

MYSTERY LEAVES PHILADELPHIA SCHOOL 'JUST WAITING.' AND WHERE ARE VICTIM'S KIDS?

Who killed Susan Reinert?

By TOM MASLAND and FREDERICK CUBICK PHILADELPHIA — Special: On Oct. 17, a small pallid inmate in a prison 100 miles from Philadelphia told two FBI agents how he had helped plan the abduction and contract killing of Philadelphia schoolteacher Susan Reinert and her two children.

The next day, the prisoner gave the same account to a reporter. It was supposed to be an insurance job, he recalled. Then it was supposed to be a kidnapping. When I found out it was murder, it scared the hell out of me.

Back in Philadelphia, some of the 18 FBI agents and state policemen assigned to the murder began checking out the prisoner's story.

In a few days of methodical detective work before they concluded — to their disappointment, but not to their surprise — that the story did not stand up. It was just one of many false leads investigators have followed in the baffling case — the murder of devoted mother Susan Reinert and the disappearance of her children, Karen, 12, and Michael, 10.

It was to be but one of many frustrations they have suffered in the four months since Reinert, a popular 37-year-old English teacher, was found dead in the trunk of her car outside Harrisburg.

"One day I just wanted to lock myself in a room and scream," one investigator was to say. "It's frustrating — we don't get any breaks. Everything we get we just have to live with."

The case is not susceptible to quick solution, said Edgar N. Bell, chief of the FBI's Philadelphia office. "There are an awful lot of pieces to this puzzle. You have to be careful not to discard them. You run them out."

In trying to piece together the puzzle, detectives have spent hours poring over newspaper reports of people in and out of Upper Merion, the Philadelphia suburb where Reinert lived.

They spoke to English teacher William S. Bradford Jr. in whose house Reinert had rented primary headquarters of \$60,000 in newly-purchased life insurance policies. They spoke to former Upper Merion school principal Jay C. Smith, 51, who was convicted of several criminal charges in the last two years and pleaded "no contest" to charges in a fourth case.

Meanwhile, Reinert's relatives and the teachers and students at Upper Merion High School — where three teachers were removed from their classrooms in full view of publicity over the murder — are, as one teacher put it, "in limbo."

In the beginning, we were traumatized by the murder and the disappearance of the kids, one teacher said. "Now there's a kind of emptiness. We're waiting, for what I don't know."

When State Police from Harrisburg entered the case June 23, there was not much to go on. There was not a single witness who had seen Reinert alive after she and her children drove away from their Actonville, Pa. home on the evening of June 22.

In Reinert's car, they found a few pieces of physical evidence: a rubber stamp and part of a blanket, a towel, and a silk comb bearing the name of the FBI's New River Command in Harrisburg, Pa.

They received no fingerprints from the car, although a State Police fingerprint expert did find what he believed was a partial print on the body door.

The investigation was marred by a tape recording of the voice of an anonymous male caller who told police where to find the body was inadvertently erased.

And Reinert's body was cremated, at her relatives' request, following an autopsy by a physician who was not a forensic pathologist.

The detectives were rick with the initial findings — that Reinert was bound and beaten but not sexually molested; that there were no drugs in her body; that she probably died when she suffocated when her nose and mouth were taped shut; and that the probably died Sunday, June 23, the day before the body was found.

"Any time you are not able to go back and reassemble the evidence it has to hamper some of the investigative efforts, period," said Robert Jones, chief deputy coroner in Douglas County (Harrisburg). He added that follow-up toxicology studies of tissue samples taken from the body would be completed this week.

Almost immediately, detectives became interested in questioning Bradford and Smith in connection with the case.

They were interested in Bradford because Reinert's will had named him as her heir, "saving him" his future husband.

Friends of Reinert told detectives she had confided in them that she and Bradford had been lovers for several years, even though Bradford was living with another English teacher, Susan Meyers.

Smith returned to Philadelphia to return for his cooperation according to sources close to the case.

