

# **\* NEWS RELEASE \***

## **ALFRED POWELL PLEADS GUILTY TO 1982 COLD-CASE MURDER OF SEASIDE MOTHER SANDRA STEPPUHN**

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**IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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Monterey County District Attorney Dean D. Flippo announced today that Alfred Powell, age 62 and currently an inmate at California State Prison-Solano in Vacaville, pleaded guilty to second-degree murder for the December 9, 1982 killing of Seaside mother Sandra Steppuhn.

Steppuhn, who was also known by her maiden name of McGee, was a 32-year-old mother of three daughters who lived with roommates in Seaside. On December 9, 1982, she borrowed a car from a friend so that she and her roommates could go out for the evening. On her way home from picking up the car, Steppuhn gave a ride to a male hitchhiker whom her roommates would later identify as Powell. When Steppuhn's roommates told her that they wanted to cancel their plans, Steppuhn decided that she still wanted to go out for the evening. She told her roommates that she was going to drop the hitchhiker off and that she was then going to a bar. Steppuhn left with the hitchhiker and never returned home.

The last reported sighting of Steppuhn that night was between 9:30 and 10 p.m. at the Quik Stop on Fremont St. in Monterey. A clerk at the Quik Stop said that Steppuhn came into the store and bought gas while an unknown male remained outside with the vehicle. After they left, Steppuhn was never seen again. Her father reported her missing to Seaside Police Department on December 11, 1982.

The car Steppuhn had borrowed the night of her disappearance was found abandoned in February 1983 at the former Del Monte Hyatt House, now the Hyatt Regency Monterey Hotel. The vehicle's keys were in the ignition and the doors were unlocked, but there was no evidence showing what had happened to Steppuhn. She remained listed as a missing person for the next 32 years.

In September 2015, landscapers digging in a yard on Third Street in Monterey located Steppuhn's skeletal remains buried in a makeshift grave on the property. Steppuhn was found in the same clothing she had been wearing the night she disappeared. At the time of her disappearance, Powell lived in a detached garage on the property where Steppuhn's remains were discovered. He had been working for the elderly female homeowner as her gardener.

Powell was arrested on March 4, 1983 for the murder of Suzanne Kay Nixon, a 30-year-old hairstylist from Pebble Beach. Nixon's body was also found in the garage on Third St. At the time of Nixon's murder, Powell had not yet been identified as a suspect in Steppuhn's disappearance. Powell began serving a sentence of 15 years to life in prison on the Nixon murder in September 1983. He has remained in custody ever since.

On June 1, 2016, Powell was formally charged with Steppuhn's murder. He was ordered to stand trial for the charge following a two-day preliminary hearing in June 2016, where both of Steppuhn's former roommates identified Powell as the hitchhiker who had left with Steppuhn the night she vanished. Powell's jury trial had been scheduled to begin on January 8.

On January 26, 2018, Monterey Superior Court Judge Julie R. Culver will sentence Powell to a term of 15 years to life in prison for second-degree murder. Powell is currently serving a separate term of 15 years to life for the murder of Nixon. The sentences will run consecutively, meaning he will not receive credit on the new plea for time that he has already served on the Nixon case.

Based on Powell's current age and the two consecutive life sentences, the District Attorney's Office was satisfied that the agreement will keep Powell in prison for the remainder of his life.

Steppuhn's missing person case was initially investigated by retired Seaside Police Department detective and former District Attorney Investigator Mark Puskaric. Retired Salinas Police detective Mark Clark re-opened the investigation in 2009. Since 2015, the homicide case was investigated by Monterey County District Attorney Investigator Peter Austen, Monterey Police Department Detectives Jeff Welch, Greg Galin and Bryan Kruse, and Dr. Lauren Zephro, a forensic anthropologist with the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office.