

# The story behind FSU professor's slaying detailed in new evidence

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By **Rebeca Piccardo**  
Sun Sentinel

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**F**lorida State University professor Daniel Markel had just been gunned down outside his home. And his ex-wife said she had a notion why.

On that day, in July 2014, Wendi Adelson told police someone might have done it for her benefit.

"I can't help but feel that this is all my fault. This can't be a random act of violence; this has to be on purpose. Someone did this for a reason," she said during a recorded police interview. "I'm so scared that someone did

this, not because they hate Danny but because they thought this was good somehow."

The interview is among dozens of newly released documents and recordings that show how investigators began to piece together what they call a murder-for-hire plot.

The evidence reveals:

- Adelson, 37, of Miami, told police that her brother Charlie, a South Florida periodontist, had joked about hiring a hit man.
- Cellphone records show calls between Charlie Adelson's phone and Katherine Magbanua, a woman connected with two men accused of carrying out the killing.
- Shortly after Markel's death, Magbanua started receiving paychecks from the Adelson Institute for Aesthetics and Implant Dentistry in Tamarac.
- The two men charged in the crime made significant purchases in the months after the killing. Sigfredo Garcia bought two cars and a motorcycle, and Luis Rivera bought a motorcycle.

No one in the Adelson family has been arrested or charged in the case and, through their attorneys, they have denied any involvement in Markel's murder.

"We understand why the government has put the Adelson family through this type of severe scrutiny. But nothing has turned up that supports this fanciful fiction that the Adelsons were involved," according to a statement released in August on behalf of the family. "There is a reason that the police have not arrested any of the Adelsons — they weren't involved in Dan's death."

Investigators have been candid about what they think happened. They say Garcia and Rivera acted as hired assassins in an arrangement handled through Magbanua. Magbanua was dating Charlie Adelson and has two small children with Garcia.

"Investigators believe motive for this murder stemmed from the desperate desire of the Adelson family to relocate Wendi and the children to South Florida, along with the pending court hearing that might have impacted their access to the grandchildren," according a police report released in September.

The document also said: "Investigators further believe Magbanua enlisted the father of her two children, Sigfredo Garcia, and his close associate, Luis Rivera, to carry out this murder, and they were all compensated for their actions."

All three of those people have been arrested. Garcia, 34, was picked up in Hallandale Beach in May. In June, authorities charged Rivera, 33, a South Florida Latin King gang leader who was already serving time in a federal prison for a racketeering conspiracy.

Court documents show Rivera took a plea deal Oct. 4, and his testimony led to the arrest of Magbanua, 31, in Davie, said Chief Assistant State Attorney Georgia Cappleman, the lead prosecutor in the case.

"You can understand why it was necessary to move forward and try to hold everyone accountable that has a part in this crime," Cappleman told reporters after a court hearing.

Rivera pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and was sentenced to an additional seven years behind bars, avoiding a trial where he faced the death penalty.

Garcia pleaded not guilty and is scheduled for trial in November.

### **'He'd set off your radar'**

When Markel was shot July 18, 2014, a neighbor saw a car resembling a Toyota Prius pull out of the driveway. The neighbor called 911 after he walked over and found Markel, 41, inside the car in his garage with "blood all over his head."

Police quickly located Wendi Adelson, who was out at lunch with two friends. Once she was inside an interview room, police explained that her ex-husband was on life support in the hospital.

"I don't know who would be angry enough with him to do something like this," she said while crying during a recorded police interview. "My ex-husband caused me a lot of grief, but I would never do something like this."

Adelson then told investigators her brother Charlie joked about hiring a hit man.

"My brother — the one I'm really close to — he makes a lot of jokes in bad taste and it was a joke he made. ... He said, 'You know, I looked into hiring a hit man and it was cheaper to get you this TV. So, instead, I got you this TV,'" Adelson told the investigator.

She then said: "He's my big brother and he's been taking care of me since I was little, but he would never."

