

SONOMA COUNTY SLAYINGS



40-year-old mystery



Sonoma County Sheriff's Detectives Gary Freitas, left, and Jesse Hanshev visit the site off Franz Valley Road where the bodies of three young women were found in the 1970s, part of a series of at least seven killings that never were solved.

4 decades after bodies of 7 young women found in 1970s, authorities seek answers

By **JULIE JOHNSON**
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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

A 16-year-old boy hiking through the wooded hills northeast of Santa Rosa in 1972 stumbled upon a human skull, bleached from the elements. He thought it was an artifact.

But the skull wasn't from an ancient burial site, as the youth imagined. It was a sign of a young life brutally cut short.

"They were just little baby girls," said Glenn Frost of the adolescents, aged 12 and 13, whose remains he discovered while with a friend.

From early 1972 to mid-1979, the bodies of seven girls and young women were found in rural Santa Rosa, buried or dumped along steep embankments or in creek beds. All were found nude. Some had been raped, strangled or hogtied.

Waves of detectives have tried solving the cases, particularly when a serial homicide suspect emerges somewhere, such as a recent Marin County case.

The Sonoma County 1970s murders have haunted not just family members, but also detectives, friends and even strangers who became connected to the cases.

"It's firmly stuck in my mind ... those names," said Frost, who runs a Santa Rosa concrete firm. "And I'm 55 going on 58 years old."

For nearly 40 years, the seven case files have slowly expanded. The emergence of DNA evidence has led another generation of detectives to search for clues. This year, they have sifted through evidence preserved through the decades in freezers and submitted possible DNA samples to a national database.

"The science is different now; we're hoping something comes back," said Lt. Dennis O'Leary,

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THE VICTIMS

The seven identified victims of the 1970s killings in Sonoma County ranged in age from 12 to 23. The bodies of six of the young women were found in 1972 and 1973. **A5**

MYSTERY: Investigators hope DNA evidence, new technology will shed light on killer

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who runs the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office violent crime unit.

Current investigators declined to specify which cases or what material contained possible DNA. However former coroner's officials said semen was present in some of the cases, according to newspaper archives.

Results could take months, or longer, because lab technicians must handle recent cases first, O'Leary said. Detectives also hope someone might finally offer an essential clue.

"The families have had no closure. We as law enforcement don't have closure," said veteran sheriff's detective Gary Freitas.

Hitchhiking to class

Kim Allen, 19, a Santa Rosa Junior College art major and Ursuline graduate, was hitchhiking from her job in Larkspur to class.

Lori Kursa, 15, a Cook Junior High eighth-grader in Santa Rosa, had run away from home.

Herbert Slater Junior High students Maureen Sterling, 12, and Yvonne Weber, 13, were dropped off at the Redwood Empire Ice Arena.

Shasta County 14-year-old Carolyn Davis was last seen by her grandmother, who dropped her off at the post office in Garberville.

Theresa Walsh, 23, was hitchhiking from Southern California to Garberville to spend Christmas with her family and 2-year-old son.

A friend of Jeannette Kamehele, 20, was about to pick her up on April 25, 1972, at a Cotati Highway 101 on-ramp when the vehicle in front of him pulled over and she got in. Perhaps she's still

alive; her remains were never found.

The last body was found in July 1979. It has never been identified, but forensic tests indicate she could have been 19 years old with red or Auburn hair. She wore contact lenses.

Photos posted on wall

To this day, photocopies of their portraits, seven young faces with long hair parted in the middle, remain posted on the wall above detectives' desks.

The cases, including those of the unidentified remains, represent eight of 54 unsolved homicides handled by the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office from 1970 to 2006, said Freitas, who is one of a team of detectives giving it another try.

"Because of the nature of the crimes, we'll never close the book on it," he said.

With closure elusive, some family of the victims have coped by allowing the horrible memories to fade.

A woman who answered the phone at Allen's family home in Mill Valley said her father "made his peace with this as best as he can, he's almost 92 years old."

"It happened. It's over. It's done," she said.

Lori Kursa's little brother was 7 years old when his sister's remains were found frozen in the December cold, off Callistoga Road.

"The mystery surrounding her death has always messed with my head," said Larry Kursa, now 46 and living in Clearlake. "She defended me tooth and nail," he said. "I loved her. That was my big sister."

Detectives don't know where the woman were killed, but their bodies were found in secluded areas off Franz Valley Road, Calistoga Road, Enterprise Road

and in Mark West Creek.

The cases have been under the scrutiny of current detectives for about three years, said Sgt. Carlos Basurto, who runs the investigations unit.

As DNA testing has grown more efficient, accurate and affordable, detectives have combed through old cases. Otherwise, their best efforts involve reading through old investigative reports and witness interviews, searching for something that might have been overlooked, Freitas said.

"It's a daunting task," he said. "We pore back over everything with fresh eyes."

The effort can ramp up when a serial murder suspect gets apprehended somewhere in the country. Such was the case in April, when a 77-year-old Reno man was arrested in connection with four murders of young women in Northern California from 1977 to 1994.

Joseph Naso's arrest sent detectives around the country scrambling, trying to determine if he had been in their area or if unsolved homicides fit the killing patterns.

