

To Catch A Killer A CBS 2 Special Assignment

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ORANGE COUNTY - One Orange County Sheriff's Detective is on the trail of a killer who could be one of California's most notorious criminals. The killer could be dead, or could be already locked up in prison. The question: can the investigators catch the killer before he can kill again?

CBS 2's investigative reporter Drew Griffin has the story.

Special Assignment: "To Catch a Killer" aired Thursday February 14, 2002 at 11 p.m.

Robert Offerman and Alexandra Manning, hands tied in a rare diamond knot, tortured, raped and beaten to death, were the first to die at the hands of a particular killer who takes his time.

Detective Larry Pool says, "He's spent up to four hours in a house raping and re-raping."

The first killings took place on Dec. 30, 1979. For the next 7 years, the killings would continue, one almost every six months. The killer always struck during a midnight break-in, surprising a couple asleep in their bed.

The victims included: Charlene and Lyman Smith in Ventura; Patty and Keith Harrington, Liguna Niguel; Manuela Lithune, Irvine; Domingo and Gregory Sanchez, Goleta.

Then came a five-year gap, before the killer struck for the last known time. Her name was Jannelle Cruz, murdered in Irvine on May 4, 1986.

At first the murders in separate towns were thought to all be separate crimes, carried out by separate killers. But Orange County Detective Larry Pool says what brought them all together came from the bodily fluids the killer left behind, stored away and saved, until DNA technology has now caught up with him.

The samples just last year were sent off to a crime lab and came back with startling results. Not only is the killer connected to each and every one of these murder victims, he is in fact the worst serial rapist that Sacramento has ever known. He is a killer who began as a rapist with more than 50 victims.

Jennifer Smith, who's father is one of the murder victims, was stunned when she learned the news. "It's blown my mind because we didn't have any idea who killed my father and we certainly didn't expect what we found," Smith tells Special Assignment.

"At the time we thought it was someone from his inner circle. To find out it was absolutely random from someone clearly sick, it was shocking."

The trail of this rapist-turned-killer is left behind in volumes of crime books, stacked like a personal library in Detective Pool's Santa Ana office.

Over his head hangs the only known sketch developed from a victim who lived, and there is something else: the voice of the killer caught on a message machine.

It is the voice of a man further terrorizing his victims. On it you hear the threat, "I'm gonna kill you, I'm gonna kill you."

According to Pool, this is the voice of "the most brazen serial killer that I've ever looked at."

Since 1986 there hasn't been a trace. He could be dead, he could be disabled or, Pool believes, he could be locked up in California's prison system, serving time that is running out.

Detective Pool: "And of course the question is how long does he sit there. Does he get out next year, next week? That's why we are racing to catch him."

Pool's best chance to catch him may not be in prison, but across the San Francisco Bay, inside a non-descriptor office building where, everyday, blood samples are arriving. It is the blood of California prison inmates -- sorted, labeled, fingerprinted and then entered into a growing database, which aims to link prisoners with unsolved crimes.

If this serial killer's blood comes through this lab, the deadly puzzle will be solved. But there's a hitch. Inmates are being asked if they want to give their blood, and a growing number are simply saying no. State law says prisoners must give their blood, but doesn't force them.

The State Department of Corrections will not draw blood from an unwilling inmate, and inside prison walls the word is getting out to just say "no."

More than 900 so far have kept their blood out of the system. They are the hardcore criminals that most likely have something to hide.

For Jennifer Smith, who has waited 22 years for her father's killer to be caught, the bureaucratic tie-up that allows inmates to thumb their nose and blood at the law is an insult to every victim left in this killer's trail.

"It's frustrating to think if there was somebody out there who committed a crime and they are in prison, they were actually convicted, and we are still blocked from getting this information; it's a law that needs to be changed," Smith tells Special Assignment.

There is an attempt by the state's district attorneys to get the law changed, or at least get the Department of Corrections to force all inmates to give blood. But so far legislators have moved slowly, and right now inmates can still "just say no" to complying with the law.

Instead, the department tries to counsel inmates on the law, take away rights if they still refuse, but more than 800 still say no, and are getting away without giving up their blood.

Anyone of them could be the killer that Larry Pool is hoping to catch.

The state's District Attorney's Association wants the prison system to quit asking prisoners for their blood samples, and simply take them.

But the Department of Corrections says it won't force inmates to give blood unless there is a court order or a new law stating that force is permissible.

In the meantime, the number of those inmates refusing to give blood appears to be growing, and detectives fear they may be running out of time.