Beat: Miscellaneous

1976 Nevada murder linked to California serial killer

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USPA News - Investigators have linked the 1976 murder of a Nevada nursing student to a serial killer believed to be responsible for the so-called `Gypsy Hill Murders` in the San Francisco area, the FBI said on Thursday as they formed a new task force to find the person responsible. The serial killer, who has also been referred to as the `San Mateo Slasher,` is believed to be responsible for the murders of five young women in the San Francisco area between January and April 1976. A sixth murder, the killing of 19-year-old nursing student Michelle Mitchell in Reno, Nevada, in February 1976 has now also been linked to the cases.

"The Reno murder occurred in between the time-frame of our five murders and recent evidence that`s been uncovered leads us to believe that the Reno murder is linked to several of our murders," said FBI Special Agent-in-Charge Gerald Bessette, adding that the crimes and methods used by the killer were "all very similar." According to prosecutors, Mitchell had called her mother to ask for a ride home on the evening of February 24, 1976, after her car broke down near the Reno campus of the University of Nevada. Mitchell`s mother immediately went to pick up her daughter but was unable to find her, until a few hours later when the girl`s body - with her hands bound with twine and her throat slashed - was found in the garage of a nearby house. But the case had been deemed closed after Cathy Woods, a mental health patient at the Louisiana State University Medical Center in Shreveport, Louisiana, told a hospital worker in 1978 that she had killed a girl named Michelle several years earlier. She later told an investigator from Reno that she had offered to help the girl fix her car, took her to a garage on the pretext of getting some tools, and cut her throat after Mitchell rejected a sexual proposal. Woods, who recanted her confession before trial, was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole, and she remains behind bars in Las Vegas. Her request to re-examine some of the evidence in her case led to the new findings, though investigators emphasized it does not rule out that Woods was involved and that she may have had an accomplice. The other five murders were all committed in San Mateo County in California over the span of just three months in 1976. "Beginning next week, members of the newly-formed Gypsy Hill Task Force will be canvassing neighborhoods, asking the public for information concerning any of the individual unsolved cases, including any recollections or connections between the California and Reno cases," Bessette said. "We ask that all members of the public take a moment to reflect back on your memories of that time in 1976, and if anything comes to mind that you please notify us." During Thursday`s press conference, Bessette added: "No tips or observations are too small for us, every piece of information helps. The pursuit of justice is not always instantaneous, it can be a lengthy process, but a process that gathered us here today and [we] take seriously, and we refuse to give up on." Bessette said potential tips could be "anything unusual" about a neighbor or individual who was seen in the areas of the murders. "Potentially an individual that lived in this area that traveled to Reno back and forth, had business there, mentioned to you that he or she was going there," he said. "We are just trying to jog people`s memories and potentially get some information from the public that may have seemed obnoxious at the time but could be important to us in this investigation." The first victim was the murder of 18-year-old Veronica "Ronnie" Cascio, who went missing on January 7, 1976, while walking from her home in the Fairway neighborhood of Pacifica to a nearby bus stop to go to a birthday party. Her partially nude body was found the next day, lying face down in a creek at a golf course along the road where she went missing. She was raped and suffered some 30 stab wounds in the throat and abdomen. The next murder took place about 2.5 weeks later after 14-year-old Tanya Blackwell left her home in Pacifica at around 10 p.m. on January 24, 1976, reportedly walking to a store in nearby South San Francisco for her mother. She was not found until June 6, 1976, when her decomposed body was found by two young boys in a grove of trees off a little-used dirt access road in the Gypsy Hills section of the city. An autopsy found she died of multiple stab wounds. The third murder happened on February 4, 1976, after 17-year-old Paula Baxter left a play rehearsal at Capuchino High School in Millbrae, east of Pacifica. Early next morning, her station wagon was found parked on a nearby residential street with its wheels, undercarriage and the floor at the driver`s seat spattered with mud. Millbrae`s nude body was located the next day in the brush behind a church, having been raped, stabbed, strangled and hit on the head with a rock. After the Reno murder of Michelle Mitchell on February 24, 1976, which is now believed to have been the fourth murder, 26-year-old Carol Lee Booth went missing on the evening of March 15, 1976, while walking home from a bus stop in South San Francisco. She was known to take a popular short cut that took people through a heavily wooded area on a quiet dirt path, where she was apparently dragged into the bushes and killed before being buried in a shallow grave. The last known murder was that of 19-year-old Denise Lampe on the evening of April 1, 1976. The young woman was last seen leaving the Serramonte Shopping Mall in Daly City and was supposed to meet a friend at her house, but her body was discovered at around 10 p.m. that evening, slumped on the front seat of her car in the mall`s parking lot. An autopsy found Lampe was stabbed 20 times in the chest and arms, but unlike other victims, there was no evidence that she was sexually assaulted. It is believed the woman was killed at the location, despite the presence of hundreds of people nearby. Investigators, who noted that Lampe had also not been stabbed in the throat like the other

victims, released a composite sketch of two persons of interest within days of the murder but stopped short of calling them suspects.

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