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Suspect in girl's murder freed after four months:[0 SOUTH PINELLAS Edition]

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Full Text (1204 words)

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At 4:07 p.m. Friday, Sandra Morris took a phone call from the Public Defender's Office.

"What?" she exclaimed. "You're joking. No, really? Oh, God, he's coming home!"

She fell to her knees, weeping, and cried: "It's over!"

Less than two hours later, her husband was home.

Charged with the brutal murder of 9-year-old neighbor Sharra Ferger, Dale Morris Jr. had spent more than four months in jail.

But a day after receiving the latest DNA results that failed to link Morris to the crime, prosecutors decided to drop the charge.

Morris was arrested Oct. 16 largely on the strength of what Pasco Sheriff Lee Cannon described at the time as a "tremendous bite mark" on Sharra's shoulder. Two dental experts working with the state said the wound was a probable match to Morris, but two experts enlisted by the defense disagreed.

And at a news conference Friday afternoon, Cannon said investigators could not prove Morris killed his young neighbor, who lived four doors down in the tiny east Pasco community of Blanton.

"All of the evidence that has been collected . . . none of that evidence links Dale Morris to the crime," Cannon said.

When Morris walked free Friday, detectives were left with two unsolved child murders in rural east Pasco.

Sharra's killing occurred more than four years after the abduction and slaying of Jennifer Odom, a 12-year-old girl who lived two miles from where Sharra's body was found.

Cannon, while asking patience of those who live in the area, could offer little reassurance.

"Keep the faith," he said. "We are working as hard as we can, and hopefully we will one day be able to resolve both cases." Free at last

When Morris got word he was being released, he was so eager to get home that he set out walking from the Pasco County jail in Land O'Lakes. His attorneys picked him up about a quarter-mile down the road and took him home, where family members had hung a sign, prepared while he was in jail, that read: "Welcome Home Dale."

He cried as he stepped out of the car, hugging his wife, stepdaughter and mother. He wore the same white shirt and blue jeans he was wearing when authorities arrested him, but he had never held his niece, a 4-month-old born two days after he was arrested. He held her, then said: "I want to go see my dog."

As for his plans, Morris said: "Spend a lot of time with my family. Get my life back together. Then I'll worry about other things when the time comes."

Morris said it is too early to say whether he will consider filing a lawsuit against the authorities over his arrest. "I'm not really worried about that now," he said. "I'm just glad to be home."

But Morris' stepfather, Mike O'Malley, said lawyers have contacted the family to offer their services.

"I know one thing - he was wronged," O'Malley said. "He lost everything."

It wasn't just that the 45-year-old welder lost his job, O'Malley said. "He lost four months of his life, going through hell."

Morris said he had a lot of time to think in jail and met regularly with his pastor from Blanton Baptist Church.

"You just have to put your trust in God and your lawyers," he told reporters, as family members gathered around.

In the distance, three members of Morris' defense team watched the scene.

Assistant Public Defender Tom Hanlon was smiling.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime case for a lawyer," he said. Overall, he said, "the system worked."

Prosecutors acted honorably, he said, as well as law enforcement officers.

"From the very beginning, the cops were given bad advice by Dr. Martin."

Dr. Kenneth Martin, a Holiday dentist, has said he stands by his opinion that Morris inflicted the bite mark on the girl's shoulder. He couldn't be reached for comment Friday.

Documents released by the prosecution show that one investigator, sheriff's Detective John Corbin, said during an interview with one of Morris' ex-wives that Morris "was probably one of our least likely suspects in the neighborhood, but through the forensics that we conducted in the investigation he was linked to the crime."

Sharra's aunt, Becky Cochran of Zephyrhills, said Friday that she still believed Morris was involved in the crime, but that, "if the man didn't do nothing, ain't no sense keeping him in jail." Her disappearance

Sharra disappeared on the night of Oct. 2. The brown-haired girl, a student at San Antonio Elementary, took a bath that night, then slipped on a green Little League shirt. Her mother left for her job as a forklift operator on the late shift at Lykes Pasco. Sharra fell asleep in the living room, next to her brother, and was never again seen alive.

Her body was found the next morning in a field just a few hundred yards from her home on Baxter Avenue. She had been stabbed more than 40 times, sexually assaulted and left naked from the waist down.

Morris' family insisted from the beginning that the Sheriff's Office had arrested the wrong man.

Although Cannon stopped short of saying that Friday's events exonerated Morris, he said investigators aren't harboring any particular suspicions about him.

"He's no more of a suspect than anyone else in the area."

The sheriff added that deputies will not stake out Morris' home, as they did in the days before his arrest.

"There is no reason for him to be under surveillance," he said. A similar crime

This month marked the five-year anniversary of Jennifer Odom's killing. The girl, who had been a friend of Morris' stepdaughter, Amanda Peek, was abducted in 1993 after her school bus dropped her off near her home. Her body was found six days later near Spring Lake in Hernando County.

When Morris was arrested, officials noted similarities between the two slayings and said they were looking into whether Morris could be responsible for both.

But Cannon said Friday detectives had found no evidence linking the crimes.

The chief prosecutor on the Morris case, Bruce Bartlett, said the State Attorney's Office worked with the Sheriff's Office in deciding to charge Morris. The decision to drop the charges before Morris' March 16 trial date also was made together, he said.

At home Friday night, Morris spoke to reporters as his wife curled a hand around his back and buried her face in his chest.

"I forgive them," Morris said. "It'll be hard to forget. . . . I hope they catch the right guy."

Public Defender Bob Dillinger, who also represented Morris, said it is possible Morris could be indicted again for the same crime if more evidence surfaces.

On Friday night, before Hanlon got in the car to leave, Morris stopped him to shake his hand.

"I'll keep you in mind if I need you again," he said. "Hopefully not."

[Illustration]

COLOR PHOTO, TONI L. SANDYS; COLOR PHOTO; BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, TONI L. SANDYS; BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO;; Caption: Dale Morris waves to his stepdaughter as he hugs his wife after being released from the Land O'Lakes Detention Center.; Rod Ferrell and attorney Bill Lackey; Sandra Morris cries as she talks to her husband.; Sharra Ferger

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