

How Good Science Caught the Bad Guy:

By Stefanie Pettit

Caught the Bad Guy:

The Stanley Pietrzak Case

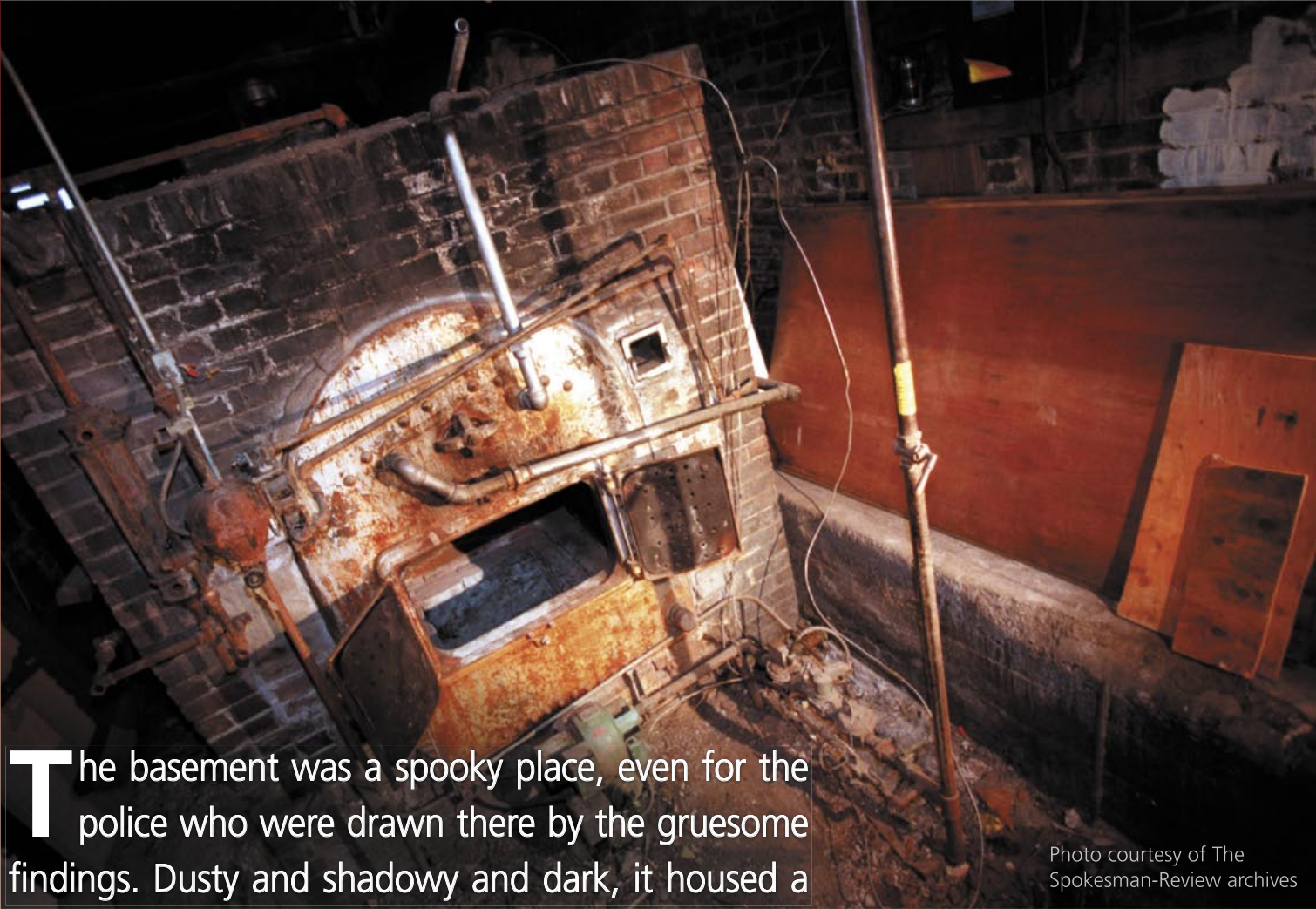


Photo courtesy of The Spokesman-Review archives

The basement was a spooky place, even for the police who were drawn there by the gruesome findings. Dusty and shadowy and dark, it housed a

furnace with iron double doors, exposed pipes, debris, storage space and a peculiar walk-in freezer. The police were there because of the furnace.

It was April 1999 and residents of Spokane were already on edge because a serial killer was moving about in their midst – unseen, kidnapping and raping prostitutes, then murdering them and leaving their bodies barely hidden.

But the sordid story that would emerge from the furnace in the catacomb beneath the Helen Apartments would not be part of the serial killer story. It would become its own tragic tale of murder, including the burning of a young

woman's body to ashes – with hints of torture and cannibalism.

It took three things to bring to light the events that took place there – a suspect who talked too much, a key piece of DNA evidence found by police and the painstaking efforts of a forensic anthropologist.

