLAIMS THAT OLSON PRESSED FOR 'ACTION BOMBINGS'

other SLA members, including DeFreeze, were killed, and the house in which they were hiding burnt to the ground. The shoot-out and inferno were carried live on television. Two weeks later, Olson delivered a passionate eulogy to her dead friend in Berkeley's Ho Chi Minh Park. Raising a clenched fist in front of a cheering crowd, she condemned the police as "pigs" and exhorted the SLA to continue its fight, pledging: "SLA soldiers, I am with you and we are with you."

Shortly afterwards, in May 1974, she was contacted by the SLA, who recruited both her and Kilgore to help secure provisions and scout for safe houses for members of the organisation. Among those in need of a hiding place was Patty Hearst, eldest daughter of the newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst. She had been kidnapped by the SLA in February 1974.

Hearst was kept blindfolded in a small closet for weeks and raped repeatedly. Two months after being seized, however, she claimed she had joined the ranks of her captors and assumed a new identity as a terrorist named Tania. The grainy black-and-white image of

Hearst in combat gear toting a gun during a bank raid became both an appalling and fascinating symbol of the violence and twisted idealism of the group.

While Olson denies being a fully fledged member, a detailed account of her alleged involvement with the SLA is given by Hearst in her autobiography, *Every Secret Thing*. Critics have condemned the book as a self-serving attempt to absolve Hearst of responsibility for her criminal involvement with the SLA. But the prosecution team has cited the book as evidence in Olson's upcoming trial and intends quizzing Hearst on its content when she is called as a witness in the case.

According to Hearst, Olson and Kilgore started out as shoplifters, pilfering "steaks and chops and fancy desserts" for the SLA. But, she says, the couple soon became impatient with this role. She claims they "began to press for some action bombings". While Hearst initially describes Olson, her younger sister Josephine and brother Steve, who joined the SLA shortly after she did, as "nice, normal revolutionaries... far more reasonable than anyone I had ever met in the SLA", she claims Olson soon took to carrying a carbine around in a straw bag.

Hearst says Olson was among a group of SLA terrorists who held up a bank in Carmichael, California, in April 1975. One customer, Myrna Lee Opsahl, a mother of four, was shot dead during the robbery. Hearst says she sat outside the bank in a getaway car, but claims Olson was inside the bank when another female SLA member pulled the trigger. She describes Olson as anxious and upset about what had happened, and says that when the group returned to their safe house, Olson enquired nervously: "How's the woman who was shot?" "Oh, she's dead," replied the alleged killer. "But it doesn't really matter. She was a bourgeois pig anyway. Her husband is a doctor."

That summer, Hearst describes how the SLA decided to direct their violence at the police as a means of "starting the revolution". First they planted a pipe bomb close to a police station. Hearst writes that Olson's "eyes sparkled as she described the destruction caused by the bomb". Nobody was hurt in the explosion. But Olson is alleged to have been one of those who delivered an SLA communiqué claiming responsibility for the attack. It included "a warning to the rabid dogs who murder our children in cold blood. Remember pigs; every time you strap on your gun, the next bullet may be speeding toward your head, the next bomb may be under the seat of your car".

Next, Hearst claims, Olson and Kilgore were set the task of placing two pipe bombs packed with construction nails under police cars in east Los Angeles on August 22, 1975. One of the bombs was faulty; it fell off the underside of a police car as it was pulling out of the car park of a busy pancake restaurant. The officer who discovered the bomb was so traumatised by the experience that he retired from the police force. The other bomb was discovered before it exploded, when police put out an alert for all officers to check the undercarriages of their patrol cars.

After this debacle, Olson and Kilgore went on the run. In their absence, a grand jury issued a sealed indictment against Olson — a similar one was issued against Kilgore — containing charges of conspiracy and attempted murder. The police had presented jurors with evidence linking Olson's fingerprints with the unexploded bombs. These are the charges for which she now stands trial.

It was during the nationwide police hunt for Olson and Kilgore, in the autumn of 1975, that police raided the SLA hide-out in San Francisco where Patty Hearst was captured. Put on trial on charges connected with the Carmichael bank robbery, Hearst was found guilty and sentenced to seven years in jail. The jury did not believe her defence that she had



been brainwashed by her captors. Her sentence was subsequently commuted to two years by President Jimmy Carter. He has campaigned ever since for her to be given a full presidential pardon.

Other former SLA members have also faced trial. Olson's brother Steve, who was briefly Hearst's boyfriend, was tried and acquitted for his alleged role in the Carmichael bank robbery. Michael Bortin served 18 months in jail for his association with the group. He has since married Olson's sister Josephine, and the couple have four children. Only Kilgore now remains in hiding.

