

Artesi hires new attorney

By Gene Vernacchio

BRIDGETON- Vineland karate expert Joseph Artesi Jr., whose conviction in the 1991 death of a Millville man was recently overturned by a state appeals court, has hired a high-powered Philadelphia attorney. Artesi, 23 has obtained the legal services of attorney A. Charles Peruto Jr.

Peruto is known for taking on highly-publicized Philadelphia cases and clients including: Gary Heidnick of the city's infamous "House of Horrors", Joey Coyle, the Philadelphia man who found a fortune that fell off an armored Brinks vehicle and later was the subject of a major Hollywood motion picture; and Tanya Darci, who was convicted of dismembering her infant son Zachary.

Artesi formerly was represented by Vineland attorney Vincent Pancari. Artesi's case has been in and out of Superior Court and the state Appellate Division since the Nov. 5, 1991 death of 20-year-old Mark Watkins, who was critically injured eight days earlier when he cracked his skull in a fight with Artesi Jr. in Cumberland Mall. Police said the fight started over an autograph signed by a karate student dressed as a ninja turtle for a demonstration. Artesi was convicted of aggravated assault in January 1993 for causing the death of Watkins, of Dock Street.

Artesi said he was defending himself, and the jury chose not to convict him of aggravated manslaughter. IN February 1993, Superior Court Judge George Stanger threw out the conviction, saying he should have told the jury it could consider the charge of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, namely Artesi's hands.

On an appeal by prosecutors, the conviction was reinstated by the Appellate Division, which said Artesi's hands could not be classified as deadly weapons. In a defense appeal, the Appellate Division in June of this year overturned the conviction, saying Stranger should have more closely looked into claims that jurors were intimidated by Watkins brother Thomas.