

CRIME 1947-1997

Mother still searches for son's murderer

By Pete Rosenbery
The Southern Illinoisan

In the nearly 10 years since her son, his wife, and their two children were brutally murdered, Joann Dardeen has not given up the search or hope that those responsible will be caught.

Yet even with that hope, there is still pain.

"It was a shock, and I still can't accept it as being real," she said recently.

On the night of Nov. 18, 1987, the severely beaten bodies of 30-year-old Elaine Dardeen, her son, Peter, 3, and newborn Casey Elaine were found inside the family's mobile home near the southern edge of Ina.

A bloody baseball bat was found at the scene of the beatings.

The next afternoon, Nov. 19, the body of Keith Dardeen, 29, was found in a field by hunters in Franklin County near Rend Lake College, just a few feet across Jefferson County's border. He had been shot multiple times in the head.

At the time, the murders brought near panic to the village of about 460 people. Now, investigators say that while there is "nothing new" in connection with the case, solving the crimes remains a priority.

"It's a burden for us," Detective John Kemp of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department said recently. "It's a big, black cloud that we would like to get rid of for the family and for ourselves. It is something that we would greatly like to resolve."

Elaine Dardeen, a part-time bookkeeper for a Mount Vernon office supply store, was 7½ months pregnant when she was

killed. Authorities have said they suspect that she delivered the premature baby spontaneously during the attack, and that the infant was then also beaten.

The baby was later named Casey Elaine by relatives.

Today, nearly all four drawers of a metal green file cabinet in the sheriff's department contain reports and interviews that are related to the slayings. Several nearby boxes also are filled with Dardeen-related case material.

The case is still open and "will remain open forever unless it's solved," Kemp said.

There are many theories as to why the murders occurred, but authorities are still unsure. About the only motive that has been ruled out is robbery, Kemp said.

"I think that is one of the things we have struggled with over the years; why exactly this happened," he said. "We're hoping that one of these days we will figure that out. I think once we put a motive in place we can solve the crime itself pretty quickly."

Dardeen had worked for the Rend Lake Conservancy District's Inter-City Water System; his body was found on conservancy district grounds. The family's car was found in Benton.

For Joann Dardeen, who lives in rural Mount Carmel, the passing of years has not eased the pain.

"The last few days I have been thinking about them a lot. I try to stay busy all the time but there is not a day goes by that my mind doesn't think about them, especially the baby," she said. "If Keith did something to somebody, why didn't they kill him and leave her and the baby alone?"

Joann Dardeen believes that

there might be two possible motives for the slayings. The first is drug-related, although she is quick to note that police have "never come up with anything that actually goes towards drugs."

She theorizes that if drugs were involved, someone might have wanted her son to traffic narcotics through his house but he had refused. While her son had previously used drugs while growing up "in an age when all kids did it," Keith Dardeen was not involved in either drug trafficking or drug use at the time, Joann Dardeen said.

And while she concedes that her second possibility "seems crazy," she believes someone might have had affections for Elaine Dardeen.

"I think they liked her and they couldn't have her so they weren't going to let Keith have her either," she said.

The Dardeens had turned their lives around and had been attending church regularly; Keith Dardeen was leading the choir, she said. Joann Dardeen and her son had gone to church a few days before he was murdered, and he was "as happy as a lark" and cheerful, she said.

But Keith Dardeen had expressed concern about living near Ina, and had told his mother he intended moving his family back to the Mount Carmel area by the beginning of 1988 whether he had a job or not, Joann Dardeen said.

Keith Dardeen was a native of Mount Carmel; his wife was born in Fairfield but had lived in nearby Albia.

One of the problems with this case is that the family lived briefly in Benton and then near Ina for about two years, Kemp said. That made it difficult for police to recreate their lives and find people

who knew a lot about them, he said.

Kemp spent much of last winter re-reading the thousands of reports and interviews, and making notes of items that caught his attention. Authorities are now going back and looking at older leads as time allows, he said.

Reviewing the file is being done to "basically double-check and make sure we have done what needs to be done," said Kemp.

It has not been determined whether the baseball bat found at the mobile home was involved in the beatings. Authorities also have never found the gun, he said.

There are no suspects at this point, Kemp said.

"A lot of times it doesn't take very much to solve a case. And this is probably going to be one of those that some quirky little thing that we overlooked, or something we didn't know will pop up that will make just complete sense to us," Kemp said. "Something like that will be what solves it most likely," he said.

Former sheriff's Detective Mike Anthis was the lead investigator when the murders occurred. He is now an investigator with Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan's office, but Anthis said that memories of the Dardeen case never leave, especially when driving past where the family had lived along Illinois 37.

"You are always kind of reflecting on it. It's not a happy memory," he said.

Anthis said that his primary concern was to follow each possible lead and motive. No one had a "stupid idea or theory about this case," he said.

"We had more than 30 investigators and if there were more than



■ NOV. 18, 1987

Keith Dardeen, 29; his wife, Elaine, 30; their 3-year-old son, Peter; and their newborn daughter, Casey, were found murdered.

Southern Illinoisan file photo

30 theories, I didn't care," Anthis said. "I wanted everybody's brain focusing on this and taking the information and turning it whichever way we could."

And while the Dardeen case is not his primary responsibility it remains in his thoughts.

"It's like a 5,000-piece jigsaw puzzle and you have 4,995 in place and you can't find the other five — they are missing from the box. When you get one of those pieces, it will all start to fall into place," he said.

And while cases can be harder to solve the longer they go on, there are stories where even 20 years later a person comes forward or "one of those pieces of the puzzle started a domino effect and you resolve it," Anthis said.

Joann Dardeen said that authorities have approached television shows such as "America's Most Wanted," "Unsolved Mysteries" and "The Montel Williams Show" about airing segments about the case. That has yet to occur.

She believes that whoever was involved might have gone to another part of the country, and talked about the slayings with someone else during that time. She also searches newspaper articles to look for any similarities between this and other cases. And she and Kemp keep in regular contact with one another.

Not knowing why the murders occurred and who is responsible is troubling, she said.

"People cannot imagine how hard it is to deal with it at times," she said. "If I knew who did it and kind of why they did it, I think it would help."

Anthis said he believes the case can be solved, but that it will require help from the public or anyone with information about it.

"I would hate to think that for some 10 years somebody has been withholding what may be a crucial piece to open the case up and bring it a closure for the families," he said.

Anyone with information is asked to call the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department at 242-2141.

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