

Robbery is suspected as motive in slayings at yogurt shop

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wrest one I've seen, considering it involved four young ladies at the same time."

Investigators said they had not determined how much money was taken from the store.

It appears they were closing and in the process of closing up," Harkness said. "I would say they were probably killed one after another. They appeared to be where they were shot in the rear of the store."

He said there was no evidence that the victims were sexually assaulted. Autopsies by Travis County Medical Examiner Dr. Robert Reynolds were not expected to be completed for several days.

Employees of adjacent stores in the Hillside Center, a few hundred yards west of Northern Mail, expressed shock Saturday.

"They were just innocent little girls," said Denise Landford, manager of Suzanne's, a clothing store next door to the

yogurt shop.
The families of the victims declined comment Saturday.

Thomas and Jennifer and Sarah Harrison were students at Lanier High School, police said; Ayers attended Burnet Middle School.

Officials of the Austin Independent School District said friends of the slain girls who desire counseling should call 472-HRHP.

Lanier Principal Paul Turner said Lanier and Burnet faculty will meet today to arrange counseling services for Monday.

"This is something that's going to reach far," Turner said. "There were two seniors and one freshman, so it's going to hit a good number of kids."

He said administrators would meet later today with faculty and staff to offer counseling. "To help them work through it first so they can be prepared to work with the kids."

Buddy Harvey, the Austin-based vice

president for operations of Fete Foods of Dallas, which owns the I Can't Believe It's Yogurt chain, said the killings were the first in the firm's 15-year history. Fete Foods has two more yogurt shops in Austin and about 200 more in 44 states and 19 other countries.

"We are outraged," Harvey said. "We're trying to learn what we can do for the families. We want them to understand that our thoughts and prayers are with them."

Harvey said the young employees and their companions were alone in the yogurt shop after closing Friday night.

The firm's president, Bill Fete, flew to Austin Saturday to meet with the families of the victims and to offer a \$25,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the killers.

Huckabay also urged the public to come forward and assist police in the investigation — especially store customers or anyone who may have been in the vicinity of the yogurt shop about an hour before its

Friday closing time of 11 p.m. Anyone with information should call 488-5055 or 472-TIPS, he said.

Tickets from several nearby movie theaters were found in the shop's trash cans, he said, indicating some moviegoers had stopped in the yogurt shop on the way home.

"I understand it's a pretty busy place and full of high school kids who are always looking for a place to hang out," said Sgt. Jesse Vasquez, a homicide detective.

The shop is several blocks from a country-western nightclub where a Hindu woman had been abducted and killed.

Huckabay said firefighters found the back door to the yogurt shop unlocked. Police would not say whether the store's cash register had been disturbed.

Some of the other 12 stores in the Hillside Center had suffered repeated robberies in recent months.

"We were broken into eight times in the

last two months until we put bars in the windows," Landford said.

Robbery must have been the motive for the slayings, said Sandra Teah, owner of Posh Pad, a diet and diet grocery store a few doors down from the yogurt shop.

"These two girls who worked there were squeaky clean," Teah said.

The fire was reported at 11:47 p.m. by Tracy Gray, an Austin police officer who was patrolling in the vicinity. Fire officials said the blaze started in a kitchen area and was extinguished quickly.

Most of the other businesses in the shopping center sustained smoke damage. The smoke apparently spread through a ceiling ventilating system that runs the length of the shopping center.

Austin American-Statesman staff writers Kerry Haglund, Zane McCormick and Chuck Lindel contributed to this report.

Slayings of teens stun friends, families

By Kerry Haglund
Austin American-Statesman Staff

As police pieced together clues Saturday, friends of four teen-age girls found shot and burned in a yogurt shop gathered to begin the healing process.

Schoolmates, teachers and family members expressed shock, recalling the four victims as a close-knit group admired by their classmates and teachers.

"You don't think about anyone our age dying," said Chery Frohlich, 14, a friend of one of the victims, Amy Ayers, 13.

"You think it's a joke and that Amy is going to show up at school on Monday."

The bodies of Ayers and three other girls were found early Saturday at 1 Can't Believe It's Yogurt, 2948 West Anderson Lane.

Their bodies were burned from a fire that police said was set in an attempt to cover up the killings. Each of the victims had been shot in the head, police said.

Ayers was an eighth-grader at Burnet Middle School. The other victims — Elise Thomas, 17, Jennifer Harrison, 17, and her sister Sarah Harrison, 15 — were students at Lanier High School. Jennifer Harrison and Thomas were store employees.

Faculty members of both schools planned to gather this afternoon at Lanier to plan how to console students when classes resume Monday, said James Wilson, principal of Burnet Middle School.

Sarah Harrison and Amy Ayers had been at Northern Mail and apparently stopped by the yogurt shop shortly before 11 p.m. to help Jennifer Harrison and Thomas close the store, friends said.

Terri Becker, 14, an eighth-grader at Burnet Middle School, said she went with a group of friends to the shop Saturday because news of the deaths wouldn't sink in.

"When I went to the yogurt shop it was like a hole being driven into my heart," Becker said. "I've lost one of my closest friends and I'll never see her again."

Francis said Ayers liked country music, thought George Strait was cute and loved cats.

Ed Gifford, a geography teacher at Lanier High School, spent Saturday writing a letter to the parents of Jennifer Harrison, selling them his memories of their daughter.

She brought joy into the classroom. She was more excited about life than any kid I've ever known," said Gifford, who taught Jennifer in his ninth-grade geography class three years ago. "She was one of the best that Lanier has ever had."

Jennifer Harrison, a senior, was president of the school's Future Farmers of America chapter. Lanier Principal Paul Turner said she was on the varsity track team and ran the 400 meters and 1,600-meter relay.

Sarah Harrison, a sixth-grader, had graduated from St. Louis Catholic School where she participated in volleyball, basketball and PFA.

She had already established herself as an assertive and enthusiastic, a vital member of the freshman class. She was a leader, clearly a kid who was going to make a mark on the place," Turner said.

Elise Thomas also was active in the PFA, friends said. Thomas' father, James E. Thomas, is a social worker. Her stepmother, Norma L. Fowler, is an associate professor of biology at the University of Texas.

Turner said Thomas was involved in the agriculture mechanics program where she excelled in classes on welding and small-engine repair.

Staff writers Chuck Lindel and Enrique J. Gonzalez contributed to this report.

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