In the years immediately following her release from jail, Hearst led a reclusive life. She married her former bodyguard and started a family, living in a high-security mansion in California. More recently, she moved to Connecticut and tried to cash in on her dubious celebrity by becoming a film actress. She featured in a series of films by the eccentric director John Waters, including *Pecker*, *Cry-Baby* and *Serial Mom*. On the advice of her lawyers, she has refused to comment on the upcoming Olson trial, except to say: "I resent all this being dredged up. It's ancient history."

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Criminal psychologists say there are no set patterns to the way fugitives from the law behave. "Some try to stay as anonymous as possible, others behave more flamboyantly," says Rex Tomb, of the FBI's Fugitive Publicity Unit. But by any standards, the new life Olson created for herself after she went on the run was quite extraordinary.

After fleeing California she returned to the state of Minnesota, where she was born, making no attempt to disguise her striking appearance: a slim redhead with intense blue eyes. But it was then that she acquired a fake social security card identifying her as Sara Jane Olson. (She legally changed her name from Soliah to Olson only after she was arrested last year, to avoid further litigation involving falsifying documents.) Olson was a shrewd choice of name: it is almost as common a surname as Smith in Minneapolis, a city once settled by many Scandinavians.

At first Olson took a job as a cook for a fraternity house at the University of Minnesota, and did voluntary work in a collective bookstore. She became neighbours with Fred Peterson, a Harvard-educated medical intern, who shared her passion for jogging. The couple married



**The house in St Paul, Minnesota, where Olson lived undetected for 10 years. Was it a perverse wish to be exposed that prompted her to join theatre groups, and play high-profile roles such as a suffragette (left)?**

in March 1980. Later that year, she gave birth to the first of three daughters. The next year, the young family moved to Zimbabwe, where Peterson worked as a doctor for Oxfam, and Olson taught English and drama. Two years later they moved back to the United States, at first spending two years in Baltimore, then in 1985 returning to Minnesota. For four years the family lived in a bungalow in Minneapolis. In 1989 they moved to a spacious ivy-covered mock-Tudor house in the exclusive neighbourhood of Highland Park, across the Mississippi river in St Paul. Instead of leading the cosseted life of a prosperous doctor's wife — by this time Peterson was an emergency-room doctor at St Paul's United Hospital — Olson threw herself into a variety of high-profile roles in the community.

Keen to get back to acting, she became involved with a number of local theatre groups. "She was highly strung, a fast idler, always on the go," says the theatre director, Wendy Knox, who got to know Olson when she played the part of a witch in *Macbeth*.

"Her choice of roles was very particular," says Lynne Musgrave, director at Minneapolis's Theatre in the Round. "She liked to play the part of a strong woman with a secret in her past." Among these roles were the parts of the scheming Goneril in *King Lear*, Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, and an ageing prostitute in *La Ronde*. "Sara was never shy about posing

**'SHE LIKED TO PLAY THE PART OF A STRONG WOMAN WITH A SECRET'**

for publicity photographs, which regularly appeared in the local papers," says Musgrave. "But in other ways, Sara was very remote and very private. Little did we know just how private she really was."

The audacity of one of Olson's theatre performances is astonishing. In 1990 she auditioned for the role of an American suffragette in a one-woman play called *A Woman of Purpose*. She took the play on a tour of local community centres and schools. She also performed it in the Minnesota State Capitol in front of a full house of state legislators.

Andy Dawkins, a Minnesota state representative, was in the crowd of politicians who watched her perform. He has known Olson and her husband since the late 1970s, when he and Fred Peterson played in a reggae band called Pressure Drop. He is also the couple's civil lawyer, so he is not an impartial observer. But Dawkins refuses to believe Olson is guilty of the offences with which she is charged: "She stood up there in front of the whole legislature and did a one-person show... To have done that, I think she must have known in her own mind that she had not been involved in anything that would have made her a 'most wanted' individual... I still don't believe the woman I have known for more than 20 years is capable of intending harm to another human being."

Apart from acting, Olson was socially active in other ways. For years she campaigned against apartheid, attending regular demonstrations and protest marches. She read newspapers to the blind. She taught English and lessons in good citizenship to immigrants. She ran marathons for charity. She was an energetic member of the Minnehaha United Methodist Church, where her husband played the trumpet on Sundays and her daughters sang in the choir.

And she cooked. Everyone who knows Olson talks about her cooking. Not only did she cook meals for the homeless, but she hosted regular parties at her house, where guests would marvel at her "12-inch-tall cheesecakes" and "exquisite spreads, each individual strawberry individually carved".

"If you were going to a party at Sara's house you wouldn't eat for days beforehand," says one friend.

It is these culinary feats, together with her involvement in the church and her children's school, that have led to her being portrayed as a "suburban soccer mom" — a mother who lives through her