

# Whoever killed, dismembered teen in 1994 is 'psychopath,' expert says

## Ronnie Hyde ordered held without bond on cold case murder charge

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**JACKSONVILLE, Fla.** - The murder and dismemberment of a 16-year-old Nassau County boy 23 years ago was the work of a classic psychopath, a law enforcement expert told News4Jax on Wednesday.

Ronnie Leon Hyde, 60, was arrested Tuesday in Jacksonville Beach on a murder charge in the death of 16-year-old Fred Laster, who investigators believe Hyde befriended while a youth pastor in the 1980s.

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Hyde appeared calm Wednesday when standing before a Duval County judge, who denied him bond and set his next court date for March 29.

The case, which was initially investigated by the Columbia County Sheriff's Office, began on June 5, 1994, when the torso of a young man was found outside a dumpster at a BP gas station at the U.S. 441 exit in Lake City.

The remains were identified as Laster's in early 2016, after his family provided DNA samples to investigators, who were able to determine a family connection with the victim.

A law enforcement expert who was working with the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office when Laster disappeared from Jacksonville in 1994 said that based on the evidence, the person who murdered Laster is a classic psychopath.

“It follows every marker for someone who is a psychopath or has psychopathic tendencies,” Greg DiFranza said. “There really is no guilt or remorse ... and they can keep their silence for a long period of time because there is no guilt.”

DiFranza now teaches interview techniques and said he thinks Hyde will talk to investigators.

“They don't really think that what they're doing is that wrong and when they are given the opportunity to talk, they talk at length because they are proud of it,” DiFranza explained.

DiFranza said that the dismemberment of Laster's remains likely told investigators something about the killer.

“There is some type of personal connection with that particular victim. Oftentimes, it's a matter of anger at the victim,” Greg DiFranza said. “Perhaps an advance was thwarted by the victim and that enraged the individual and that is where this type of anger, this very intense, personal anger comes from.”

Hyde, who worked for decades as a mental health counselor, became a suspect after Laster's family said that the last time Fred was heard from, he was with Hyde, the man he knew as his pastor.

Hyde was arrested early Tuesday morning after DNA taken from items in his trash last year matched DNA found on a flannel shirt left in the dumpster next to Laster's remains.

## **Who is Hyde?**

News4Jax learned that Hyde is a licensed mental health counselor in Florida and has owned the Jacksonville Beach home since 1993.

Andrew Sturm, a man who said his family was being counseled by Hyde, told News4Jax on Tuesday that he hoped Hyde's arrest was a misunderstanding, but after going through the state's report and watching the news, he said Wednesday that he had changed his mind.

“From what I heard with the DNA in the dumpsters and in his trash cans that the FBI received -- DNA doesn't lie,” Sturm said. “I don't know what extent he might have had ... to do with it, but he has saved my marriage as a counselor, and he will always be the Ron Hyde that I know and I have known him as for the past two years.”

Sturm was one of the last people to see Hyde before he was taken into custody by police and showed up to court Wednesday to support him.

“I am a religious person and believe that everybody needs support, everybody needs to be reminded of God, and I think that maybe me being here alone is showing support for him,” Sturm said.

Sturm said he is also praying for the Laster family.

“I feel horrible for the family. No family should ever have to go through anything like that, let alone to that extent,” Sturm said. “I feel horrible for them. I don’t mean any disrespect to them by me being here by any means. I am praying for them multiple times a day also.”

Sturm asked the chaplain at the jail if he can bring a Bible in and read from it with Hyde. He said he wants Hyde to know that God forgives.

Sturm also said he hopes all of the attention on the crime doesn’t hurt the church Hyde went to because the church does so much for the community.

### I-TEAM: [Who is Ronnie Hyde?](#)

Hyde wrote on his Facebook page that he works at Crosswater Community Church in Nocatee.

Crosswater's Pastor, Jack Millwood, said he has spoken with the FBI about Hyde and the church is fully cooperating with the investigation.

“I am personally not aware of any victims of Ron Hyde that involve anyone associated with Crosswater,” Millwood said in a video released by the church. “Our main concern, as always, is to help people and victims in our area. Our thoughts and prayers go out to any potential victims of any crimes committed.”

