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Families still haunted by killings six years ago

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Mike and Carol Riley start feeling the weight when the trick-or-treaters disappear with buckets full of Halloween candy. The sadness never evaporates, but it lifts a bit after the last note of the last Christmas carol.

That's the reality of the holiday season for the Rileys, whose 19-year-old daughter, Kimberly, was killed along with 5-year-old Jeremy Britt Bayinthavong on Thanksgiving night six years ago as a festive party wound down in a South End Tacoma home.

"It's an emotional time for us," Riley, now 57, said this week.

Each year, the Rileys have a low-key Thanksgiving at their home in Volcano, Hawaii. They get invitations to come to their friends' home but they never accept, and instead opt for a quiet meal together.

They always remember Kimberly, but they don't reminisce with stories of her young life or flip through photographs.

"It's still just too painful," Carol Riley said. "It's not a joyous holiday for us at all."

It's the same for Joe Britt, Jeremy's grandfather.

"I don't do Thanksgiving anymore," Britt said this week. "I can't be thankful for anything."

The families used to love Thanksgiving but that changed Nov. 28, 2002.

About 10 p.m. that Thanksgiving night, under a veil of darkness and fog, a gunman fired several shots into the lower window of Britt's split-level home in the 1000 block of South 75th Street.

At the time, 11 young people were in the downstairs room, some playing pool, others gabbing and a few watching the movie "Men in Black II."

Jeremy, who was cradled in a cousin's arms because he wasn't feeling well, was killed. So was Kimberly Carol Riley, a Hawaii native who had started taking classes two months before at the University of Washington. Riley, a friend of the Britt family, was watching TV.

Two others - a brother and a sister - were struck by the gunfire but survived.

The gunman disappeared.

Six years later, Tacoma police investigators have made no arrest in the case. They believe the gunman targeted the house, or one of the nearly two dozen people inside.

Investigators have only a scant description of the gunman - a dark figure with dark hair, wearing a bulky coat.

They have released a more detailed description of his suspected getaway vehicle - a dark, possibly brown, 1970s to 1980s, full-sized, Ford pickup truck. It had a weathered, light-colored canopy with windows, loud exhaust and the word FORD across the tailgate.

Beyond that, the department has released nothing else, not wanting to jeopardize the investigation.

That doesn't mean the case is far from detective Brian Vold's thoughts.

Vold, who has worked on homicides for the past eight years, keeps a Tacoma-Pierce County Crime Stoppers bulletin featuring smiling photos of Jeremy and Kimberly and the program from Jeremy's memorial service pegged to a wall at his desk.

"I see it every morning," Vold said this week. "It's a reminder."

He won't take the fliers down until the gunman is in custody and charged.

He works on the case - one of three unsolved homicides he's been the lead investigator on - when he has time. In recent years, that's not been much. Nonetheless, he's alert to any tidbit of information that might trigger a break in the investigation.

"You are just looking for anything that turns the corner," Vold said.

If he spots a truck that loosely fits the description of the gunman's vehicle, Vold follows up. He's tracked trucks to other counties, just to get a closer look. He has repeatedly visited inmates at the Pierce County Jail. He's looked at hundreds of police reports on other shootings.

"I continue to search our databases for any shooting that could have any relevance," Vold said.

"Anytime anything pops up with a shred of information, I try to run it down."

Most of the time, the tidbits turn out to be dead ends. Still, Vold and the families remain determined. They have faith in the detective.

"He's got 110 percent support," said Britt, who sold his Tacoma house shortly after the shooting and now lives in Federal Way.

They believe someone in the community knows something about what happened and who committed the killings. A reward of more than \$30,000 is available for that valuable information.

"We are still looking," Riley said. "We need information. We still need help."

"I am itching to write a check."

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