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Gov. Bush sparks review of Cohen case

FDLE will take another look at Sarasota man's death

By MATTHEW DOIG
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SARASOTA COUNTY -- The Florida Department of Law Enforcement plans to renew its inquiry into whether a Sarasota man who appeared to die of heart failure in 2003 actually was murdered.

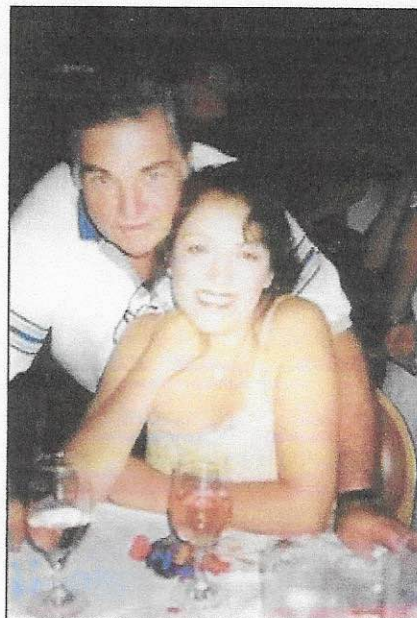
Gov. Jeb Bush personally sparked the review by asking a staff attorney to "re-inquire into the circumstances surrounding" Murray Cohen's death, according to an Aug. 30 letter from Bush's office to Cohen's son, Steve Esdale.

The governor's request followed an Aug. 24 Herald-Tribune story that raised new questions about whether Cohen was already dead when his wife called 911.

The story cited a forensic audio expert who said he can hear a man ask for an ambulance in the background of the taped call between Maria Cohen and the 911 operator.

Murray Cohen was supposed to be the only man in the room at the time of the 911 call, and Maria Cohen told the 911 operator that her husband was "totally gone" before the male voice is heard on the tape.

While state officials confirmed Monday that they will review the case, they downplayed the significance of the governor's request.



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COURTESY PHOTO
Steve Esdale is determined to prove that his father, Murray Cohen, was killed by his wife, Maria Cohen.

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A governor's spokesman called Bush's request routine, and an FDLE official stopped short of calling the new inquiry an investigation.

"The use of the term 'review' is better," FDLE spokesman Larry Long said.

Even so, the request for a review is a stronger response than Esdale got from Bush a year ago.

In July 2004, Bush's deputy general counsel told Esdale that a separate FDLE investigation into his father's death "is not warranted at this time."

For nearly three years, Esdale has sought to prove that Maria Cohen murdered his father for his million-dollar estate. His relentless efforts have forced local, state and federal investigators to examine his father's death repeatedly.

Each investigation found no evidence that Cohen died of anything other than natural causes.

But a Herald-Tribune investigation found a number of inconsistencies that lent credence to some of Esdale's claims -- including that his father's voice could be heard asking for help on the 911 tape.

Esdale said he would withhold judgment until after he sees the results of the review.

"If this is a legitimate investigation, then it's good news," Esdale said. "I'm not looking to bash anybody, I just want justice and closure."

Lt. Chuck Lesaltato, a spokesman for the Sarasota Sheriff's Office, said Sheriff Bill Balkwill also called FDLE after the

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to see "whether enough evidence exists today to support the filing of criminal charges" against three men who were indicted but not charged in Chappell's death.

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