



Ohio Attorney General's Office
Bureau of Criminal Investigation
Investigative Report



2023-3023

Officer Involved Critical Incident - 6235 Hathaway Rd.,
Garfield Heights, Cuyahoga County, Ohio 44125

Investigative Activity: Interview with Wilma Russell
Activity Date: November 14, 2023
Authoring Agent: Special Agent Cory Momchilov #64

On Tuesday, November 14, 2023, Special Agent (SA) Cory Momchilov (Momchilov) and SA Andrew Harasimchuk (Harasimchuk) interviewed Wilma Russell (Wilma) at the Garfield Heights Police Department located at 5555 Turney Road, Garfield Heights, Ohio.

It was reported that Benard Russell, Wilma's husband, had called 911 to ask for the suicide hotline phone number. It was further reported, that Benard then hung up the phone when he was asked follow-up questions by the dispatcher. Garfield Heights officers were dispatched in reference to the 911 call and Wilma was present at their residence, 6235 Hathaway Road, Garfield Heights, Ohio, when Garfield Heights officers responded.

During SA Momchilov and SA Harasimchuk's interview with Wilma, Wilma provided details of a recent and ongoing disagreement she had with Benard. However, Wilma did not provide the details chronologically.

Below is a summary of Wilma's statement to investigators, regarding her and Benard's recent disagreement in chronological order.

Summary

Wilma inherited \$60,000 from her grandmother who recently passed away and was the sole beneficiary. Wilma wanted to share some of the money with her other siblings and had contacted a probate attorney. Benard overheard a conversation that occurred on Friday, November 10, 2023 between Wilma and the attorney. Benard disagreed with Wilma's decision and the two discussed the matter. According to Wilma, Benard "put a squash on it."

On Tuesday, November 14, 2023, Wilma advised her and Benard had a "deep family conversation." Wilma advised that during that conversation she brought up past infidelity issues and the conversation "shook" Benard.

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Interview Details

SA Momchilov asked Wilma if she could explain what had occurred.

Wilma explained that she was inside her residence, getting dressed when she heard a "bump, bump, bump." Wilma advised that she "kind of ignored it" and then heard her doorbell ring. Wilma answered the door and was greeted by a police officer. The officer informed Wilma that the police department received a call "about suicide." The officer asked if anyone else was home and that the police department received a call from someone inside the residence. Wilma advised that her husband was in the basement and that "he could of called." Wilma invited the officers into the house and directed them to the door that led into the basement. It was discovered that door was locked. Wilma then provided the officers a key that opened an exterior door that led into the basement.

Wilma advised that the officers entered the basement and that she could "hear them talking to him." Wilma then went outside and attempted to enter the basement but was told to leave. Wilma then went back and sat down at her kitchen table until additional officers arrived. At that point, Wilma was taken out of the house towards a police vehicle. Wilma stated she noticed more officers arrived and that the street was blocked. Wilma then stated she heard, "Boom, boom, boom, three shots." Wilma stated, "The female cop comes out, she's clearly upset."

Wilma explained that eventually Benard was brought out on a gurney while chest compressions were being performed on him. Wilma stated, "I don't know what's going on. I don't know if he had a gun, shot himself, I'm just praying he pulls through this but to be honest with you, I don't know how good it sounds. I know, unfortunately he could have did a cop by suicide, who knows, three shots make me think, she shot him, not the other way around, because I don't think you can shoot yourself three times, I don't know..." Wilma stated that she "definitely heard three shots."

SA Momchilov asked Wilma how long her and Benard have been married. Wilma stated she and Benard got married in 1976 and that Benard retired from the Cleveland Fire Department.

SA Momchilov stated, "Has he ever had, I guess somebody mentioned that he called a suicide hotline." Wilma stated that she believed that the officers mentioned that Benard called the police department to get the number to the suicide hotline.

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SA Momchilov asked, "Has your husband ever had issues with suicide or discussed suicide?" Wilma replied, "No, no, no, no. We had one of those deep family conversations this morning and um, and it carried over from Friday because I told him, I said, 'you know, you get mad at me and then you want to threaten divorce.' You know, I'm at the point where I want to say, 'Just get the divorce.' You know, it's this bad." Wilma advised that Benard's response was, "threatening is the only way that you seem to hear me and understand."

