

*** NEWS RELEASE ***

ALFRED POWELL SENTENCED TO LIFE IN PRISON FOR 1982 COLD-CASE MURDER OF SEASIDE MOTHER

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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, was sentenced to 15 years to life in prison for the December 9, 1982 murder of Seaside mother Sandra Steppuhn. On January 5, Powell pleaded guilty to second-degree murder days before his jury trial was scheduled to begin.

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 p.m. 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 previously 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.

Monterey Superior Court Judge Julie R. Culver sentenced 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.

During the sentencing, Judge Culver heard victim impact statements from Steppuhn's husband and her three daughters, who were 12, 12 and 7 years old when their mother disappeared. The family members expressed that while they all coped differently with their mother's loss, they found strength through supporting each other. They wanted Powell to know that while he permanently changed their lives the day he killed their mother, he did not break them.

Judge Culver told the courtroom that while she had presided over many murder trials in her career, she had not seen or sentenced anyone as depraved as Powell. Calling him "intensely egocentric" and stating that he had psychopathic and sociopathic traits, Judge Culver stated that she intended for Powell to remain in prison for the rest 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.