

## **Hope, Pain for Murder Victims' Families; Crime: Loved Ones Respond as DNA Evidence Revives Probe of O.C. Serial Killings Dating Back 20 Years**

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By Jack Leonard

*The killer--who detectives dub "the Original Nightstalker"-- carefully selected his victims from upscale communities in Orange, Santa Barbara and Ventura counties.*

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It was a painful, reluctant gathering--one that opened old wounds that had never fully healed.

But relatives of two victims of a recently identified serial killer went public Wednesday, hoping their voices will bring justice- -and help detectives in the intense hunt for a suspect sought for as many as 10 slayings nearly two decades ago.

Family members spoke of recent breakthroughs in the case. Of a \$100,000 reward. Of the devastating loss that still feels fresh today.

"Perhaps it would have been easier not to relive this nightmare, especially in public," said Ron Harrington, whose younger brother Keith was among the victims. "But hopefully--even after 20 years-- hopefully this matter can be resolved."

The pleas followed an announcement earlier this week that a team of "cold case" investigators at the Orange County Sheriff's Department had used cutting-edge technology and a thorough review of case files to link six separate murder scenes to a single suspect.

The killer--who detectives dub "the Original Nightstalker"-- carefully selected his victims from upscale communities in Orange, Santa Barbara and Ventura counties.

Investigators said they have followed hundreds of leads and considered thousands of possible suspects in their hunt for the unknown killer. But without a name, detectives acknowledge they have no idea whether the assailant is dead, incarcerated or still on the loose somewhere.

For relatives of the victims, the last few months have been bittersweet. On the one hand, they have learned that detectives are closer than ever to solving the killings. But they also have discovered gruesome details about the violent deaths of their loved ones, and they are grappling once more with the loss they first experienced more than a decade ago.

"We were very close--we told each other everything," said Michelle Cruz of her older sister Janelle, who was 18 when she was murdered at her home. "She was like my twin. When she died, it was like I lost a part of my identity."

Until recently, investigators withheld details about the crime scenes from everyone, including relatives. It was only in recent months that the Harrington family learned about the ordeal Keith Harrington and his wife went through during the last minutes of their lives.

The couple were married only three months when an intruder slipped into their Laguna Niguel home through an unlocked door the night of Aug., 19, 1980. The pair were tied up. Patti was raped. The killer then bludgeoned them to death.

"It's ghoulish," said Doug Harrington, one of Keith's three brothers, all of whom attended Wednesday's news conference. "I can't believe what my brother and his wife went through."

The killings devastated the Harrington family. Thanksgiving, once a festive holiday, became a time of painful memories. "Every Thanksgiving, my dad would always say a prayer and remind us that there was someone missing," Harrington said.

With few clues and no suspects, the family was left only to speculate. Doug Harrington said his father sometimes questioned whether his daughter-in-law might have been the target of the attack that also claimed his son. The father died a few years ago--and never knew about the new DNA evidence, which proved the killing was random, bringing the family some small comfort.

"We never could understand how this could have happened," said Bruce Harrington. "Now that we have DNA, we're hoping that it will finally answer the questions we've had for more than 20 years."

Patti and Keith Harrington were the killer's first Orange County victims. The next was Manuela Witthuhn, a 28-year-old student killed in her Irvine home Feb. 5, 1981.

More than five years later, DNA evidence links the same killer to a final victim: Janelle Lisa Cruz, an 18-year-old restaurant cashier who lived in Irvine.

The murder investigations were inactive for years, but blood, semen and hair samples were saved. Four years ago, advances in DNA testing prompted Orange County sheriff's investigators to review old, unsolved cases.

The DNA testing--along with distinct similarities between the attacks--helped investigators link the same killer to three others in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. Those attacks claimed four more lives between 1979 and 1981.

An FBI-trained profiler at the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department suggested that the killer was probably driven by anger aimed at someone close to him--perhaps his mother or a stepmother, Orange County Sheriff's Det. Larry Pool said.

"He probably targets the woman because she reminds him of the target of his rage," Pool said. "The profile would say that he would essentially have no conscience."

The killer is believed to be white and was in his early 20s when he first struck. Sometimes he brought a German shepherd with him. Officials guess he was living in the Goleta area of Santa Barbara County when he surfaced.

Though disturbing, the news that a serial killer might be responsible for her sister's death has at least renewed hope for Michelle Cruz that Janelle's killer might be found.

"Maybe's there more evidence out there," Cruz said. "I'm hoping that this will help get someone with information to come forward."

The families of the victims have put up a \$100,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction in the case. Sheriff's officials are asking that anyone with information call (714) 834-2583.

Until then, family members said they will have to learn to deal with their loved ones' deaths once more.

"It had faded, but the memories have rushed forward," said Doug Harrington as he passed around a photograph of his brother and sister-in-law taken before their wedding. "It's been a very difficult week."

**[Illustration]**

Caption: PHOTO: Ron and Bruce Harrington listen as a sheriff's investigator talks about new evidence in the slayings of their brother and his wife in 1980.; PHOTOGRAPHER: ALEXANDER GALLARDO / Los Angeles Times