Wilma further stated, "I was mopping down the steps and ah, sat down, he was watching tv, had some water, you know, and he brought the conversation that we had on Friday up and unfortunately, um, I guess you just don't understand, um, I guess, he, he, he probably stressed himself out. Because during all the conversation and everything we talked about, then it came down to, you know, they taught this stuff, what's mine is ours and what's yours is yours. You know, I just don't understand that, that was him talking or this ol' happy life, happy wife bullshit. I definitely don't believe that, that was a long time ago, you know, I been quit believing that stuff. I said, you know, when I started to talk, you know, you may not remember this Benard, but you have to think about this and I think this is where I must of upset him, with this conversation. I said, you know, infidelity is the leading cause of divorce. Most people don't put up with this, they get a divorce, we would have been divorced so long ago. I said but, you know, we put up with it. I said, then it gets to the point now where you're not taking care of yourself. So if you can go out and come back with a disease and I can go and see you're taking medications cause you picked up something, what am I supposed to do with that. How can I even think about wanting to be intimate with you. So, you're right it is easy to shut down. You're happy off in the basement doing you thing and, you know, I said but whenever you want to, you can come to bed, but you choose to stay up and watch tv all night. I think he watches tv all night, he doesn't turn the tv off, you know. I said we've been in this house, you've come to this bedroom one time, to sleep in this bed. That conversation definitely shook him, I could tell it shook him. I think so many times I held that in. I've held that in."

SA Momchilov asked Wilma if that conversation occurred this morning. Wilma shook her head yes and stated, "I could tell he was obviously shaken and all he kept saying was, 'It isn't so, it isn't so.' He didn't say I just don't get it, he just said, it isn't, you know, I'm not, it isn't so."

Wilma continued, "So, after a little while and he's smoking and, I said, 'Evidently this had affected you to the core.' You know, my statements but he never engaged the conversation any further. Normally he accuses me of, 'you just want to end this conversation and run off.' So, I patiently, you know, we were probably down there two

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hours. Eventually, just finished the cigar, slipped on his shoes and got his keys and went out the back door. He left the back door open, and I just figured he gone to piddle in the garage."

Wilma advised that she finished doing the laundry and then went upstairs around 11:15 A.M. Wilma then watched the tv show "The View" and then took a shower sometime after 12:00 P.M. After the shower, Wilma received a phone call from her son, who lives out of state. Wilma explained that her son asked if she was around Benard. Wilma advised that she was not and that she had just stepped out of the shower. Wilma further advised her son said he would call Benard after their conversation. Wilma advised that she and her son "chit chat" for a while and told her son, "I haven't been able to broach dad about us coming to D.C. for Thanksgiving, he's a little upset with me right now." Wilma told her son that he would speak with Benard about going to D.C. on Friday when we "Take his truck in." Wilma advised her son stated, "I'll go ahead and start that conversation." Wilma advised that after her conversation with her son, she heard the house phone ring (her son called the house phone to speak with Benard). Wilma advised that she then "Got up and looked and it (phone) wasn't in use, so he (Benard) didn't answer the phone." Wilma advised that she finished getting dressed and that's when she heard the police knock on the door.

SA Momchilov stated, "Forgive me for asking, or prying, you said you guys had an argument on Friday and it kind of boiled over."

Wilma stated, "He got upset with me Friday." Wilma explained that she recently inherited some money after her grandmother's death, and she was the sole beneficiary. Wilma further explained that she had reached out to probate attorney asking if she could give her siblings "something to sign" in which, they would not sue her if she gave them some of the inherited money. Wilma stated that the probate attorney called her on Friday when she and Benard were driving home from the doctor's office. Wilma further stated that Benard overheard the conversation and stated, "Why don't you get it, we all told you, you do not share this money."

On Saturday, Wilma advised that her and Benard were supposed to go to Delaware, Ohio, to visit her cousin but Benard was "upset" and stated, "You go where you want to go." Wilma advised that she did not want to go to Delaware by herself and canceled the trip.

On Saturday morning Wilma stated she wanted to address the issue with Benard and felt as if Benard was "pouting." Wilma stated, "So, he's down in his little cave (basement) and it's not uncommon for me to go and have coffee with him in the morning." Wilma advised that she attempted to go downstairs to have coffee with Benard. This document is the property of the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation and is confidential in nature. Neither the document nor its contents are to be disseminated outside your agency except as provided by law - a statute, an administrative rule, or any rule of procedure.



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Benard, but the basement door was locked from the inside and the door has never been locked before.

Wilma advised that she stayed upstairs and typed Benard a letter. Wilma advised that a friend of hers then came over. At that point, Benard left the basement to see who was at the house. Wilma then gave Benard the letter and Wilma and her friend went to a tree festival in Akron. (Agents were able to locate the letter on a desk in the basement after the shooting.)

Letter to Benard,

I have not been at peace with myself in regards to sharing Grandma Jo's assets with my siblings. I felt you knew I was not at peace with it and I felt we or maybe I talked around the subject.

You have been clear on your position of not giving my siblings anything and you have even said that you didn't want to be like my sisters waiting on Jo to die so we could combine our assets. (I don't know if you remember that, we use to sit on the porch on Rutland and talk.)

Anyway, you have made the decision for me and you will not hear me talk about sharing with Connie or Pat. Are you okay with me giving Marcus and Mrs. Lewis \$5,000 each and my brother David \$10,000.?

Marcus and Mrs. Lewis are not expecting anything but I feel they had been there for Jo when none of the family was.

Figure 1: Letter located in basement.

