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Levy County murder case assisted by reality show *State attorney takes death penalty off the table*

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LEVY COUNTY – The Sept. 15 indictment by the Grand Jury of Levy County of Merle Mackey, 72, for premeditated first degree murder resulted in part from a reality TV show becoming involved with a cold case in Hernando County, according to information shared by Hernando County Sheriff Al Nienhuis on Nov. 2 during a press conference.

Among the many people and agencies Sheriff Nienhuis thanked on Nov. 2 was Levy County Sheriff Robert “Bobby” McCallum Jr. The Hernando County sheriff said that as soon as Sheriff McCallum learned the murder was in Levy County, he immediately offered to help. Levy County Undersheriff W.O. “Brett” Beauchamp III had announced on Oct. 27 that an old murder case that reportedly took place in Levy County in 1982 had resulted in an arrest. And records show the 72-year-old Mackey was booked into the Levy County Jail without bond on Oct. 25.



Merle Mackey

This is where he awaits trial.

Mackey has been charged with murder after the 1981 disappearance of his wife Evelyn “Laverne” Mackey.

The Hernando County Sheriff’s Office held a news conference on Nov. 2 to announce that a reality TV show named Cold Justice on the TNT network broadcast the TV show’s findings on May 1.

The Levy County Grand Jury’s indictment was based on this 1982 incident reported to it by the Hernando County Sheriff’s Office, Beauchamp noted in a press release last month.

In January of 1982, Evelyn “Laverne” Mackey was reported as a missing person by her family. Evelyn Mackey was the wife of Merle Mackey, Beauchamp said.

Throughout the following years, Beauchamp said, the Hernando County Sheriff’s Office interviewed several witnesses and developed information indicating that the murder actually took place in Levy County. The victim’s body has not been recovered.

HCSO Det. George Loydgren had been working on this case, and several other cold cases. When Sheriff Nienhuis was at a conference of the Florida Sheriff’s Association, representatives of TNT’s Cold Justice show solicited unsolved murder cases that were on the brink of being solved.

The TNT show did not really want a missing person case, but it did become involved with this one, according to what was said at the press conference.

With the added money and manpower of the TV show, Loydgren, his volunteers and several other individuals and agencies worked together. In March, Merle Mackey made admissions to causing the death of his wife and that happened in Levy County, Sheriff Nienhuis said.

Eighth Judicial Circuit State Attorney William “Bill” Cervone’s office is prosecuting the case, because there is reason to believe this is where the murder occurred, according to what has been released so far from the LCSO and HCSO.

Cervone said that although premeditated first degree murder does include the death penalty as a maximum sentence, he is not going to seek the death penalty in this case. The maximum

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sentence for Mackey is life in prison without hope for parole, Cervone said.

The May 1 airing of the Cold Justice program showed the general public those aspects that the TV investigative team found in relation to the case.

An arrest warrant was issued based on the Levy County Grand Jury indictment, Beauchamp said. Mackey was arrested in New Mexico by the U.S. Marshals Service and transported to Levy County, where he was jailed.

Among the several agencies thanked during the press conference, Sheriff Niehuis mentioned the USMS in Texas and New Mexico, and the famed law enforcement agency – the Texas Rangers.

The show funded the airfare for investigators to interview Mackey in Texas earlier this year, Loydgren said, and that saved Hernando County taxpayers money. That is when Mackey allegedly made admissions to being responsible for his wife's death in Levy County, Loydgren said during the press conference, a week ago Monday.

There has not been information released to the public yet to indicate why Hernando County detectives thought Mackey killed his wife in Levy County.

The Office of Fifth Judicial Circuit State Attorney Bradley “Brad” King would be the prosecutor in the case if the murder was believed to have occurred in Hernando County.

The TV show's broadcast indicated that Merl Mackey exploited Laverne Mackey. According to the TV version of reality, Mackey claimed he had terminal cancer and had her add his name to the ownership of her house.

State Attorney Cervone said he has no intention of calling the Cold Justice participants during the trial.

Cervone said the TV personalities are not part of this case. Cervone said his office takes cases to prosecute from information provided by law enforcement agencies, not TV programs.

The Office of Eighth Judicial Circuit Public Defender Stacy Scott is the office responsible for the defense of this suspected killer.