

7 Indicted in Murders of Florida Couple; D.A. Can Seek Death Penalty

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PENSACOLA, Fla. — A Florida grand jury indicted seven men Tuesday in the robbery and killings of a couple known for adopting special needs children, and a lawyer for the family acknowledged that a safe in the couple's home contained \$164,000.

Byrd and Melanie Billings were shot to death July 9. Surveillance cameras captured men dressed as ninjas and wearing black masks entering the couple's sprawling house, stealing a safe and leaving in less than four minutes.

Family attorney Robert Beasley said in a statement that a second safe was not stolen and contained the money, but no drugs, guns or other items to suggest illegal activity. It's not known if the suspects were looking for the second safe, Beasley said. The one they left with had little in financial value.

"Contrary to rumors of as much as \$12 million in the home the night of the murders, the second safe contained \$164,000 in cash, some antique jewelry and assorted legal documents," the lawyer's statement said.

The money was a cash reserve for the family's financing business, Beasley said. The family ran Worldco Financial Services next to a used car lot they operated. Authorities have removed the money as possible evidence, he said.

Meanwhile, a grand jury indicted seven men in the case on two counts each of first-degree murder and one count each of home-invasion robbery.

The indictments give State Attorney Bill Eddins the option of seeking the death penalty against Leonard Patrick Gonzalez Jr., 35, the man suspected of pulling the trigger, and his six co-defendants.

The men are due in an Escambia County court for formal arraignments on the new charges Thursday.

Byrd, 66, and Melanie Billings, 43, had four biological and 13 adopted children. Nine were home and in other parts of the estate during the home invasion.

Investigators found the stolen safe in the back yard of a home that Pamela Long Wiggins, 47, had rented to one of the suspects. Wiggins, an antique shop owner, has been charged as an accomplice in the case. Her attorney has pleaded not guilty on her behalf.

