Israel orders Brown review

Contributed by JOSE PEREZ (Special to South Florida Times)

FORT LAUDERDALE – New elected Broward Sheriff Scott Israel has instructed Ron Gunzburger, general counsel with the Broward Sheriff's Office (BSO), "to pull all files" related to the death of businessman Oral Brown in 2001. After Gunzburger finishes that "internal inventory," a decision will be made on whether to re-open the case, Israel said.

He said he has not given Gunzburger a deadline because "there are so many things to do" as the BSO continues to transition under new leadership.

Israel however is denying that the transfers of two BSO deputies who took part in the investigation of Brown's death is linked to the case.

Veda Coleman-Wright, acting director of BSO's Public Information Office, said Lt. Robert O'Neil is now assigned to Tamarac, where he is responsible for overseeing road patrol services. Detective Glenn Bukata is now a road patrol sergeant in Pompano Beach.

Israel said those transfers were "not even remotely connected to Oral Brown." They were related, instead, to routine changes in personnel that normally follow the arrival of a new sheriff, he said.

"The transfers allow us to take this agency forward," Israel said in an interview with South Florida Times.

Brown was involved in a single-vehicle rollover accident at Fort Lauderdale's Swap Shop on Oct. 15, 2001. After he was freed from the wreckage, he appeared disoriented and first responders reported having to forcibly subdue him.

Brown was hogtied and strapped face down on a stretcher and taken to a hospital emergency room, where he was pronounced dead. An autopsy and a BSO homicide investigation found his death was accidental. A Grand Jury reached the same conclusion and no criminal charges were filed.

Brown's family filed a lawsuit over his death and the case is pending in court.

A key factor that casts doubt on the accidental death conclusion is whether a cervical collar had been placed on Brown, whose neck was bruised and injured. The autopsy found he also suffered from petechial hemorrhaging, a possible sign of strangulation.

Bukata, who prepared the homicide report on May 8, 2002, wrote that paramedic Ken Loukinen had told him he had put a cervical collar on Brown. But the audio recording of Loukinen's statement shows he never made any statement about placing a cervical collar on Brown.

Also, during a deposition taken in the lawsuit, Loukinen said he did not put a collar on Brown and did not see anyone else do so.

BSO Deputy Todd Chase, in a statement to O'Neil, said he didn't recall seeing a collar being put on Brown.

And the autopsy report makes no mention of a cervical collar. That autopsy was performed by Dr. Linda Rush, O'Neil's wife. ressing for a special prosecutor before Gunzberger finished his internal investigation would be "getting ahead of ourselves," Coleman-Wright said.

Michael Winer, attorney for the Brown family, said they were not impressed by the transfers of Bukata and O'Neil.

"They just want to find out what happened to their father, their husband," he said.

Winer, who has called for an independent review of the autopsy report, said ongoing delays in finally bringing some closure to Brown's family were "ludicrous."

"Mrs. Brown has waited over 12 years to find out what killed her husband," he said. "Apparently no one is in a big rush to find out what happened to him and that's not right."

*Pictured above is Broward Sheriff Scott Israel, left, and the late Oral Brown, right.