

Dontae Morris charged in a fourth murder

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TAMPA — Dontae Morris, the man accused of gunning down two Tampa police officers and a third Tampa man since his April release from prison, was charged Friday in a fourth homicide.

Hillsborough County sheriff's deputies linked Morris to the June killing of 25-year-old Harold Wright in Palm River-Clair Mel by fingerprints left on a car at the crime scene, according to an arrest affidavit.

A second suspect, as yet unnamed, may have also participated in the killing, the affidavit said. A girlfriend of Morris told investigators that he and another person planned to rob and kill Wright.

Wright, of Valrico, was found dead on the side of the road next to a rented blue Dodge Charger in the 2000 block of S 51st Street at midnight June 8. Deputies said he was robbed and shot in the head.

Those who knew Wright told investigators he was carrying a large sum of cash and drugs that night, but deputies found no money or drugs at the scene, the affidavit states.

"It was very clear that the intention was to murder Mr. Wright," sheriff's Maj. Harold Winsett said.

Winsett said detectives were investigating Morris' possible involvement in Wright's murder even before the June 29 shootings of officers David Curtis and Jeffrey Kocab.

But it wasn't until the night of June 30 that authorities interviewed the girlfriend of Morris who helped link him to Wright's case. That interview took place in the midst of a massive manhunt for Morris that ended when he turned himself in on July 2.

Winsett would not discuss the investigation, saying only there's still "an awful lot of work to be done" before the case is closed. He would not say whether the handgun used to shoot the officers was linked to Wright.

That gun was already connected to the May 18 death of Derek Anderson in the Kenneth Court Apartments, the third killing in which Morris faces murder charges. Investigators would not say Friday whether they recovered the gun.

When asked whether more people could face charges in Wright's death, Winsett said, "You never know."

Morris remains behind bars without bail at a Hillsborough County jail and will appear before a judge via closed circuit television again this morning for a first appearance in the Wright case.

He remains a "person of interest" in a fifth, unspecified killing in Tampa. Police say they won't release information on that case until they determine several other things about Morris, including those who spoke to him while he was on the run.

Morris eluded authorities for four days after officers Curtis and Kocab were fatally shot during a traffic stop in east Tampa early June 29.

What he did during that time remains a mystery, but investigators may have identified at least one place he slept.

Investigators told Janiesha Carmouche, who lives in the Bristol Bay apartment where police found Cortnee Brantley the day after the killings, that Morris may have spent the night of June 30 at her home.

Brantley, the driver of the car during the fatal traffic stop, was picked up June 29 by police for questioning and released later that day.

Carmouche said she wasn't home at the time and that Morris had a key to her apartment. Before that night, he babysat her kids and often spent the night there.

On Friday, the apartment management notified Carmouche that she was being evicted and had seven days to leave, alleging that she hid Brantley knowing police wanted her. Carmouche said she plans to contest the claim.

Also Friday, police and an FDLE special agent reinterviewed Carmouche, who was good friends with Morris.

Winsett wouldn't name any other open homicide cases that could be linked to Morris. But he said, "Anytime you have a suspect like this, involved in this many cases, we look to compare him to others."

Winsett said it could take several more weeks to complete the Wright investigation alone. Still, "It's a good feeling in the sense that you have some resolution to this case."

Wright's aunt, Claudette Michel, said she saw her nephew the day before he was killed, and he was carrying three bags of marijuana.

"He was a nice person, but he was selling drugs," said Michel, 55. "His mama kept begging him to leave them alone, but he wouldn't."

Michel said she has heard more than one name floated in connection with her nephew's death, but rumors of Morris' ties became more plausible after she heard about the officers' deaths. She said she suspects her nephew's death was the result of a set-up drug deal.

Michel also heard that Morris and Brantley attended Wright's funeral.

Wright's mother, Debra Smith, said it was "a relief to know he's behind bars."

Wright's own criminal history began in 2000, when he was 15 and charged with petty theft. After that, he was arrested nine more times on charges ranging from drug possession to aggravated battery with a deadly weapon.

But his family members called him a good person at heart.

Wright's cousin, Ronald Swinson, 26, said Wright played running back and quarterback on his college football team in Dalton, Ga. He had several children and was always there for them, Swinson said.

"There were tons of people at his funeral," he added.

Swinson, who said he went to elementary school with Morris, said the charge in Wright's killing gives the family some closure.

"I'm happy and my family is happy, too," Swinson said. "It's sick to me because I knew him," he said of Morris.

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