Wendi Adelson's boyfriend at the time also told investigators the brother should be considered as a suspect.

"I would be investigating Charlie Adelson," Jeffrey Lacasse, a professor in the College of Social Work at FSU, told an investigator during a recorded interview in July 2014. "If you got in front of this guy, he'd set off your radar. He set off my radar."

Lacasse said Charlie Adelson hung out with unsavory people.

"He's a dentist and he's very wealthy, but he kind of hangs out with people from both sides of the tracks," he said during the interview. "You know, he goes boating in South Beach with his rich buddies and he also goes to his gym with some other kinds of characters."

Lacasse also told investigators Wendi Adelson told him her brother had looked into hiring a hit man and was told it would cost \$15,000.

"Wendi had reported to me that Charlie had considered all the options possible to take care of this problem," he said. "She said it in a dead serious, chilling, uncomfortable way."

When investigators asked Lacasse how he thought Adelson would have committed the murder, he said: "He'd get his buddy in the special forces to do this, or he'd get some seedy guys down in the Cuban neighborhood or something like that."

Wendi Adelson's attorney, John Lauro, said Lacasse "speculates about many things" and looked "obviously upset about no longer being in a relationship with Wendi" during his recorded police interviews.

"The results of the actual law enforcement investigation show that Wendi was not involved in any way," he said.

Lauro added that the recording of Adelson's police interview is "the most powerful evidence of her innocence," because it shows her willingness to cooperate with the police and answer any questions in the investigation.

"You can also sense immediately the raw emotion and pain she feels at being told her ex-husband has been shot," Lauro said. "Anyone watching that interview in its entirety comes away with the belief that Wendi is totally innocent."

### **Tracking cellphone records**

Investigators used surveillance images and SunPass toll records to track down the Toyota Prius seen following Markel in Tallahassee on the day of the shooting. They found that the car had been rented to Rivera in North Miami and that Garcia's cellphone also was listed in the rental documents.

Authorities tracked their cellphone records, which placed the two men in Tallahassee at the time of the murder. An informant also told authorities he had rented a motel room in Tallahassee for them the night before the murder and identified Rivera and Garcia from separate photo line-ups.

Cellphone records show "numerous contacts" between Magbanua and both Charlie Adelson and Garcia before the murder, according to Magbanua's arrest warrant from Sept. 30. On one occasion, phone records showed contact between both Garcia's and Magbanua's phones and a cellphone registered to Adelson's father, Harvey Adelson.

Cellphone records also showed that Magbanua, Rivera and Garcia were in the same area while she called Charlie Adelson on the night of the shooting, the report said.

After Rivera's plea deal on Oct. 4, Charlie Adelson's attorney, David Oscar Markus, said the prosecution bought off Rivera's testimony "by giving away the farm to a murderer" after admitting they didn't have enough evidence to charge anyone else.

"This convicted gangster knows the game and would have said anything not to come out of prison in a box. The prosecution literally threatened him with the needle to get this testimony," Markus said. "That's not a search for the truth. That's a deal with the devil."

Cappleman, the chief assistant state attorney, said: "It is what it is. It's a necessary evil. Otherwise you're looking at the possibility of culpable parties not facing any ramifications for their role in the crime."

### **'She never wanted to live here'**

With Markel gone, Adelson could finally leave Tallahassee and raise her sons in South Florida.

When she filed for divorce in September 2012, Adelson sought primary custody of their two sons and asked a judge to allow her and the children to move to Coral Springs to be near her family. The court denied her petition in 2013.

"That was probably the nastiest divorce I've ever seen," Tamara Demko, a friend of Markel's, told investigators. "I know she felt trapped here."

Investigators say Markel's murder appeared to be tied to his bitter divorce from Adelson, their ongoing legal battle over money and their children, and her parents' "desperate desire" for her and the children to move to South Florida.