Hyde graduated from Fletcher High School, worked as a correctional officer in Jacksonville in the 1970s, got a bachelor's in psychology from the University of North Florida in 1981 and earned a Masters in Counselor Education from UNF in 1998. He became a mental health counselor in 2001 and was working as a contract employee for a health services provider for the Department of Corrections.

A state DOC spokeswoman said the department was cooperating fully with the FBI, "and will deploy any available resource needed to ensure this individual is held accountable."

Hyde was on the federal government's radar in 2003 and 2004 for not paying \$13,000 in business taxes.

### **Property searches**

The FBI and the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office began exhaustive searches Tuesday of Hyde's homes on Fourth Avenue North in Jacksonville Beach and Thelma Street in the Talleyrand neighborhood of Jacksonville. The searches were suspended for the night, but local, federal and state investigators were back at the homes on Wednesday and are expected to return to the Jax Beach property again Thursday.

Agents could be seen combing through evidence sprawled on tables under tents at the Jacksonville Beach property. Searchers used a ground-penetrating radar device at the Thelma Street home, but ended the search there early Wednesday afternoon.

A similar device was used at the Jacksonville Beach property, where boxes upon boxes of items were removed from the house. A large U-Haul truck was seen at the property to take all the potential evidence away.

IMAGES: [Arrest made in 1994 cold case murder](#)

The FBI confirmed Wednesday that a medical examiner was at the Jacksonville Beach property but would not elaborate on why.

Investigators believe that Fred Laster was killed in Hyde's Jacksonville Beach home and dismembered there using kitchen knives, two of which were found with the boy's torso at the Lake City gas station. The report noted that Hyde had taken nursing courses and had knowledge of how to dismember a body.

Detectives believe that Hyde drove his elderly father's Chevrolet Camaro to dump the body, and committed the crime while wearing his father's flannel shirt -- one of the only clues early on in the case. The report said the shirt was left in the dumpster next to the body, along with bath mats and outdated bath appliques.

Laster's siblings told detectives that they matched the bath decor in Hyde's father's house in Jacksonville Beach, into which Hyde later moved.

The arrest affidavit said police took trash from outside of Hyde's home last year and obtained Hyde's DNA, which was a match to DNA on the flannel shirt. The report said the odds of it being anyone but the killer was 700 billion to one. It is believed that the rest of Fred Laster's body has never been found.

"The dedication and professionalism of the initial team of investigators all the way through the present team has enabled the family to have some closure," Columbia County Sheriff Mark Hunter said. "Fred's immediate surviving family has been notified of this arrest, and they are in our thoughts and prayers."

## **Family connections**

Fred Laster's family might have jump-started the investigation. One of his cousins told News4Jax on Tuesday that she started to search cold cases online years after the teen disappeared, and in 2015, she spotted a cold case poster from the Lake City "John Doe" case and showed it to Laster's siblings, who recognized the photos on the flier.

The family contacted investigators, who conducted DNA tests in September 2015 on the siblings to confirm a match with the human remains that were found. The tests came back positive for a family connection in February 2016 and for the first time Fred Laster's family had confirmation that he was dead.

An [arrest affidavit](#) obtained by News4Jax shows that Hyde was reported to be the last person to see Fred Laster, and the victim's sister told officers last year that she thought Hyde had something to do with his disappearance.

According to the arrest affidavit, what remained of the body had recently been washed, leading investigators to believe that the victim was killed elsewhere.

FROM THE ARCHIVE:  
[1994 WJXT report on body discovered](#)

The FBI said that as a counselor, Hyde likely had "extensive access" to other children over the years and asked anyone who might have also been victimized to call 904-248-7000.

"This is a reminder that justice has no expiration date, and my office intends to continue the hard work of our law enforcement partners to deliver long-delayed justice," said State Attorney Melissa Nelson, whose office will prosecute Hyde.

Hyde, who has lived in Jacksonville most of his life and has traveled frequently in the U.S. and abroad, was investigated in a previous international child exploitation case several years ago, but no charges were ever filed.

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Doe Network Case <http://www.doenetwork.org/cases/2442umfl.html>