Sonoma County detectives said that while they haven't ruled Naso out in the local cases, there are enough differences that it seems unlikely he was the killer. Naso, who is being prosecuted in Marin County, is not actively being pursued as a suspect, Basurto said.

Serial slayings in news

Sonoma County's string of slayings came at a time of national focus on serial murderers.

In March 1971, a Press Democrat head line announced that the elusive Zodiac killer was still taunting law enforcement, claiming at that point more than 17 victims. Ted Bundy, another notori-

ous American serial killer, also was committing murders in the 1970s.

Both have been investigated repeatedly in search of Sonoma County angles. Bundy was ruled out by a Sonoma County detective in the 1970s and again during another hard look in 1989.

Basurto said current efforts aren't focused on Bundy. While the serial killer's trail showed he came through Sonoma County briefly, there was no apparent link.

"It was such a narrow window. The timeline doesn't match," Basurto said. Among others scrutinized were the so-called Hillside Strangler killers in Los Angeles, Kenneth Bianchi and Angelo Buono.

Trees, brush have grown

On a recent afternoon, detectives Freitas and Jesse Hanshev pulled into a narrow dirt turnout along Franz Valley Road near where three of the bodies were found.

Nearly four decades later, the trees have grown and the brush "looks thicker," Freitas said.

"Trying to find exact location is difficult; it's been 40 years, a lot has changed," Hanshev said.

"You have to understand, some of the remains were skeletal remains," Freitas said. "We're using every investigative tool and technique that we have."

Anyone with information about the cases can call the Sonoma County investigations unit at 565-2185.

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THE VICTIMS



KIM ALLEN

Kim Allen, 19, the first victim found, was last seen March 4, 1972, by two men who gave her a ride from Larkspur to San Rafael. The next day, two Santa Rosa high school students riding motorcycles on Enterprise Road south of Santa Rosa saw what looked like a mannequin in a creek bed about 20 feet down an embankment.

Allen had been tortured, strangled with a cord. It took at least a half-hour for her to die, officials said.

Detectives at the time thought her assailant might have been injured based on marks on the hillside indicating someone may have taken a bad fall.

Her belongings, including a beige coat, aluminum-frame orange backpack and a large wooden soy barrel with red Chinese characters were never found.

Police grilled the men who drove her to San Rafael, and one took a lie-detector test, however they weren't linked to her killing.



LORI KURSA

Lori Kursa's body was found Dec. 14, 1972. Her mother had reported the 13-year-old missing Nov. 11. She apparently had run away and was last seen with friends in Santa Rosa on Nov. 20 or 21.

The nude corpse of the youngster with chipped red nail polish was spotted by a couple walking along Calistoga Road. The remains were frozen from the winter cold and coroner's officials estimated that she'd been dead for one to two weeks. They speculated that she jumped or was thrown into the ravine from the road.

Police received a report that a girl matching Kursa's description was led or pushed by two men into a van on Parkhurst Drive, according to newspaper archives. The van, which appeared to have been damaged, headed north on Calistoga Road. The driver was a white male with Afro-style hair.



MAUREN STERLING



YVONNE WEBER

Maureen Sterling, 12, and Yvonne Weber, 13, were last seen at the Redwood Empire Ice Arena in Santa Rosa.

Their skeletal remains were found more than nine months later, on Dec. 28, 1972, by two teenage boys in the woods 60 feet down a steep embankment off Franz Valley Road about three miles northeast of Porter Creek Road.

Detectives at the time found an earring with a circular metal design and orange beads and a necklace with a 14-carat gold cross.

Four youths were given lie-detector tests, detectives said at the time, but no suspects were ever identified.



CAROLYN DAVIS

Carolyn Davis, 14, was found July 31, 1973, off Franz Valley Road, only a few feet from where the remains of Sterling and Weber had been spotted seven months earlier.

She had run away from her family's home outside Anderson in Shasta County in February. Coroner's officials said she died from a massive dose of strychnine about 10 to 14 days before her body was discovered.

Because the hillside brush was undisturbed, detectives at the time speculated that her body had been thrown from the road.

She was last seen by her grandmother on July 15, 1973, when she was dropped off at the Garberville post office.



THERESA WALSH

Theresa Walsh's body, partially submerged in Mark West Creek, was found by kayakers on Dec. 28, 1974. Walsh, 23, had been hogtied and strangled. The water was high and her body could have been carried for miles, detectives said at the time.

She was last seen six days earlier by friends at Zuma Beach near Malibu. She was wearing white bell bottoms, a lavender blouse and a hooded, hip-length brown fur coat. She carried an olive-green Boy Scout knapsack. She had intended to hitchhike to her family's Garberville home in time for Christmas. She left behind a 2-year-old son, Danran Walsh, according to newspaper archives.



JEANNETTE KAMEHELE

Jeannette Kamahele, 20, wearing a brown sweater, blue jeans and sandals, was standing on a Highway 101 onramp in Cotati on April 25, 1972, when a friend saw her get into a 1950s pickup fitted with a homemade wooden camper. A white man in his 20s or 30s was behind the wheel, according to newspaper archives.

Her friend called authorities after he learned that she never arrived at the Santa Rosa Junior College that day. No trace of Kamahele has been found.