



L. A. County District Attorney

NEWS RELEASE

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LOS ANGELES -- The former chief deputy director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History was charged today with the alleged embezzlement of more than \$2 million from the museum and its supporting non-profit foundation, the District Attorney's office announced.

Marcus Arthur Rodriguez, 53 (dob 7-24-41), was arrested by District Attorney's Investigators as he was leaving his Glendale home. The arrest occurred only minutes after case No. BA 117636 was filed against Rodriguez and two others.

Also charged are Marissa Meroney, 41 (dob 5-8-53), of Chino Hills, former chief financial officer for the Museum of Natural History Foundation, and Cristina Elizabeth Coleman, 41 (dob 8-24-53), of Van Nuys, Rodriguez's former secretary. Coleman, who currently works for the Department of Beaches and Harbors, was arrested at a department facility in Marina Del Rey. Meroney, who is self-employed and works out of her home, is not in custody at this time.

Rodriguez and Coleman are scheduled to appear for arraignment in Division 30 of Los Angeles Municipal Court on Thursday. Rodriguez is being held on \$2 million bail, while bond for Coleman is \$50,000. Bail of \$600,000 is recommended for Meroney.

Deputy District Attorney Allen Field, head of the Special Investigations Division, said the case against Rodriguez and the others is part of an investigation made public in February of this year when search warrants were served at the museum and its affiliate, the George C. Page Museum.

Rodriguez, who was in charge of running Page Museum, was placed on administrative leave pending the outcome of the District Attorney's investigation.

Deputy District Attorney Allen Field, head of the Special Investigations Division, praised Dr. James L. Powell, the museum director, for his cooperation with District Attorney's investigators during the probe that led to today's felony criminal complaint.

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Field noted Powell's "foresight in discovering the theft that led to this investigation."

In a public statement last February, Powell noted that when "some apparent irregularities in the financial records of the Museum Foundation" were discovered, the information was promptly turned over to the District Attorney's office. Powell and museum personnel have been cooperating with investigators since that time.

The county Auditor-Controller's office also was praised for its cooperation with District Attorney's investigators during the probe. Investigators served a series of six search warrants during the course of the inquiry in the Rodriguez case.

The 26-count complaint (BA 117636) charges Rodriguez with five counts of grand theft, two counts of misuse of public money, one count of forgery, 12 counts of money laundering and two counts of conspiracy. If convicted of all charges, he faces a possible maximum state prison term of 12 years.

Meroney is charged with two counts of conspiracy and one of grand theft. Coleman is charged with one count of grand theft and four counts of receiving stolen property. If convicted of the charges against them, each woman faces a possible maximum prison term of three years.

Deputy District Attorney Joseph D. Shidler, who is prosecuting the case, said Rodriguez is accused of embezzling more than \$2 million dollars between July 1988 and May 1994. The money, he said, was used in part for personal purchases, including three automobiles. Shidler said the defendant also is accused of using the funds to pay off personal loans and credit card purchases, as well as to set up a personal line of credit.

In addition, the prosecutor said, the former county official is accused of using the funds to pay taxes on property owned by a relative.

In the overt acts for the two conspiracy counts, it was alleged that museum and foundation funds were channeled into investment accounts in either Meroney's name or in joint tenancy with Meroney. It also was alleged that Rodriguez wrote checks to purchase cashier's checks made payable to Coleman, who was his secretary until 1992. Shidler said it is alleged the checks were presented after Coleman was no longer employed by the museum.

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