

Yogurt Shop Killings: The Victims

A painful step toward families' relief

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said Mike Harbison, the father of Jennifer and Sarah Harbison who lives in Northeast Texas.

Rusk said community support, prayers and thoughts for the families have always been appreciated. "But what they need now is little space," he said.

As they have many times since the 1991 murders, friends are gathering around the families.

James Strickland, executive director of Child Inc., a local Head Start program, knew the Harbison sisters from the time they were babies to a close friend of their mother, Barbara Ayres. He says "everyone involved in this case, even tangentially, is hoping for closure."

"Everyone really, really, really wants this to be, finally," Strickland said. "But for their own sanity, they have to put something aside. They don't have to go to put all their hope there. They are holding some of their hope in reserve."

Din and Susan Cox understand the pain the families are feeling. Their daughter, 20-year-old Christi Lanza, was killed in 1986 by a drunk driver, and the couple formed a support group, For The Love Of Christi, to help others, including Eliza's mother and sister, through their grief.

For eight years, they didn't know who or how many people were involved. "They didn't know why," Don Cox said. "It will be frightening to see them."



David Hernandez/AH-5

Seeing the suspects might be difficult, but it also could help answer the question that has haunted Austin.

The Rev. Kirby Garner is pastor at San Jose Catholic Church now, but he officiated at the funeral of Jennifer, Sarah, Amy and Eliza at St. Louis Catholic Church in December 1991. The funeral was the most difficult he had ever done in part because he felt he was speaking for the community, Garner said.

"I remember saying 'Who did this? Who did this?'" he said. "The painful thing for me was to know the families were dealing with grief but no closure. In some way give a closure. It doesn't bring the girls back or lessen the families' pain, but it may end frustration of year after year wondering if the people are wandering the streets."

When Dan Aguilera, a training manager at CTE, saw the pictures of the yogurt shop victims on the television screen this week, his heart stopped.

He had been a senior at Lanier High School when the killings occurred, and some of the girls were his friends. He was so troubled by their deaths that, as a tribute to their lives at the graveside services, he took along his trumpet and played a haunting "Amazing Grace."

Now, to learn that at least three of the suspects were also in high school at the time disturbed him even more.

"When this happened, it seemed the world stopped for a while. We thought it had to be an outsider. It doesn't seem right that someone from within our city, in our age group," has been arrested, he said. "I can't make sense out of it."



AH-5 1991

United in life, death

Four North Austin girls, united in death forever by the events of Dec. 6, 1991, were said to be inseparable in life as well.

Amy Ayers, 13

Like her three friends, Amy loved animals and spent the first seven years of her life living on ranches that her father managed. Although she was an eighth grader at Sunset Middle School, she became a junior member of Lanier High School's Future Farmers of America chapter and was raising a pig. She was a good student, her principal said back in 1991, a girl who made good grades, good friends and looked for extracurricular activities to do. She was a country music fan — she particularly loved George Strait — and she loved cats. Sarah was her best friend and, after cruising Northcross Mall the night of Dec. 6, they stopped by the yogurt shop to help Sarah's sister clean up and close the store.



Jennifer Harbison, 17

Jennifer "brought joy into the classroom," a former teacher said. A senior at Lanier, she was president of the FFA chapter — she raised lambs — and ran the 400 meters and 1,600-meter relay for the varsity track team. Jennifer was first spotted in a car on Feb. 1992 parking for help in the case. At left, Dan Aguilera played "Amazing Grace" at graveside in 1991.



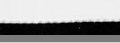
Sarah Harbison, 15

Sarah, a north grocer, had attended St. Louis Catholic School on a humanitarian scholarship until a year before her death. She was said to be strong-willed, with a stubborn belief that "what's right is right, and right must be done," a family friend said. Like her sister, she raised lambs for FFA, and they often went to the FFA pens early and late to feed and care for their animals. She was a junior varsity cheerleader, played basketball and volleyball and was a student council representative.



Eliza Thomas, 17

Even among her animal-loving friends, Eliza stood out for being "really nice about animals," her father said. Eliza, a Lanier senior who had attended McCallum High School earlier, kept four craft kits in a display in her bedroom and a pair of white rats. In FFA, she focused on pigs, specifically a show animal named Lucille. She wanted to become a veterinarian. She had worked at the yogurt shop for about a year, becoming shift leader, and used her earnings to buy a "janky" green car that she was nonetheless quite proud of, friends said. She had asked for car parts for Christmas.



McCallum teachers, graduates shocked

Few can recall the three suspects who shared their hallways and classrooms

By Tara A. Trower
Special to the Statesman

Veteran McCallum High School faculty members and ex-students, who eight years ago mourned the brutal killing of a classmate at a North Austin yogurt shop, now must deal with the shocking possibility that her killers had also been in their midst.

By late afternoon Wednesday, McCallum teachers and alumni as far away as Dallas had heard the news on television or from other alumni classmates: Robert Burns Springsteen Jr., Forrest Welborn and Michael James Scott, who had attended their school in 1991, had been charged with capital murder. A fourth suspect, Marissa Pines, briefly attended Anderson High School.

One of the four girls killed at the yogurt shop, Eliza Thomas, 17, attended McCallum briefly before transferring to Lanier High School a few months before she was killed.

"It's hard to think that while we were speaking about how horrible the murders were, (the suspects) were listening to us grieve," said Sara Jackson, a cultural arts educator at the Carver Museum who was a junior at McCallum when the killings occurred.

Although faculty members and former students described McCallum as a tight-knit community, few were able to remember much about the suspects on Wednesday.

"The names just don't ring any bells," said Jeremiah Dix, who graduated from McCallum in 1996 and now works for Dell Computers. "It's probably better that I don't know them — the whole thing makes me so angry."

Although unable to place the names of the suspects, Blair Edgier, an elementary school teacher who graduated from McCallum in 1991, said two of the photos she saw on television looked familiar. "I probably never even had a conversation with them, but the fact that I recognized two of them is pretty creepy," she said.

Perhaps the reason the suspects are so hard to place, some say, is that none of them graduated from McCallum, or any other Austin school. Austin school officials said Springsteen dropped off the district's enrollment records in mid-December 1991, shortly after the killings. Welborn withdrew from McCallum in 1986 and Scott in 1992. Pierce left Anderson in the ninth grade.

The suspects either attended alternative schools during their academic careers or repeated a grade level.



McCallum Assistant Principal Charles Waer remembers attending the school. Waer says he hopes the case can finally be put to rest.

Former McCallum Principal Penny Miller, who knew the three suspects who attended the school, said she finds it difficult to grasp that any of the students she knew would be capable of such brutality. "None of us can believe that kids can keep a secret like that for that long and go on about life for eight years," she said. "Principals have to work with kids who have great difficulties, but you see some good in all of the kids."

Miller predicted that the impact of the arrests would ripple through the community for some time.

The nature of high school, she said, means that hundreds of people knew either the victims or the suspects, or know someone else who did.

Figuring out the identities of the suspects, she said, is like a painful bruise against a still-healing wound.

English teacher Michael Urlick, who taught both Thomas and Scott in separate classes, was trying to adjust to the disturbing possibility that one of his students might have murdered another student. Although he described Thomas as one of his favorite students, Urlick declined to comment on his recollections of Scott.

Despite the reluctance to believe that someone with whom they shared hallways would be capable of committing such a crime, many said they hope the police have the actual killers in custody.

McCallum Assistant Principal Charles Waer, who remembers Scott most clearly of the three, said he was surprised to hear that he had been implicated.

"I hope they have the right people and can prove it," Waer said, "so this can finally be put to rest."

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