Wilma advised that when she returned home, Benard responded to the letter "put something back in my hand" (at the bottom of the letter that Wilma provided to Benard, Benard wrote a handwritten response).

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Benard:

I do understand that you have been uneasy with our decision not to share Clarence J.'s assets with your family.

I had and do still agree with the decision to award Marcus & Mrs. Lewis with \$5,000 each. They were there when no one else had even thought about helping Clarence Jr. But if you award any of your sisters any part of that money it opens the door to the argument that if you award one of your sisters any of that money you should award them all !!!

We would not want in so to die your sisters were. As so far as David's concerns I believe it is just chasing a paycheck.

No this " We are not rich by any stretch of the imagination. We have our dreams and goals, and this blessing does not and probably will not come again. We are at the end come in our life and we need to secure our future because no one is going to help us except us.

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We did not hit the mega millions lottery, and in the not too distant future this money will be gone... What do you do then?

Benard

Figure 2: Benard's handwritten response to Wilma's Letter

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On Sunday morning at 8:30 A.M., Benard had a doctor's appointment for an MRI. After that, Wilma stated she made some chicken wings for the Browns game. Wilma stated she did not remember anything significant happening on Monday.

At this point in the interview, Wilma began to discuss the conversation she had with Benard on Tuesday again. Wilma stated, "When I come downstairs because I'm mopping down, that's when we sit down and he starts to, 'Why don't you feel at peace' you know, and I, you know, you know what, I know -inaudible- I don't need to share or whatever but I just been trying to pray over it to feel at peace with it, you know. I didn't tell him this, I probably should of, he does know, I do believe in giving, you know. I told him, as far as I was concerned Benard, on Friday, you put a squash on it Friday when you said don't give your sisters anything -inaudible- the cap, what's yours is mine. So, you cannot give away half of our money, you cannot give away our money to your sisters, you know, they took it to court and all this stuff, you know. He says, so, I told him as far as I was concerned, Friday it was settled. I said, but I did promise my brother something and he said -inaudible- all that he is, is a paycheck. What has he done to deserve any of this, and I am trying to get a new kitchen, but would I give, would I share this little 60 thousand dollars with everybody and then I don't have 10 thousand for my kitchen, you know, and he said that doesn't make sense, you know. You got the kitchen right there in your hand, you just have to decide what company you want. That's why I say money makes strange bedfellows, you know. I was being honest, but I was not at peace with my decision, but if I think that I was, it would be over with, I wouldn't be thinking about it. When it comes down to our household, he does lay down the law and the way he put it on Friday, that was it, you know, but he doesn't believe me. You brought the conversation up today, I didn't. You know, when we sit down, I didn't bring it up. You know, so, he's good to tell me what I'm thinking, you know. Anyway, on and on and on, you know, this happy wife, happy life, so if I tell you what I'm thinking, I've totally upset you. I mean, I would never dreamed he was suicidal. I've never seen that in him."

SA Momchilov stated, "So I guess what I'm gathering from this, Wilma, you came into a little bit of money, and you wanted to give some to your family members, right, and he was kind of against that, and that's what kind of started the argument on Friday and it kind of led into.." Wilma replied, "Mm hu, but he said it's been going on the whole time."

Wilma advised that Benard has had a lot of doctors appointments this year and stated that he "has had a shorter fuse." SA Momchilov asked Wilma if Benard had been

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diagnosed with any diseases or chronic issues. Wilma advised that a doctor showed them that Benard has "more little strokes" and that is why Benard had the MRI on Sunday.

SA Momchilov asked Wilma if Benard kept any weapons or firearms in the house. Wilma explained at some point, her niece began taking care of her grandmother and they removed a long gun from the residence, and she believed Benard put it in the garage. Wilma also stated, "I think I found a Colt .45, that I gave him from cleaning out my grandma's house. I thought he was getting rid of it."

Wilma also stated she was previously "cleaning up" and found "little bullets." Wilma gave the bullets to Benard and asked if they were for the shotgun. When Wilma was doing the laundry yesterday, she located the bullets that she had previously found, standing up on the desk downstairs. Wilma described the bullets as being 1 or 2 inches long.

SA Momchilov asked Wilma if she had any security cameras at her residence. Wilma stated, "No, we, what was on the house we didn't really know how to work and the people didn't leave us the instructions like they said, and we never wanted to be under contract with -inaudible-."

SA Momchilov asked Wilma if Benard had previous encounter with law enforcement. Wilma replied, "Not negative."

At this point in the interview, SA Momchilov left the room and spoke with Garfield Heights police personnel. SA Momchilov then re-entered the room and informed Wilma that Benard had died.

The interview with Wilma was recorded both by audio and video. The audio recording is attached to this investigative report. The video interview was placed into the item section of the physical case file, labeled as Item I.

Attachments:

Audio Interview of Wilma Russel

Items:

Video Interview of Wilma Russell

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