

TJ Wiggins held without bond; others' bond set

SAO: Wiggins' bonded out in March, still awaiting pretrial hearing

By PHIL ATTINGER
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — The three people arrested and charged in the murders of three friends in Frostproof had their first hearings Thursday.

Tony "TJ" Wiggins, 26, is being held without bond on three first-degree murder charges, as well as tampering with evidence, possession of a firearm by a convicted felon and possession of ammunition by a convicted felon.

Bond was set at \$15,000 for possession of weapons and \$5,000 for possession of ammunition charges.

His 27-year-old girlfriend, Mary Clare Whittemore, had bond set at \$45,000 on three counts of accessory after the fact of capital felony.



TJ WIGGINS R. WIGGINS WHITTEMORE

TJ Wiggins' 21-year-old brother, Robert Wiggins, had bond set at \$46,000 on charges of tampering with evidence and three counts of accessory after the fact of capital felony.

If released on bond, Whittemore and Robert Wiggins will be prohibited from having contact with or going within 500 feet of the victims' families or from having contact with each other. They also

must wear GPS monitors at all times.

TJ Wiggins stands accused of being the shooter in Friday's murder of 23-year-old Damion Tillman, 30-year-old Keven Springfield and 27-year-old Brandon Rollins sometime at or just after 10:06 p.m. Friday on Lake Streety Road in Frostproof, a site three to four miles from town in a largely rural area of southeast Polk County.

According to Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd, TJ Wiggins had his brother follow the three men so he could confront Springfield at gunpoint for allegedly selling his truck and/or the engine out of it.

When Rollins and Tillman pleaded with TJ Wiggins to put the gun away, he opened fire, Judd said in a press conference Wednesday.

TJ Wiggins was out on bond at the time regarding March 6 charges of aggravated assault, in which he was accused of breaking a person's arm with a crowbar, Judd said.

The State Attorney's Office for the Tenth Judicial District in Bartow has confirmed that bond has been rescinded on the assault case.

In addition, Judd said TJ Wiggins had a history involving 230 felony charges and 15 convictions, with two stints in state prison.

Judd described TJ Wiggins as violent and unstable, and said the three victims were "shot-up" so badly that by the time Rollins' father arrived after his son had phoned him for help, he was beyond

BOND | 8A

Florida has record 173 virus deaths in one day

By MARCVALERO
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — Florida had its most COVID-19 fatalities in one day with 173 deaths in the latest report Thursday from the Florida Department of Health.

It is sadly the second record breaking day for deaths in Florida in the past seven days. The previous record was set July 16 with 156 deaths.

The statewide death toll is now 5,518.

With 10,249 new cases on Wednesday, a total of 389,868 in Florida have tested positive for COVID-19 over the course of the pandemic.

Highlands County had an increase of 36 cases, bringing its total to 912 with the number of deaths remaining at 16. There have been two more hospitalizations due to COVID-19, bringing the current total to 57.

In Highlands, the 55-66 age group had the largest number of cases with 146 followed by the 25-34 age group with 138 cases, 45-54 age group with 134 cases and the 35-44 age group with 130 cases.

Highlands has had 109 cases among residents and staff of long-term care facilities and 22 cases among residents and staff of correctional facilities.

Neighboring Okeechobee County had its largest daily increase with 74 new cases for a total of 770.

Franklin and Liberty counties were the only two counties in the state to see no increase.

Dade County had 2,720 new cases and Broward had 1,268 new cases.

The counties with three-digit increases are: Collier — 152, Columbia — 268, Duval — 377, Escambia — 144, Hillsborough — 544, Lake — 160, Lee — 370, Leon — 163, Manatee — 171, Marion — 104, Orange — 547, Osceola — 156, Palm Beach — 756, Pasco — 105, Pinellas — 186, Polk — 238, Seminole — 105, St. Lucie — 112 and Volusia — 143.

The counties with three and four-digit increases account for 8,789 of the total increase in Florida.

See the Cases by the County graph on page A8

Highlands unemployment at 9.2%

CareerSource: Number is COVID-related

By PHIL ATTINGER
STAFF WRITER

SEBRING — Highlands County's unemployment rate is up from last year, thanks to the pandemic, but local jobs officials hope to overcome that.



DOUBLEDAY

On Monday, the News Service of Florida reported unemployment rates for all Florida counties, ranging from almost 23% for Osceola County down to just 4.9% for LaFayette County.

That last number, 4.9%, was Highlands County's rate last year at this time, said Donna Doubleday, president/CEO of CareerSource Heartland. Now it's 9.2%.

She said the COVID-19 pandemic has definitely been a major factor in the near doubling of the local rate. Some of it relates to the physical-distancing requirement, and some to whether or not people feel comfortable returning to stores and offices, as either customers or workers.

Restaurants, Doubleday said, have not opened to full occupancy. Some — like bars — remain closed by law. Still others can't open until they can get full occupancy, because they can't make their bills without a full dining room, Doubleday said.

Many stores also would normally not be hiring right now, Doubleday said, because their business slows down in the summer months.

People have been seeking jobs, she said, but many have said they aren't comfortable with the prospect of going into work with a steady rise of COVID-19 cases in recent weeks.

"Some folks who would normally be looking are not looking until they feel safe," Doubleday said.

As for what is going on to help encourage more employment, Doubleday said there are a lot of things already happening. She pointed to Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act funds that many businesses have already used, along with new funds recently approved for distribution through the county.

Doubleday said Highlands County still has businesses open, posting available jobs. Those who want jobs can contact CareerSource Heartland at 863-385-3672 to arrange a personal or virtual appointment.

When asked, Doubleday said there are telecommuting jobs available, but not many. Most jobs available right now require people to be present in an office,



KELLY JOHNSON/COURTESY VIA AP

Kelly Johnson, right, takes part in a protest on June 10, 2020, in Tampa, Florida, after losing her job from the coronavirus pandemic and struggled to get unemployment benefits. Now, the unemployed single mother of eight is running for office — as a Democrat — in a bid to oust a state legislator who is one of Florida's rising Republican stars. She knows it's a long shot, but Johnson hopes even a loss will serve a purpose for Democrats: Boosting turnout in the race to evict Trump from the White House.

store or facility.

News Service reported that numbers are not adjusted for seasonal fluctuations, which Doubleday said could account for some of that increase.

It's less than the average rate for the state while being 22nd on the list statewide. Twelve counties have double-digit

unemployment, including Polk County at a rate higher than Broward or Miami-Dade.

Just five show less than 6% jobless rates, including DeSoto County at 5.9%.

Jobless rates came from the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity



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Good morning To
Gia Corbone
Thanks for reading!



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