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HUSBAND KILLED HIS NEWLYWED WIFE, POLICE SAY

LAURA FIGUEROA, lfigueroa@herald.com

He promised to love and protect his wife till death do them part.

Four days later, Michel **Escoto's** wife was found bludgeoned to death near a Dumpster in Medley.

That was nearly three years ago, on Oct. 14, 2002.

Early Tuesday, **Escoto**, 33, was charged with the murder of his bride, Wendy Marie **Trapaga**, 21, of Miami Beach.

Escoto was taken into custody at the home of his girlfriend, Yolanda Cerrillo, in the Fontainebleau area. He could face the death penalty if convicted.

From day one, police considered **Escoto** a prime suspect in his wife's slaying. Her family always felt **Trapaga's** new husband was behind her murder - and said so publicly.

After all, just days before the couple eloped to the Florida Keys, **Escoto** had taken out a \$1 million life insurance policy in **Trapaga's** name.

"All of this seemed set up from the beginning," said **Trapaga's** sister, Rita Stephan.

"He was able to fork out the money for a pricey life insurance policy, but where they were living was a hole in the wall, as if it was only a temporary living situation for him."

Trapaga's mother and stepfather declined comment Tuesday, saying they will hold a news conference today with their attorney.

"We don't want to say anything that will hurt the case, so we are following our attorney's advice and will not say anything until then," said Juan Benitez, **Trapaga's** stepfather.

EVIDENCE LACKING

From the very beginning, the **Trapaga** family had pointed the finger squarely at **Escoto**. Back then, Miami-Dade homicide detectives did not have enough evidence to make an arrest. **Escoto** refused to give DNA samples or to undergo a polygraph test.

"I'm not saying he's the one who did this, but he is a prime suspect," Gus Bayas, the lead detective, told reporters in November 2003, a year after the slaying. "To this date, we've been unable to eliminate Michel **Escoto** as a suspect."

Bayas has since retired from the police department.

"Detectives developed new information that led to his arrest," Juan DelCastillo, a Miami-Dade police spokesman, said Tuesday.

The evidence came from a civil case. In July, **Trapaga's** mother, Myriam Benitez, sued **Escoto** for the \$900,000 **Escoto** was in line to receive from his wife's life insurance policy. The money had been held in an escrow account.

Benitez won the case against **Escoto** Aug. 9. **Escoto** withdrew all claims to the money, making it available to **Trapaga's** estate, court records show.

Benitez's lawyers say it was **Escoto's** five and a half hours of testimony in the civil trial that may have provided police with the evidence they were looking for.

"He had a lot of inconsistencies in his story," said Jorge Barron, an attorney for **Trapaga's** family.

Among them:

Escoto testified that on the day of the murder the couple were returning from a one-night stay at the Miami Executive Motel and partying at the nearby club La Covacha when they got into a heated argument.

He said the couple arrived at their Miami Beach apartment around 5 a.m., but **Trapaga** stormed off by herself.

The new groom then told lawyers he called **Trapaga's** mother at 5:25 a.m. to tell her about the couple's argument and to find out if she knew of **Trapaga's** whereabouts. He said **Trapaga** had taken her car. At the civil trial, attorneys for Benitez poked holes in that story.

"We found a couple who operates a lunch truck in the area," said Rene Palomino Jr., another attorney for **Trapaga's** family. "They open their cart every day at the same time - 5 in the morning - and the only people they saw around that time were the garbage collectors." Phone records also showed **Escoto** and Cerrillo, at the time his ex-girlfriend, exchanged several phone calls the morning of the murder.

Escoto said he was checking on her daughter, who had been sick for a week. However, police found a witness who said the little girl had been fine.

The Miami-Dade coroner's office also said **Trapaga's** death occurred between 3 and 5 a.m.

Escoto was unable to provide an alibi for his whereabouts during those hours.

Escoto's lawyer, Miguel Manuel de la O, did not return repeated phone calls Tuesday.

Trapaga's body was found around 6 a.m., along the 7200 block of Northwest 70th Street, about 10 minutes away from the hotel where he said they had spent the final night of **Trapaga's** life.

Trapaga and **Escoto** met in February 2002, while **Trapaga** was a student at La Belle Beauty School. They moved into a Miami Beach efficiency by July and eloped that October.

Stephan said her family never liked **Escoto**. "The first time I met him, I shook his hand, and I wanted to wipe my hands right after."

CRIMINAL RECORD

According to police records, **Escoto** has a criminal record dating back to February 1995, when he was charged with robbing a Walgreen's off Bird Road and Southwest 87th Avenue. He also faced charges of carrying a concealed weapon and fleeing from police.

Trapaga, known to her family as someone who would tend to stray animals, graduated from William H. Turner Technical Arts High School, where she was the president of the school's Students Against Drunk Driving and Youth Crime Watch organizations.

Her father, Ernesto **Trapaga**, died in a plane crash when Wendy was 6 years old, perhaps a reason why "she was always rushing to live life each minute," said her sister.

