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CNN eyes local murder-for-hire case

Sheriff says daughter wanted mother killed

By **HILARY TRENTA**
Staff Writer

Nothing says "Happy Mother's Day" like plotting Mom's murder.

National media outlets such as CNN Headline News' Nancy Grace and "Good Morning America" have taken notice of the trio arrested in Wilson

County last November and charged with criminal conspiracy to commit first-degree murder.

The preliminary hearing for the three was May 7 in Judge Barry Tatum's Criminal Court, who bound the case over to the grand jury for possible indictments.

Lauren Morrow, 19, of Bethpage, Tenn., her boyfriend Andrew Bland, 24, and then-Watertown High school student Joshua Stubblefield were arrested after Morrow and Bland allegedly hired Stubblefield to murder



Morrow

Morrow's mother.

Colleen Strible, Morrow's mother, did not see eye-to-eye with Morrow about her relationship with Bland, according to Wilson County Sheriff's Department investigators.

The couple offered Stubblefield \$150,000 to murder Strible, because they believed Morrow would receive \$2 million from Strible's life insurance policy, according to

the WCSD.

After an informant who knew Stubblefield brought information to the sheriff's department about the student wanting to buy a gun, the informant was fitted with a recording device that caught on tape Stubblefield buying a gun that WCSD had rendered

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Take a candor at these geese

CNN

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inoperable.

Stubblefield was arrested Nov. 12, 2007, and authorities listened in and recorded a telephone conversation between he and Bland that same day. He also wore a listening device Nov. 13 to a meeting where he discussed the murder with the couple.

Morrow and Bland were arrested that day, and all three were charged with criminal conspiracy to commit first-degree murder. Assistant District Attorney Brian Fuller would not comment whether Stubblefield's charges would be plead down for his cooperation with WCSD.

Strible and Morrow are currently living together, and Strible has not pressed charges against her daughter. At the Nov. 26 bond hearing, Strible asked that Morrow's \$50,000 bond be lowered, which it was to \$35,000.

During the show "Nancy Grace" Thursday night, Grace reported that Strible told a show's producer that even if Morrow was convicted, "I will still be there beside her ... and I know in her heart she'd never have gone through with it."

Jack Lowery Sr., Morrow's defense attorney, also appeared on Grace's show, but told The Democrat earlier Thursday afternoon that in his opinion, the case does not cross the legal threshold of

conspiracy, since despite extensive discussion, the trio never finalized any of their plans.

"I think this case, in spite its notoriety, were some young people that admittedly said some things they wished they hadn't; that were at least inappropriate," he said.

"The legal question is whether that action met the threshold to meet conspiracy to murder. The judge commented in pre-trial, had it been a trial and there needed to be proof beyond a reasonable doubt, he did not feel it met that threshold."

Lowery said another big point of the case will be Strible not pressing charges against any of the three.

"In criminal cases, the state is concerned with the victim. In this case, the victim is my client's mother. She's said she loves her dearly, that she knows the other two boys, and has not been afraid in this process. They have a loving relationship," he said.

"It was an unfortunate, impulsive conversation. ... Some of the discussions are admittedly raw. It's not like I condone or approve that kind of discussion. I wish my client had not said some things," Lowery said.

"It was unpleasant kind of talk but it never got to [actually conspiracy] level in my opinion. They should have used better judgment and sense."

Lowery said he's been approached by "Good Morning America," who would like to do a live feed out of Nashville, though he wasn't sure what date they were aiming for. He

said he wanted to keep media questions general to protect his case.

"I don't want to jeopardize my client's defense by responding to the media," he said.

Wilson County Sheriff Terry Ashe was also interviewed on Grace's show and said he saw the case very differently than Lowery.

"We absolutely have the daughter on tape asking that a shot gun not be used, but then there was talk of a closed casket and she said, 'OK.' It's real disturbing to hear that from a child," Ashe said.

"When we interviewed her, she showed no remorse and talked about how she'd spend the insurance money."

Ashe said that there are over two hours of recorded conversation, during which time none of the three said no to the plan. "That's long enough to back out. They were dead set on having her killed."

The national media attention came as no surprise to Ashe, who said he expected it when Strible took the stance she did with Morrow.

"[The preliminary hearing] happened on Mother's Day week. That's the stuff big news stations pick up on," he said.

The grand jury will convene May 12 and 13, which Circuit Court Clerk Linda Neal said may or may not be enough time for the District Attorney to get the case prepared for indictments.

"Since it was bound over to the grand jury so close [to the date they'll meet], the DA may not have enough time to get the case together, in which case they'll hear it in June," she said.

The grand jury will meet June 9 and 10, and Ashe said he is ready to see the case move forward.

"We'll see how it plays out in court. The judge and the jury are the ones who make the decisions."

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