

Records show murder suspect plotted suicide while on the lam

Palm Beach County court records show that the Miami-Dade man charged with killing his relatives on Thanksgiving Day planned to kill himself while on the lam.



Prosecutors say Paul Michael Merhige bought supplies to kill himself while on the lam.
LANNIS WATERS / PALM BEACH POST

BY SUSAN SPENCER-WENDEL, MICHAEL LAFORGIA AND ANDREW MARRA

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After the bloodbath on Thanksgiving Day that left four relatives dead, Paul Michael Merhige, the man accused of the killings, made his way to the Florida Keys, where he bought supplies to end his own life -- and the bestseller handbook on how to do it, prosecutors say.

On Dec. 1, from Borders Express in Key West, he ordered *Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying*. In the following days, he started buying supplies to do just that, according to a portion of evidence in the case released this week by prosecutors.

One of the suicide methods detailed in *Final Exit* involves using a large plastic bag and gas for suffocation. In trips to Kmart and a marina, Merhige bought five helium kits, garbage bags, scissors, duct tape, tubing and hose clamps, according to the evidence.

Phone records show he made multiple calls to the pro-euthanasia Hemlock Society, which was founded by the book's author, Derek Humphry.

On Nov. 30, Merhige called Humphry's organization four times, receiving a call back from the organization's number later that day.

He called again three times on Dec. 3 and twice on Dec. 16, phone records show, as he holed up in the Long Key motel as a nationwide manhunt continued. There was no second return call from the organization in the records.

The next day, though, Dec. 17, Merhige was at a Walgreens buying more food -- baked beans and chopped chicken -- and pain relievers and arthritis medications.

He made several other calls to bookstores, a hotel, an RV rental dealer and an outdoor outfitter, the records show. And the day before his capture, Jan. 2, he called an auto repair shop.

When U.S. marshals crashed into Room 14, where Merhige had hidden during the manhunt, he cried out: "Don't shoot me!" Then he dropped to his knees, according to a marshals report.

He was slow to obey their orders, and they shocked him with a stun gun three times. "OK, you can cuff me," he eventually said.

One asked Merhige if he knew why they had come. "Because I killed my family," Merhige answered, according to the records.

The evidence released Thursday reflects the extraordinary efforts law enforcement made to capture him, issuing warrants for several cellphones found on Merhige, combing campgrounds and stores looking for him, searching waterways for evidence.

He is accused of killing, after Thanksgiving dinner, his aunt and twin sisters and the 6-year-old daughter of his cousin as she slept in her purple Tinkerbell pajamas, which now are listed as evidence.

Two other family members were wounded but survived.

Merhige is charged with four counts of first-degree murder and two counts of attempted first-degree murder. Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty.

Public Defender Carey Haughwout is defending Merhige and has aggressively sought to withhold evidence from the public, at one time asking a judge for a complete ban on its release, citing Merhige's right to a fair trial.

Family members have said Merhige had a long history of mental illness before committing the crime. But there is no explicit evidence of that in the released documents and e-mails.

One telling e-mail, though, came to Merhige the day after the shooting from Dr. Michael Jenike, a psychiatry professor at Harvard University.

``Paul -- I heard the news. I doubt you are checking e-mail, but if you are, please surrender to authorities. Your parents don't need any more trauma. I will come visit you. -- DrJ''

The only relative who appears to have e-mailed Merhige's AOL account in the days before the shooting was his father, Michael, the documents show.

In six e-mails sent between Nov. 1 and Nov. 25, Merhige and his father discuss mental health issues and computer problems.

Michael Merhige forwarded his son a message from Merhige's sister Carla urging him to attend a book signing. She was one of the people Merhige is accused of killing.

Michael Merhige also wrote to him about a class-action lawsuit filed on behalf of shareholders in a pharmaceutical company, using an anti-Semitic slur.

``The lawyers will take all but a penny," father wrote to son.

Palm Beach Post staff writer Christine Stapleton contributed to this report.

Read more: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/04/02/1561103/records-show-murder-suspect-plotted.html#ixzz0mVHLQnS2>