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**My ex-husband caused me a lot of grief, but I would never do something like this.**

— Wendi Adelson

"After exhausting all efforts to force or compel Markel into agreeing to allow his ex-wife and children to relocate to South Florida, the subject family members previously identified realized any hope of a legal remedy in their favor was futile," according to the warrant from Sept. 30.

During her interview with investigators, Adelson worried that her former in-laws would think she had something to do with Markel's death.

"The reason I say his parents are going to say I did it is because when we got divorced, I wanted to move to South Florida and I filed a petition to relocate in the court and the court said no," she said in the recorded interview. "So, we're in Tallahassee because of Danny's job."

After the judge denied Adelson's request to leave with her children, her mother, Donna Adelson, suggested the family offer Markel \$1 million to get him to allow the relocation, according to the warrant signed on Sept. 30.

Wendi Adelson refused to go through with that plan, and her mother became "extremely upset," police said in the same report.

"She never wanted to be here ever. She came with Markel. They were supposed to be here a year and then move on," Lacasse, Adelson's former boyfriend, told police. "She never wanted to live here, never thought she would live here."

Lacasse later told investigators that Wendi Adelson said she switched her phone a few days after the shooting because she thought police had bugged it.

Markel's parents later contacted investigators in September 2015 to notify them that Wendi Adelson had changed the children's last names and removed her older son's middle name, which was the Hebrew name of Markel's maternal grandmother, investigators said in the report.

"The Markel family was deeply troubled by this action and believe it was done by Wendi to sever any connection to the Markel family," according to the police report.

### **After the shooting**

Shortly after Markel's death, Magbanua started getting paychecks, signed by Donna Adelson, from the Adelson Institute for Aesthetics and Implant Dentistry. She received more than \$56,000, according to the arrest warrant from Sept. 30.

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Wendi had reported to me that Charlie had considered all the options possible to take care of this problem.

— Jeffrey Lacasse, Wendi Adelson's ex-boyfriend

She also received a 2001 Lexus sedan registered to Harvey Adelson that was previously used by Charlie Adelson, according to the report.

Investigators also say images of Magbanua posted on Facebook before and after Markel's shooting show "obvious breast enhancements" after his death.

"Through analysis of Magbanua's bank accounts and other investigative techniques, it appears that the majority of her income does not come from legitimate employment," the report said. "Investigators believe that Magbanua is supported financially by Charlie Adelson and has received numerous benefits from the Adelsons since Markel's murder."

Garcia and Rivera also bought several vehicles in the months after the murder.

Motor vehicle records showed Garcia bought a 1984 Chevrolet Monte Carlo about a week after Markel's death, followed by a 2000 Nissan Maxima and a Honda motorcycle that August, investigators said. Rivera bought a 2003 Suzuki motorcycle that July, authorities said.

Early in the investigation, people close to Markel and Wendi Adelson shared their concerns about the Adelson family with authorities.

Tamara Demko, Markel's long-time friend, told investigators she drove to Adelson's house as soon as she heard the news and felt a strange tension when she saw Adelson's parents, whom she knew.

"There's just things that don't feel right to me," she told an investigator during a recorded interview the day after Markel was shot. "[Wendi Adelson] opened the door and she looked really calm. ...[Her mother] seemed appropriately upset, then her dad, who I've met a couple dozen times in Coral Springs and up here, he gave me this look. ... It was awkward and it never had been before. That really bothered me."

During a memorial service at Shomrei Torah Synagogue in Tallahassee, an investigator met with Wendi Adelson's parents to ask them for an interview before they returned to South Florida.

But the day after the service, the investigator received a call from Adelson's attorney, letting him know Adelson and the children had left for South Florida with her parents.

"No one in the family has contacted Tallahassee police or asked about the status of the investigation," investigators said in a police report.

*[rpiccardo@sun-sentinel.com](mailto:rpiccardo@sun-sentinel.com), 954-356-4544 or Twitter @rebecapiccardo*

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