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SCHAFER PLEADS GUILTY TO CHARGES IN 1999 MURDER OF SAAD KAWAF

State Attorney Melissa Nelson announces that Melissa Jo Schafer has pleaded guilty to Second-Degree Murder, Kidnapping, Armed Robbery, Armed Burglary with Assault or Battery, and Aggravated Battery with a Deadly Weapon in the 1999 killing of Saad Kawaf.

Schafer's sentencing guidelines range from 31 years to life in Florida State Prison. She has agreed to truthfully cooperate and testify against her co-defendant — her ex-husband and former Jacksonville Sheriff's Office detective William Baer. She will be sentenced at a later date by the Honorable Gilbert Feltel.

In the early hours of May 17, 1999, Schafer and Baer attacked Saad Kawaf moments after he left his Deerwood home. Kawaf's wife, Samar, went to the garage area of the residence after hearing screams and witnessed Baer stabbing Kawaf in a violent struggle. Samar Kawaf attempted to help her husband but was forcefully stopped by Schafer. During that struggle, Samar Kawaf bit Schafer in the arm.

Schafer and Baer demanded money from Samar Kawaf based on Baer's knowledge that Saad Kawaf, a local business owner, went to the bank each week to make deposits. Under the threat of violence and at knifepoint, Samar Kawaf provided them approximately \$53,000. Schafer and Baer then duct-taped Samar Kawaf's mouth and wrists, and then duct-taped her to a kitchen chair and fled. Samar Kawaf was eventually able to free herself and called police. Saad Kawaf was transported to the hospital but died from his injuries.

DNA evidence was collected at the crime scene and was preserved. As a result of recent advances in forensic technology, this DNA evidence was identified as belonging to both Schafer and Baer. They were arrested in July 2020.

The case is being prosecuted by State Attorney Melissa Nelson and Chief Assistant State Attorney L.E. Hutton.