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Florida bill would lift time limit on wrongful-death claims

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The 30-year mystery of Jeffrey Klee's disappearance ended with the discovery of his remains in a watery grave in Broward County two years ago, but his family's fight for justice continues.

At the time of his death, state law prevented prosecutors from pursuing a manslaughter charge because the statute of limitations expired after three years. The Legislature removed the time limit for such criminal cases in 1996, but a two-year limit remains for civil wrongful-death claims.

His sister, Cyndy Klee, asked state lawmakers Tuesday to support a measure named in his honor that would give slaying victims' families more recourse to file civil lawsuits for wrongful death.

Klee, then 18, vanished in July 1977 shortly after graduating from high school in Broward County, where he was a star football player. Authorities didn't solve his case until 2008 when his remains were discovered in a van submerged in a Coral Springs canal. A tip led police to a friend of Klee's, who admitted killing him with a blow to the head and pushing the van into the canal with his body inside.

"Unfortunately, [his killer] will never see the inside of a courtroom -- either criminally or civilly," said Cyndy Klee, his younger sister, now a sergeant at the Coral Springs Police Department.

Sponsored by Rep. Ari Porth, D-Coral Springs, and Sen. Nan Rich, D-Weston, the "Jeffrey Klee Memorial Act" would eliminate the time restrictions for filing civil lawsuits. A House committee gave the legislation initial approval last week and the Senate Criminal Justice Committee unanimously passed it after hearing from Klee.

Similar legislation sailed through the House in 2009 but died in a Senate committee because of concerns about the cost to the court system from new filings.

"Hopefully, the second time is the charm," Cyndy Klee said.

If approved, the measure won't help Klee's family because it doesn't apply retroactively. But Cyndy Klee said it will help bring closure.

"Being in law enforcement, you see things like this all the time, so I know there are other families out there," she said. "I know this will help them out."

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