Trapaga was the type of girl who opted not to buy yearbook photos or a "Grad Night" ticket her senior year. Instead, she used the money to buy red satin and sew a prom dress for a friend who could not afford one.

"She saw everyone through rose-colored glasses," said her sister.

"She saw only the good in people. She had faith in someone that she thought would take care of her, but unfortunately that was not the case."

Herald staff writers Luisa Yanez and David Ovalle and researcher Monika Z. Leal contributed to this report.

MURDER CASE CONTRADICTIONS

Here are statements made by Michel **Escoto** during the police investigation into his wife's death and evidence that emerged in the civil lawsuit against **Escoto**.

Statement 1: The day Wendy **Trapaga** died, the couple got into an argument before entering their Miami Beach apartment around 5 a.m., causing **Trapaga** to storm off. **Escoto** said he went inside the apartment.

Civil case evidence: A couple who set up their lunch truck near the apartment each morning at 5 a.m. said they did not see **Escoto** or **Trapaga** around the area at that time. The only people seen in the area were garbage collectors.

Statement 2: **Escoto** said his 3 a.m. calls to then-former girlfriend Yolanda Cerrillo were to check on the status of Cerrillo's sick daughter.

Civil case evidence: Cerrillo's daughter was not sick that weekend, according to testimony from a friend who had stayed with Cerrillo.

Statement 3: **Escoto** said he was unfamiliar with the Medley area where **Trapaga's** body was discovered.

Civil case evidence: A business card was found in the couple's apartment for a Medley motorcycle shop where **Escoto** frequently had his bike serviced.

Statement 4: **Escoto** could not explain where he was between the hours of 3 and 6 a.m. the day his wife died.

Civil case evidence: Miami-Dade coroner Dr. Ken Hutchins said **Trapaga's** death occurred between 3 and 5 a.m. Her body was found about 6 a.m. Inside Wendy **Trapaga's** body, medical examiners found sleeping pills, pain killers and anti-anxiety medicine.

That means her body would have been so drugged up, she couldn't have driven away after a fight with her new husband, as he contends, just hours before she was found beaten to death.

The detail was disclosed in court papers released Wednesday in the arrest of Michel **Escoto**, who was charged this week with murdering his new bride in 2002.

Escoto - who weeks before the murder had taken out a \$1 million policy on **Trapaga** - had claimed his wife stormed off after an argument shortly before she was found bludgeoned to death next to a Dumpster in Medley.

The drugs would "have caused her to be extremely lethargic," Miami-Dade Detective John Butchko wrote in court documents. "The fact that the victim's body had no defensive wounds was consistent with her intoxicated state and reflected a person with so little control over their body they could not have been expected to drive anywhere."

The arrest came days after **Escoto** dropped a claim to the life insurance policy on **Trapaga** - and making contradictory statements during civil court testimony.

At a news conference on Wednesday, **Trapaga's** family floated their theory:

Interpreting a home pregnancy test, **Escoto** convinced his girlfriend she was pregnant, sparking their rushed wedding - and her murder to cash in on the life insurance policy.

"He's really arrogant and he thinks he's smarter than everyone else," said Jorge Borron, an attorney for **Trapaga's** mother, Myriam Benitez.

Trapaga and **Escoto** had met in early 2002 and by July were living in a Miami Beach efficiency. In August 2002, they took out \$1 million life insurance policies on each other. About 10 days before they eloped to the Keys, **Trapaga** called her mother with the happy news.

"She told me I was going to be a grandma," Benitez said at the tearful news conference.

When Benitez suggested to her daughter she immediately begin prenatal care, **Escoto** stepped in and told her no - it would be too stressful, Benitez said.

An autopsy later revealed **Trapaga** was not pregnant.

Escoto told detectives his version: On Oct. 14, 2002, after a night of partying and a brief stay at a hotel near Miami International Airport, he and his new bride began arguing. The reason: he had found she lied about being pregnant.

According to **Escoto**, she stormed off in her car.

An hour later, her body was found behind the Medley Dumpster.

During their investigation, detectives say, **Escoto** was uncooperative - he refused to give DNA samples or to undergo a polygraph test. But during the civil trial over the insurance policy, he was compelled to testify and made inconsistent statements about that night.

For example, he initially told police that he and his wife left the hotel about 3:45 a.m.

But during the civil trial, he testified he left at 3 a.m. - and according to cellphone records, shortly thereafter, he made a phone call just blocks from the crime scene.

Phone records showed **Escoto** exchanged several calls the morning of the murder with Yolanda Cerrillo, at the time his ex-girlfriend.

Escoto said he was checking on Cerrillo's daughter, who had been sick for a week.

However, police found a witness who said the little girl had been fine.

"He was the last person to have seen the victim alive. No one can vouch for his whereabouts, nor for those of his girlfriend Yolanda Cerrillo, at the time the killing took place," Detective Butchko wrote.

[ILLUSTRATIONS=] photo: Wendy **Trapaga** (a)