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Detectives bring these 'cold cases' back to life

City police duo never stop digging for the answers to unsolved crimes.

By Crystal Carreon -- Bee Staff Writer

Published 2:15 am PDT Thursday, April 27, 2006

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Inside a ground-floor office at the Sacramento Police Department, reams of black binders are filled with the ghosts of whodunits - murder mysteries and violent unsolved rapes that have haunted detectives since the 1960s.

A profile of the "East Area Rapist," the man suspected in nearly four dozen attacks that terrorized Sacramento in the late '70s before escalating to murder in Southern California, is filed by year near the reports of random "body dumps" - young women who were assaulted and slain three decades ago. A file on a woman found burned to death inside a dumpster in 2001 remains a "Jane Doe." It's a recent addition to the more than 200 cold cases in Sacramento investigated by Detectives Pat Keller and Pete Willover.

Keller and Willover form the backbone of the department's Cold Case Unit, the 5-year-old destination for cases without closure. Some of the case files have collected dust over the years; a few crime scene photos have faded, but the detectives study them, almost reverentially, mining for new clues to solve old crimes.

"It would be easy to just look at these cases and say, 'Oh, there's nothing new here,' and just close the book," said Keller, a 21-year veteran of the department. "But that doesn't help the families or the next person who might be killed by the guy who is still out there on the street."

The two detectives, housed in a small office around the corner from a storage room, come from different generations and have slightly different styles, but share a commitment to uncovering the past.

Willover, 61, opted out of retirement last year to return to the post he helped mature into a staple at the department. And two months ago, Keller, 41, joined the unit as a full-time detective after a few years investigating fugitive crimes and homicides.

"I'm an office kind of guy; he's more out of the office," Willover muses on his new partner. "That's what I like - he brings a fresh mind, fresh ideas."

Actually, it's Willover, a soft-spoken 40-year veteran of the force, who's up-to-date on the latest advances in forensic evidence, especially DNA, making prosecuting old cases possible.

Keller, known for his tenacity, emerges as the old-fashioned gumshoe - knocking on doors, talking to possible witnesses, finding those whose memories or loyalties might have changed over the years.

The combination of their strengths and the dedication of a team that includes a full-time crime lab technician

will only continue to bring answers to families and victims who have wondered if the person standing in line in front of them, or riding in the car next to them, was responsible, said Anne Marie Schubert, who prosecutes cold cases for the Sacramento County District Attorney's Office.

"There are hundreds of families out there, just waiting for resolution on these cases," she said of cases from the Police Department's and Sacramento County Sheriff's Department's cold case units.

"We owe it to them," she said.

The District Attorney's Office, Schubert said, has filed more than a dozen criminal cases against cold case suspects, including the Police Department's recent arrest of a man charged in his wife's 20-year-old murder.

Michael Debreceeny, whom police found in North Carolina where he was arrested in January, had originally been suspected in 19-year-old Lisa Debreceeny's death, but there wasn't enough evidence at the time to make a case against him. More than two decades later, revisiting old contacts, friends and family turned up fresh details that ultimately led to the arrest.

Lisa Debreceeny's brother, David Randolph, said his family had come to believe, over the years, that his sister's husband would never be held accountable. That changed when the detective called him from North Carolina on Jan. 4.

"To have reached this point today, happy is the wrong word; it is very satisfying," said Randolph, who helped raise his sister's son, a newborn at the time of his mother's death. "We hope it will bring us some closure."

The cold case team, he said, was respectful to his family throughout the investigation as they "turned over every stone, every blade of grass and talked to every witness, personally."

The case against Michael Debreceeny is pending.

Schubert said she admires the commitment displayed by the detectives in tackling cases that are inherently challenging.

She said Willover will call a victim's family on the anniversary date of the crime to assure them he is still working the case, still searching for answers.

"Once he's latched onto a case, that case sits on his desk until it is done," Schubert said. "He never forgets."

When he came to the cold case unit, Keller brought with him the file on a young "Jane Doe" whose body was found burning in an 18th Avenue dumpster on June 29, 2001. The woman, believed to be in her late teens or early 20s, had a perfect smile, no cavities.

He recently released photographs of a patterned blanket found with her body, and this week, her composite facial sculpture was posted on the Web site for the National Center for Missing Adults at www.theyaremissd.org The mystery surrounding her fate and others have been unsettling.

"You always think about them; you always think about different things you should try or people you should contact," Keller said. "We're here to solve these crimes."

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Detectives Pet Willover, left, and Pat Keller have files on unsolved crimes dating back to the 1960s in their Sacramento Police Department office. The two men say their differing styles and strengths mesh well. Sacramento Bee/Michael A. Jones



A composite sculpture of a woman whose body was found burning in 2001 - one of the unit's cases.

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