

Legal web may have slowed inquiry into missing men

By JOSHUA B. GOOD
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TAMPA — A veteran Tampa detective with a history of accusing prosecutors of corruption has filed a lawsuit stating that the Hillsborough County state attorney interfered with an investigation into the disappearance of two gay men in December.

The interference delayed the search of a possible suspect's residence for months, said Detective Dale "Chip" DeBlock in his suit against State Attorney Mark Ober.

Eventually, federal drug agents secured their own warrant to search the residence, where they found "evidence of the kidnapping, sexual molestation, torture or aggravated battery of victims," DeBlock also stated in the lawsuit.

Since 1995, police in the Tampa Bay area have investigated the disappearance of at least five gay men. DeBlock was assigned to investigate the disappearance of Jason Galehouse, formerly a Sarasota florist, and Michael Wachholtz, who were both 26 when they vanished in separate parts of Tampa on Dec. 20.

Wachholtz's body was found wrapped in a sheet Jan. 6 in the back of a Jeep Cherokee in a Town 'N Country apartment parking lot. Galehouse has not been found.

Detective sought warrant

In January, DeBlock asked the Hillsborough state attorney's office to help him obtain a search warrant for a possible suspect in the missing gay men case. The suspect may have used a date-rape drug called Gamma-Hydroxy Butyrate, or GHB, to drug and kidnap gay men, then sexually assault and



Dale "Chip" DeBlock was turned down for a search warrant months ago.



From left, Jason Galehouse, Michael Wachholtz, and Bradley Lee Williams.

The disappearances of five gay men

At least five gay men have been reported missing in the Tampa Bay area since 1995. One was found dead.

Michael Wachholtz, 26. Reported missing Dec. 20, 2003. Found dead Jan. 6. Last seen leaving his home in Tampa.

Jason Galehouse, 26, formerly of Sarasota. Missing since Dec.

20, 2003. Last seen about 2:45 a.m. at a lounge in Tampa when he told friends he was leaving with two men. Authorities say they have not established a link between the Wachholtz and Galehouse cases.

Mark Thompson, 30. Missing since Nov. 1, 2001. Last seen leaving a pub in Clearwater.

Bradley Lee Williams, 31. Missing since June 9, 2001. Last seen at a Tampa bar.

James M. Shumaker, 36. Missing since Oct. 20, 1995. Last seen at a cafe in downtown Tampa.

Sources: Tampa Tribune archives, Florida Department of Law Enforcement

torture them, DeBlock told prosecutors.

GHB is an odorless, colorless liquid that acts on the central nervous system as a depressant and anesthesia and can cause memory loss. It is banned in the United States for other than medical uses.

Ober's office rejected DeBlock, saying he could not be a witness for a search warrant affidavit because he was not credible.

Ober denies that he hampered DeBlock's investigation and declined to be interviewed for this story. His attorney, Thomas Gonzalez, said Ober has a long-standing policy not to use DeBlock as a witness because DeBlock's credibility came into question over the tape recording of two prosecutors in a 1999 investigation of a Hillsborough prosecutor.

DeBlock surreptitiously recorded conversations with the prosecutors to gather evidence against another.

Gonzalez also said that Ober informed the Tampa Police Department that any detective, besides DeBlock, could swear out an affidavit in the missing men case.

Tampa police Maj. Jane Siling, who supervises detectives, said DeBlock was the only detective assigned to the case and only he could have signed the affidavit.

The search

During the past two months, Tampa police and U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents searched the suspect's home using a federal search warrant, Siling said.

Scott Albrecht, a DEA agent assigned to the case, said DeBlock's assertion that there was evidence of kidnapping, sexual molestation, torture or aggravated battery at the suspect's residence was overstated.

Albrecht said a more accurate description would be that

it "may be" evidence of such conduct.

The suspect was arrested on narcotics and drug paraphernalia charges, Siling said. He spent six hours in custody and was released, Albrecht said. Officials would not disclose the suspect's name because of an ongoing homicide and drug investigation.

Siling and Albrecht said the investigation was in the preliminary stage. Investigators don't know if the man is linked to any attacks, Siling and Albrecht said.