Bradfield will be put under questioning, but has been subpoenaed to appear before a grand jury investigating the case, according to his lawyer, John J. Curran.

"My client is in a status quo position," he said. "This has been a very upsetting experience for him. I've just had to live with it and wait."

He confirmed that Bradford recently has been involved in a lawsuit filed at Upper Merion High School, suffering from hypertension. Bradford's only public comment in the case came in a letter to fellow teachers in September, in which he withdrew from the local teachers' association of which he was president.

"I want to assure you that I had nothing to do with Mrs. Reinert's death, and I'll have my own say as to the whereabouts of her children," he said in a letter. "I also want to assure you that I am doing everything I can in order to bring the matter to a speedy and just conclusion."

Former principal While the negotiations with the teachers were being held, the investigators were digging into the background of Jay C. Smith, the former Upper Merion principal.

They interviewed scores of local police officers and friends and colleagues and neighbors of Smith. They pored over newspaper reports and other documents, including a list of people who had been convicted of stealing from Sears, Roebuck & Co. stores by impersonating a security guard. They visited Smith at Dallas State Correctional Institution near Stratton, Pa.

On the very day Reinert's body was found, Smith had been sentenced to serve two-to-five years in prison on charges of possessing firearms and other implements of crime, and disorderly conduct. These charges were brought after he was arrested in Denver, Pa., shopping center in August 1978 with four pistols, a hand, burglary knife and drug paraphernalia.

Following the murder of Reinert, sources said, detectives had quickly learned that Smith was a retired air-liner pilot in the 700 Airway Reserve Command in Harrisburg, Pa. — the unit whose name was printed on the comb found in Reinert's car along with her body.

They also learned that Bradford had been an adult witness during one of Smith's trials, testifying that he ran into Smith in Lower City, N. J., at the same time Smith was allegedly plotting revenge from a Sears store in Radnor Township, Pa.

Smith told detectives that he had never seen Reinert's car and that he had never seen her socially, sources said.

While all of this was going on last summer, Montgomery County, Pa., authorities were preparing an ultimately successful and another mystery involving Smith, the unexplained disappearance of Stephanie and Edward Hunsberger, Smith's daughter and son-in-law, who were living in Smith's home. The two simply vanished, leaving their bodies in Smith's house in February 1979.

In a letter to about 29 Upper Merion teachers two weeks entitled "Letters from Prison 1" and bearing a copyright in his name, Smith spoke of visits from "anonymous" men. He asked for money and for help in documenting libel suits. And he included this comment on Bradford:

"I viewed Mr. Bradford as a superior teacher who had an unusual influence on the brightest students and on much of the staff. He also had an unusual influence on the parents of the school. I viewed him as someone I had to be alert about, always. The principal's office is not a wilderness site in a tranquil academic setting. It is a turbulent place with many wide, winding, twisting, and turning roads. Not friendly. Perhaps perilous. Perhaps."

But those were far from the only sources of investigation.

In their search for possible clues to the murder, the FBI subpoenaed the long-distance telephone records of Reinert and several others. But the records revealed little of interest.

Multi-tracking tapes led the investigators down a number of blind alleys.

They did report that a mysterious figure had been seen lurking around Mr. Reinert's driveway a few blocks from the school, a number of Parents Without Partners, a group for single parents to which Reinert belonged, and a number of other individuals who had been reported to have been seen near the school.

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SUSAN REINERT Found in trunk

Still another tip provided a fruitless search of a wooded area near Bradford's house for the remains of the two Reinert children.

Two weeks ago agents returned to Upper Merion High School to conduct more interviews with teachers. Upon entering the school, they passed by a motto posted on the auditorium wall by Jay C. Smith, who was principal — Knowledge Without Morality is Void.

All those leads have not been lost on Reinert's Reinert. Knowledge Without Morality is Void.

Reinert's former husband, who retains hope that his children, Karen, 12, and Michael, 10 may still be alive, really think they have been. "I was of the law enforcement."

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