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Pahokee sex offender faces murder charges after alibi unravels

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An unraveled alibi and DNA on a towel has a 39-year-old sex offender facing first-degree murder charges on accusations he strangled and bludgeoned a woman whose half-naked body was found under a tree in Pahokee last year.

Deputies say James Harmon emerged quickly as a potential suspect in 52-year-old Ophelia Redden's January 2011 death after several witnesses told them they last saw Redden with Harmon and another man outside the Pahokee liquor store.

A passerby found Redden lying face down under a tree near the 500 block of State Market Road, wearing a bra and underwear pulled down to her knees.

Harmon, of Pahokee, initially told deputies he last saw Redden locked in an intimate embrace with that second man and caught a ride home. His wife Patti gave him an alibi, saying he returned home around 10 p.m. the night of the murder and watched a movie with her before they fell asleep.

Deputies arrested Harmon in February on a probation violation and for allegedly failing to register as a sex offender. Department of corrections records show he served 13 years in prison for a 1991 attempted sexual battery and burglary.

Harmon's wife eventually told investigators that Harmon came home between 2 and 3 a.m. the night of Redden's murder and told her to make up the story about the movie. Investigators say they caught Harmon admitting the lie in several jailhouse calls to his wife.

"We talked about what you were supposed to tell them for me to get out of this [expletive]," deputies say Harmon told his wife in a recorded call. "You were supposed to stick to the story."

Harmon's wife told investigators she provided Harmon with the alibi because she was afraid of him.

Detectives working the case, meanwhile, had matched Harmon's DNA to a blue towel found stuffed in Redden's purse, which was found in a nearby canal and also contained the shirt and pants Redden was wearing when she was last seen.

Other witnesses placed Harmon, known in Pahokee as Nardo, in the area where Redden's body was found around the time of the murder.

A life-long friend of Redden's told investigators that a week before she was killed, Redden complained to him that Harmon had been asking to have sex with her.

The witness told police that Harmon had threatened to rape her when she refused.

Detectives arrested Harmon Thursday at the Palm Beach County jail, where he remains incarcerated on the probation violation. A hearing in that case is scheduled for Jan. 19.

Staff researcher Niels Heimeriks contributed to this story.

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