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Feds investigate murder suspect in AARP fraud case

By DANIEL STURM

The Lansing woman charged with killing her boyfriend and burying him in her yard is also being investigated for embezzling from the Michigan chapter of the AARP.

U.S. postal authorities confirmed that Linda Young Marquardt, the woman charged with murder in the death of her boyfriend, James Lee Wilkerson, is under investigation for allegedly embezzling almost \$46,000 from AARP in 2001. City Pulse reported the embezzlement probe a year ago but was unable to identify the suspect.

Marquardt allegedly shot Wilkerson, 31, multiple times June 9 and buried him behind her home at 311 N. Martin Luther King Blvd., police said. Marquardt, 32, turned herself in July 7 hours after police, acting on a tip from a friend of hers, discovered the body.

Jim Black, a postal inspector for the U.S. Postal Investigation Office in Detroit, confirmed that Marquardt is suspected of having stolen the money when she worked as the senior manager of the AARP's office in downtown Lansing.

Black said Lansing police officers have advised him about the circumstances of the murder. He said that he could not give any specifics about the embezzlement case. No fraud charges have been filed against Marquardt.

Rumors about an embezzlement of \$46,000 to \$100,000 arose after Marquardt took sick time in August 2000, and colleagues who routinely opened her mail observed suspicious invoices, of which they eventually began to make copies, sources said. The colleagues reported discovering fictitious addresses of companies billing to AARP, observing bills for two unauthorized cell phones and finding catalogue mail orders and evidence of personal purchases on office accounts. They also saw receipts for a trip to northern Michigan taken by Marquardt and Wilkerson.

AARP officials declined to comment on the new development. Bill Knox, a spokesman for the state office, told City Pulse last year that the embezzlement involved fraud and was discovered in February 2001, about the same time Marquardt resigned after four years. At the time, AARP employees in Lansing were told she had quit for health reasons.

A spokesman for AARP in Washington, D.C., told City Pulse last year that an employee in the Lansing office

reported the embezzlement to AARP's Chicago office. Sources said the employee was a whistleblower who acted independently of supervisors.

The Chicago office investigated the matter for several months before reporting it to the AARP's board, which turned it over to postal authorities.

Asked why the investigation was still open, Fred VandePutte, a U.S. postal inspector in Detroit, said cases with so much paperwork can go on for months. "That's not unusual," said VandenPutte. "Also, we have to work with the prosecutor, who is on a schedule regarding available resources and court times."

VandenPutte doesn't believe the murder case will have an effect on their fraud investigation. "It could conceivably affect the prosecutor's decision, but that's not something that we have any control over," he said.

Since the embezzlement happened almost two years ago, AARP members have questioned the organization's interest in resolving the case. "I am against crime, but they want to keep it hush-hush," said former AARP volunteer John Willson, who resigned in protest and accused Michigan AARP Director Steve Gools of sweeping things under the rug.

According to an AARP grievance file, Marquardt encouraged coworkers to use office accounts for personal purchases. The same file claims Gools must have known about at least some of the forbidden purchases.

"Linda brought friends to the AARP Motown event. Steve authorized the payment of two rooms, both under her name, one of which was also used by her friends, who also used room service on the AARP bill," wrote one staff member to the grievance file.

AARP's Knox declined to comment on any details of the case. "The only reason why the embezzlement issue is coming up again is because Linda Marquardt has been arrested for murder," he said.

"The murder case has nothing to do with the embezzlement. I'm not willing to confirm or deny anything about an ongoing investigation," Knox said. The Lansing Police Department has not yet contacted the AARP office, he added.

When asked if AARP had information they wished to share with the police, Knox replied: "I don't think so. Linda Marquardt is a resigned employee, and is employed some place else now. The police might want to talk to them."

Marquardt, who faces mandatory life in prison if convicted, is in the Ingham County Jail without bond. Police learned about Wilkerson's death after Marquardt visited a friend in Stow, Ohio. Police say Marquardt admitted to her friend that she had killed Wilkerson and buried him.

Then her friend called Ohio police, who contacted Lansing police with a description of Marquardt's house. Within several hours, police identified the house and obtained a search warrant. They spent an hour digging out the body in Marquardt's back yard, which was littered with toys of her three children. Investigators removed an above-ground pool, which concealed the burial site.

Lansing police Sgt. Noel Garcia said they are still trying to find out why Marquardt killed her boyfriend, but that an accident was unlikely. Garcia said the police have gathered some evidence linking the crime to domestic problems. "There were definitely a whole lot of verbal and mental problems between the both of them. We also have some evidence that there are some physical altercations," Garcia said .

AARP employees reported a fight between Marquardt's boyfriend and another male friend during a double date at a bar in 2001.

Marquardt's children, who are 8, 6, and 2 years old, probably do not have direct knowledge of the crime, Garcia said. "They knew he was gone but didn't know what had happened to him," he said. The sergeant added he hoped Marquardt would decide to let him interview her before the preliminary hearing on July 21.

"There are still so many open questions," Garcia said.

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