DeBlock declined to speak on the record. His lawyer, Ward Maythaler, did not return calls seeking comment.

Brian Winfield, a gay rights spokesman for Equality Florida, said it was "outrageous" that a "petty dispute" could have hampered the investigation.

While saying he was pleased with the way the Tampa Police Department often met with

members of the gay community to get leads, "we're disappointed with the lack of results with the investigation," Winfield said.

A Galehouse friend, Joel Edwards of Orlando, set up a Web site, www.findjasonnow.com. He said he wasn't surprised by DeBlock's allegations.

"It's sad that if those allegations are true that people's egos get in the way of the greater good," Edwards said.

Galehouse's mother, Pam Williams, said she is unhappy with how the Tampa Police Department has handled the case since May. She said she believes her son is still alive.

Loss of trust

DeBlock first filed a lawsuit against Ober in 2003, claiming that Ober slandered him and interfered with his job. On June 18, DeBlock filed an amended complaint outlining parts of the missing gay men investigation.

DeBlock has been taken off the case because of his problems with Ober, Siling said.

The DEA, the Hillsborough Sheriff's Office and the Tampa police are now jointly investigating the missing persons case. Ober has also referred DeBlock's civil court filing about the missing gay men to the U.S. attorney's office for a possible criminal investigation into leaking information about an ongoing investigation.

Laura McElroy, spokeswoman for the Tampa Police Department, said Chief Stephen Hogue was upset over DeBlock's revelations about the investigation.

McElroy said Hogue did not know that Ober had banned DeBlock as a witness until DeBlock applied for the search warrant and was rejected.

Former Tampa police Chief Bennie Holder had promised Ober in 2001 that DeBlock would not handle cases where he would become a witness, said Pam Bondi, Ober's spokeswoman. Because of Holder's actions, DeBlock sued the Tampa Police Department. That suit, and the one against Ober, are pending.

DeBlock is now assigned to a squad that investigates guns and gangs. His job is to trace guns used in crimes. He has no contact with the Hillsborough state attorney's office, McElroy said.

DeBlock has worked for the Tampa Police Department for 21 years. Despite his problems

with the prosecutor's office, he has received excellent annual reviews from his supervisors.

"Detective DeBlock is always professional in his treatment of complainants and suspects. Det. DeBlock gets along extremely well with his co-workers and his supervisors," Sgt. D.E. Kirby wrote in DeBlock's evaluation last year.

DeBlock is a strong supporter of Ober's political opponent, Robin Fuson, in the upcoming Aug. 31 Republican primary.

In 1996, DeBlock was assigned to the department's criminal intelligence bureau, a position he held until May 2001 when he was transferred to investigate missing persons cases because Ober had told Holder that DeBlock could not be used as a witness, according to a deposition Holder gave in DeBlock's lawsuit against the department.

Missing persons investigators are less likely than mainstream criminal investigators to seek search warrants and be called as prosecution witnesses.

DeBlock's problems with the local prosecutor's office began in 1997 when he reported to the U.S. attorney's office, the FBI and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement that State Attorney Harry Lee Coe III had sex with a prostitute, according to a sworn deposition he gave in his lawsuit against Ober. Gonzalez said the U.S. attorney's office declined to investigate Coe on the word of a prostitute.

In 1999, DeBlock accused former prosecutor Elton "Buddy" Gissendanner of tipping off John Brotherton, the owner of a lingerie shop, that Brotherton was under investigation. DeBlock recorded his telephone conversations with two other prosecutors in his attempt to get information on Gissendanner and gave the tapes to the FDLE.

Gissendanner, who at the time prosecuted prostitution cases against massage parlors, strip clubs and lingerie shops, knew Brotherton and recused himself from Brotherton's cases, according to sworn statements from his supervisors.

DeBlock was investigated for illegally taping the conversations and said he was doing it on behalf of the FDLE. FDLE agents said that wasn't so. Based on the FDLE's response, Gonzalez said, Ober decided that DeBlock could not be used as a witness because his credibility was questionable.