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### **BAER PLEADS GUILTY TO MURDER IN 1999 MURDER OF SAAD KAWAF**

State Attorney Melissa Nelson announces that William Baer has pleaded guilty to First-Degree Murder, Kidnapping with a Weapon, Armed Robbery, and Aggravated Battery with a Deadly Weapon in the 1999 killing of Saad Kawaf. Pursuant to the plea agreement, the Honorable Mark Borello sentenced Baer to life in Florida State Prison during a Sept. 28, 2021 hearing.

In the early hours of May 17, 1999, Baer and Melissa Jo Schafer — Baer's ex-wife and co-defendant — attacked Saad Kawaf moments after he left his Deerwood home. Kawaf's wife, Samar, went to the garage area of the residence after hearing screams and witnessed Baer stabbing Kawaf in a violent struggle. Samar Kawaf attempted to help her husband but was forcefully stopped by Schafer. During that struggle, Samar Kawaf bit Schafer in the arm.

Baer — a longtime detective with the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office — and Schafer demanded money from Samar Kawaf based on Baer's knowledge that Saad Kawaf, a local business owner, went to the bank each week to make deposits. Under the threat of violence and at knifepoint, Samar Kawaf provided them approximately \$53,000. Samar Kawaf's mouth and wrists were duct-taped before the two fled. She eventually freed herself and called police. Saad Kawaf was transported to the hospital but died from his injuries.

DNA evidence was collected at the crime scene and preserved. As a result of recent advances in forensic technology, this DNA evidence was identified as belonging to both Baer and Schafer, who were arrested in July 2020. Schafer has pleaded guilty to her role and awaits sentencing.

The was prosecuted by State Attorney Melissa Nelson and Chief Assistant State Attorney L.E. Hutton.