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The entrance at the I Can't Believe It's Yogurt at 2949 W. Anderson Lane, where four teen-age girls were killed eight months ago, has been covered as part of a renovation project. But the girls' parents' pain still lingers.

1991 staff photo

Pain of unfulfilled dreams, plans torments parents of murdered girls

By Kimberly Garcia
American-Statesman Staff

Barbara Suraci never imagined that back-to-school ads would bring tears to her eyes.

She used to enjoy the shopping trips with her two daughters. But the approaching school year is another painful reminder for Suraci and other parents of four teen-agers slain in a North Austin yogurt shop Dec. 6. They realize their girls never again will fill their homes with chatter about new school clothes, livestock shows and country music.

"It's the first time in 17 years I haven't prepared for September," said Suraci, who lost her only daughters eight months ago. "(The pain) doesn't change. It doesn't get any easier. You just get used to missing them."

Jennifer Harbison, 17; her sister, Sarah, 19; Elina Thomas, 17; and Amy Ayers, 13, were shot to death Dec. 6 at the I Can't Believe It's Yogurt shop at 2949 W. Anderson Lane.

Their deaths have left parents tumbling through emotions and thoughts about what they would have been doing with their daughters.

Suraci said her husband Frank was looking forward to visiting Jennifer at one of the small in-state colleges she was looking at.

Sarah would have been trying out for junior varsity cheerleading and the volleyball team at Lanier High School. But, most importantly, she would have been walking the halls with her best pal, Amy, who would have been a freshman at Lanier.

"Sarah held back her freshman ag class so she and Amy could take it together," said Amy's mom, Pam Ayers. "Amy was looking forward to high school because Sarah was there. She was going to introduce her to all her friends. We'd all be making big plans now, buying school clothes, jeans and boots."

Elina's father, James Thomas, might have been helping his daughter fix her car. He said she was one of the few girls willing to put her hair on the ground. Her mother, Maria Thomas, said Elina had planned to live at home and attend Austin Community College for two years.

"I'm angry that all of Elina's dreams have been taken away from her," said Maria Thomas, who tears up magazines and newspapers to take out her frustrations. "It's just a seesaw of emotions. These days I'm pretty angry. I guess I feel cheated."

Barbara Suraci said she feels hurt recently because the entrance of the former yogurt shop was covered last week with bricks. Suraci used to take solace in the candles and flowers left there in remembrance of the girls.

Charles Morrison, owner of the property, said the space occupied by the yogurt shop and by an adjacent clothing store will be combined to form a photo and copying business opening in a couple of months. The new store has no need for the entrance to the yogurt shop, Morrison said.

The bricking of the entrance also touched a nerve in Sgt. John Jones, lead investigator in the killings.

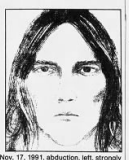
"There used to be flowers there. Now they're gone. It might be out of those people's memories, but not ours," Jones said. "I can't look there without seeing what happened there that night.

"Dec. 6 is every day for us. Before, we (homicide investigators) would see bodies all the time. It was like an assembly line. Now it's stuck."

Jones said investigators, who have received 2,000 tips about the slayings, have ruled out 40 percent of the 761 suspects. Parents are not sure they are ready to find out who committed the crime.

But, what they fear most is facing the one-year anniversary of the last day of their daughters' lives.

"I'm already dreading Dec. 6," said Amy's father, Bob Ayers. "I know it's coming, but I don't know how I can get myself ready for it. This is the worst year of my life, next year is going to be the second worst year and the next year the third."



Police say a sketch of a suspect in a Nov. 17, 1991, abduction, left, strongly resembles the drawing at right of a man seen in a car outside a North Austin yogurt shop on the night four teen-agers were slain.

Police investigating yogurt murders hunt for 3 kidnap suspects

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tin working on an episode about the killings at the yogurt shop, sources said.

Three men are charged in a Nov. 17, 1991, abduction that began at the Cavity Club, 615 Red River St. Earlier this year, police released sketches, but no names, of three men wanted in that abduction. At the time, police noted that one of those sketches strongly resembled the drawing of a man seen seated in a car outside the yogurt shop on the night the four teen-agers were slain.

On Dec. 6, four girls were slain at I Can't Believe It's Yogurt!, 2949 W. Anderson Lane in North Austin. Killed were Jennifer Harbison, 17; her 15-year-old sister, Sarah; Elina Thomas, 17; and Amy Ayers, 13. All were shot to death, and the shop was then set ablaze.

A customer at the store later told police that near the time of the killings, a man was seen sitting outside the yogurt shop in an older model, white, four-door car, possibly a Chevrolet Impala.

The Cavity Club abduction occurred on Nov. 17, when a woman leaving the club was approached by three men and offered a ride, police said. Because it was raining, the woman accepted a ride to her car but instead was taken to the Galewood Garden Apartments at 9010 Galewood Drive, where the driver got a gun, police said. They left the North Austin apartment complex in a newer model, white, four-door Ford, drove toward San Antonio and sexually assaulted the woman at gunpoint during the trip, police said. The victim was released in San Antonio, police said.

The indictment unsealed Wednesday charges that the men abducted the woman "with intent to inflict bodily injury (on the woman) and to violate and abuse (her) sexually."

The indictment was returned one week after police released the sketches of the suspects in the abduction.

Since then, a search for the three men by Austin police and federal agents has been fruitless, sources said.

Sgt. John Jones, the lead investigator in the slayings at the yogurt shop, declined to comment about the new developments and referred questions to investigators in the sex crimes detail who are familiar with the Cavity Club assault. Those investigators could not be reached Wednesday.

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