

# Sgt. Jones still feels wrapped up in yogurt shop case

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Continued to forget about the case or at least put it behind him. That wasn't happen.

Jones spent this weekend cleaning out his cubicle in the Austin Police Department homicide unit, and Monday at 9 a.m. he will report to his assault unit.

Moving boxes to a new office will be easier than unloading the mental baggage of 30 months as the lead police officer on one of the city's most horrifying crimes.

Jones, his partner Mike Hockabay and some of the family members of the slain girls have strong differences of opinion with police administrators about how they treated Jones in the past few months.

But one thing Jones knows, and has known for a while, is that it is time to do something else. The problem is, it has become hard to let go.

"I really don't see myself as leaving the case, not yet," Jones said Friday. "I probably have to move all the way to Florida to get away."

"I'm afraid this case is a permanent part of me. If we had rotated other investigators in ... it might not be that way, but I'm afraid the damage is irreversible. And, with the lack of a smooth transition (to a new investigation), I know what's going to happen: my phone's going to ring with questions, he said.

"I'm just not going to be able to make a clean break with it," Jones said.

That is easy to understand, given the nature of the case and the emotions that have become attached to it.

The killings of Ellen Thomas, 17, Jennifer Harrison, 17, Sarah Harrison, 15, and Amy Ayers, 13, at the I Can't Believe It's Yogurt on Anderson Lane stunned Austin. More than 1,500 people attended their funerals. The shopping center where the girls were shot became a citizens' shrine, where people left flowers, messages and notes. About 1,200 people attended a candlelight vigil for the victims six months after the slayings.

There was intense media coverage, and the families of the teenagers became familiar and tragic figures in the consciousness of the city. More than \$100,000 in specialists were brought in to join a growing task force of investigators, and national television shows focused on the investigation.

Many subscribed to a note left in front of the yogurt shop. "I miss you even though I don't know you."

Jones and Hockabay became the focus of the hopes and prayers of thousands. If that was not enough pressure, there was the built-in pressure that every police officer, every investigator, brings on himself or herself in every case. And that pressure was applied for years.

"We were allowed to get way too deep in it ourselves," Jones said. "But you know, we did what we had to do."

Jones said the hardest time was four months he was the only full-time investigator on the case.

"It sent me to the psychologist, and I'm still going. Going to the psychologist kept my head above water. In between battling the administration and trying to do justice to the case, it was draining me down to zero."

"It also sent me back to church, though, and ... if there's anything that's been positive that's come out of this case, it's been my renewed faith in a supreme being, someone to watch over me. It reloaded me ready to make it to this point right now."

Jones took a month off in October, primarily to rest, and Hockabay was put back in charge. Jones before that, Hockabay said he was "brought down, my self-esteem was low, my confidence was low." By February, Hockabay was almost taking a month off.

Hockabay, who is staying in the homicide unit and will continue to work on the yogurt shop case, said, "I sensed like every time you opened a door, there was a little well behind it. You can only take that for so long."

"That it's hard to let go. I've harmed more sick leave in the last 20 years than I have in the last 20 or 25 years. But police officers are not going to count forward and say, 'I can't handle it any more,'" he said.

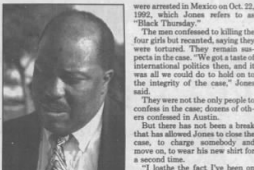
When "things started going wrong," Hockabay said to Jones and told him, "I'm depressed and I don't know why. I want to cry and I don't know why." Jones suggested his psychologist, which Hockabay described as "probably the best move I ever made, because also made me realize all this is normal, and all this is a byproduct of all that I've gone through."

Both men say one place the stress generated was within the department. Jones' transfer out of the homicide unit against his will was for him the latest in a series of misunderstandings of the personnel in the investigation of the killings.

"We did the best we could. We did what we had, and we didn't have



Police Sgt. John Jones walks away from the memorial at the North Austin yogurt shop where four teenage girls were slain 2 1/2 years ago.



Sgt. John Jones will start Monday in a new post. Deputy Chief Bruce Mills said it's in the best interest of the Police Department and the case.

and we can't help but have him for that," she said.

Norma Fowler, the stepmother of Ellen Thomas, said she is sorry to see Jones leave the case but wants what is best for him. "I think that we have just been unbelievably, uniquely lucky in how positive our interactions with the police have been, and I think a lot of that is due to John," Fowler said.

Mills also said he understood that Jones wanted to remain in homicide but said, "The best interest of the Police Department and the case is for him to move. I can't create a position for him."

Jones, despite his objections to how the transfer was handled, knows it is time to do something other than the yogurt shop slayings.

"I don't quibble with the concept that I need to do other things. It's long overdue," he said.

And, he is willing to wait. It was a lesson he learned during the course of the last 2 1/2 years.

"Two years ago, the line would have been, 'This son-of-a-bitch is going to be solved soon. Now, (the response is) it's going to be solved when it's ready to be solved. It's up to the man upstairs."

"The tip was more pretty much down. There's just out a whole lot left to do. But Hockabay and I were to be a permanent part of the case. It might be tomorrow, it might be 30 years from now. It might be those guys in Mexico; it could be somebody we've already talked to; it could be (convicted killer Kenneth) McDuff."

"Until the big man comes along," Jones is able to wait. "I think they'll have to have Hockabay and I back for that; they'll just have to wait longer about prosecuting it without Hockabay and I."

Until then, Jones' new shift, the one he wore only once, will remain the closest.

"I told the families that the next time they see me wearing that shirt, they'll know it is all over. They know which one it is," he said. "That shirt is an unbreakable bond between us. It never will be broken."

They were not the only people to confess in the case; dozens of others confessed in Austin.

But there has not been a break that has allowed Jones to close the case, to charge somebody and move on to wear his own shirt for a second time.

"I think the fact I've been on this case so long," he said, "I wanted to do something else." What he wanted was to stay in homicide, working cases that have a shorter time span and keeping his hands in for new developments in the yogurt shop case.

Instead, last month, he was told he was gone. Off the case, out of homicide, on to something different.

"The bottom dropped out of me," he said. Quoting a song, he said, "Deep dark depression, excessive misery."

While he and his superior differed over where he would go, they also agreed over how much time he needed to gain along his knowledge of the case to a new investigator. The official report matches about 5,000 pages, and there are another 8,000 to 10,000 records in a database, Jones said.

"The end of that story is I got two days. I can't continue anything in two days on this case," Jones said.

"I had been looking for a slow-down, been asking for one for a long time. The mechanics is where this thing fell apart. What I got was a call on my day off, saying, 'Come in. You're being transferred in a week.'"

"That was a slap in the face. It hurt."

Others agreed.

"I personally don't like the way it was handled with John," Hockabay said. "I thought he should have stayed in homicide."

Bartney Sorens, the mother of Sarah and Jennifer Harrison, said, "We feel abandoned" by Jones' transfer. "We're being processed out just like John Jones was."

"The man dedicated his life to what happened to our children,

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