

O'Keefe cold case still being pursued

Investigators work on own time to solve teen's murder

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LANCASTER - The investigation into the murder of 18-year-old Michelle O'Keefe five years ago is very much alive.

It's a cold case with a fair amount of heat.

Private investigators are committed to working the case on their own time and their "own dime, until it is solved."

In the meantime, the commitment to resolve the crime continues to grow, as does the reward. The payout for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons responsible for Michelle's murder has now reached \$55,000.

The volunteer investigators continue to work while the murder is officially classified a "cold case" by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Homicide Bureau.

"We've made progress - we're feeling more hopeful," said Jim Jeffra, former sheriff's deputy and a third-term Lancaster councilman. He, along with several other retired as well as active law enforcement officers, one a federal investigator, have devoted "several hundred hours" to the ongoing investigation.

"It's not going to go away until it's resolved," Jeffra said. "The commitment to the family is long term, and if I'm breathing air, I'm working this case.

"Why? I've got a daughter, that's it. It's real close to home."

"People can't save the world," said Jeffra, a 40-year Valley resident. "But if you can make a difference in your own community, do it."

Given the level of personal dedication and law enforcement experience - a combined total of almost 100 years - it's not surprising the "active, highly focused and concentrated (investigative) effort" has engendered renewed hope.

"We began with several suspects," Jeffra said. "Five people quickly dwindled to two, then down to just one."

Referring to a "32-point bulletin" that investigators compiled in connection with the case, Jeffra said, "it points to one person."

The list of suspicious statements and behaviors, including lying to detectives and offering conflicting information as well as failing a polygraph exam, was recently completed, Jeffra said.

"Now that the documentation is complete, we know somebody out there has information. At least three people in the Antelope Valley know in detail what happened to Michelle, and those people need to come forward," said the investigator.

"Early on they may have been afraid to come forward, but all information will be kept confidential. We will take any and all information on this - (but) we only want the truth."

The truth of exactly what happened to Mike and Pat O'Keefe's daughter the night she was dropped off at the Avenue S

commuter park-and-ride lot to retrieve her car after returning from a music video shoot in Los Angeles has evaded solution for more than five years.

All the grieving parents have been left with is the memory of their only girl, an Antelope Valley College student and former Quartz Hill High School cheerleader described as an angel by her mom and as bright and ever-smiling by everyone else who knew her, and the knowledge that she was assaulted and shot to death in her brand new Ford Mustang by one or more unknown assailants on Feb. 22, 2000.

The only person detectives knew to be in the lot at the time of her shooting was Raymond Lee Jennings, a minimum-wage security guard in his second week of employment and on his second night at the commuter lot just east of the Antelope Valley Freeway. He said he heard the shots but didn't see who fired.

During the approximately one hour Jennings spent at the parking lot, from the time of his arrival around 8:30 p.m. until the time he said he heard the shots fired around 9:30, Jennings said he saw no one - not one person entered or left the premises as he radioed his company, All Valley Security, for help.

When Jennings' supervisor, Iris Malone, arrived at the scene, she said she found Jennings standing next to his car and, a few hundred feet away, Michelle's bullet-riddled body sprawled inside her Mustang.

Investigators determined that O'Keefe was not raped, nor was she evidently robbed.

They also ascertained that she was not the apparent victim of a carjacking, a grudge killing or a case of road rage.

In a lengthy interview in the weeks following the killing, Detective Sgt. Rich Longshore told Jennings that he was sized up as the most likely "prime suspect" in the case. But lacking the gun used to kill O'Keefe and sufficient forensic evidence, the case remains open.

Jennings has neither been arrested nor charged with any crime. He has been named on a continuous basis by sheriff's investigators as a "person of interest."

Jennings was investigated by his initial California National Guard unit for failing to make a number of Guard weekend duty assignments. He is currently with a National Guard unit in Iraq.

He remains the sole defendant left in a civil action brought by the slain girl's parents. The suit brought by Lancaster attorney R. Rex Parris contends that Jennings failed to safeguard O'Keefe's life the night of the killing.

Of the other parties named in the wrongful death lawsuit, All Valley Security has declared bankruptcy and Palmdale recently reached a confidential settlement with O'Keefe's parents.

The civil case against Jennings, charging that he "so negligently and carelessly patrolled, guarded, maintained, supervised and controlled the said park-and-ride so as to fail to protect decedent against a fatal attack," was scheduled to start in April in a Lancaster court.

However, Jennings, a sergeant on active duty with the National Guard since Nov. 27, 2004, received a stay in the case when he was deployed to Kirkuk in northern Iraq.

While he is not scheduled to return to the United States until May 2006, the civil case will resume on Jan. 4, at which time a

hearing will be held to determine the status of the court proceeding and Jennings' ability to participate.

"With the public's help, this case is going to get solved," Jeffra said. It's the people from this community, the ones directly impacted by Michelle's death, who will break the case, he said, adding, "that's the way it should be."

The number to call to offer information or your services to the investigation is (866) 343-2770.

The toll-free line is open 24 hours and full confidentiality is guaranteed.

Those with information about the murder are also asked to contact the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Homicide Bureau at (323) 890-5500.

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