That forensic anthropologist was Sarah Keller, professor of anthropology at Eastern Washington University. Keller has worked with law enforce-

ment for nearly 20 years, identifying skeletal material and conducting physical anthropology workshops for police, students, coroners, attorneys and others.

"I'd say most all our major-crimes detectives have taken her bone identification classes," said Chet Gilmore, a detective with the Spokane Police Department. "She is *the* expert."

But back to the basement of the Helen Apartments, a group of low-income units above a tavern on the western edge of downtown Spokane. And, actually, back a little further – to November 1998 when Spokane Police first learned that Kelly Conway, 24, a young mother with a troubled history and a risky lifestyle, was missing.

Apparently, she had last been seen in the company of Stanley Pietrzak, a 44-year-old registered sex offender. Pietrzak was a resident of the Helen Apartments and had been the building manager for a time, with keys to the basement.

He was already well known to police. A woman had been found dead in his bed earlier that year – after a night of drinking, Pietrzak claimed. There was not enough evidence to charge him in the case, a case on which Gilmore was lead detective.

Pietrzak had also been questioned by detectives in 1993 in the disappearance of another young woman who had lived with him, a woman still listed as missing today. Even earlier, back in the 1970s, his first wife had been found dead in their home.

Still, nothing conclusive was learned about Kelly Conway's whereabouts in November 1998. Pietrzak, however, remained on the police radar screen, even as a suspect in the serial killer investigations for a time.

In April 1999, when police arrived at the Helen Apartments on another matter – “We had a long history there,” Gilmore said – residents spoke of disturbing things. They said Pietrzak, who had recently vacated the premises to begin a jail sentence for sexually abusing a 16-year-old girl, had been spinning wild tales about Kelly Conway.

According to police and newspaper reports, residents said Pietrzak told them he killed Conway – who they described as a likeable young woman they called “Bubbles” because of her happy disposition – and burned her body in the basement furnace, that he talked of a basement torture room, that he claimed he served some of her remains to them as part of a stew he made. Now that Pietrzak was in jail, residents had been poking around in the basement.

“This opened yet another creepy door into the life and times of the underbelly of the city,” said Adam Lynn, who was the police reporter with *The Spokesman-Review* at the time.

The Spokane Serial Killer Task Force began the investigation at the Helen Apartments and determined the circumstances did not fit the profile of their case. Chet Gilmore then took over as lead detective because of his previous experience with Pietrzak and the Helen Apartments.

The police would spend quite a bit of time in the basement, removing six five-gallon buckets of material from the old furnace and examining the “torture room,” a converted walk-in freezer,

about 8-by-8 feet with a 5-inch thick door, which made it soundproof. It contained leather straps and handles on the walls.

The Spokesman-Review began its own full-court press by assigning three reporters to the initial coverage, recalls Lynn, now a reporter with the *Tacoma News Tribune*.

“That basement was chilling,” he remembered. “Even a jaded, cynical journalist had to feel empathy for anyone who may have been kept down there. Even though none of the ‘torture’ information made it to court, just standing in that basement, I was struck by how young girls like Kelly Conway become victims, how they are preyed upon.”

While the public speculated, police and scientists had already been at work gathering evidence. Before the investigation even became visible to the public, Sarah Keller was called in to the Public Safety Building in Spokane to examine the first fragments police removed from the furnace. She asked not to be told in advance what they thought they had found or where they found it.

“I didn’t want to know what it was that I was supposed to see,” she said. “It’s important to approach material without prejudice.”

The first few pieces she examined were so fragmented that it was hard to tell if they were human or animal. “But, the sixth or seventh piece was a cervical vertebra,” she said. “It wasn’t as damaged as the others, so I could determine that it was human.”

The six buckets of furnace material would be delivered to Keller at her lab at Eastern, and over the course of the next several weeks – working after hours and on weekends – she examined everything, screening it through a No. 10 USA Standard testing sieve with a 2 mm mesh opening. It was slow and painstaking.

“Burned material is difficult to work with,” she said, “because it’s so fragile and can disintegrate so easily. Bone shrinks and warps in fire as it loses water content, the bigger bones even more so. We get better identification from small bones.”

There were plenty of small bones.

The police provided her with a secure locker to store the material. She changed the locks on her lab doors. She wore a mask and gloves and worked her way through the buckets, one scoop at a time.

In all, there were 1,318 skeletal fragments recovered by the screening (varying in size from

4 inches to 10 mm) and some 50 others collected by the police and turned over to her, with 350 identifiable as to bone and anatomical features.

Her report provides intricate detail about the fragments, including her findings that the recovered material was human, consistent with being the remains of a single individual and that the individual was a young female 18-30 years old. She noted that all sections of the body were represented except for the skull and hands and that some bones – such as at the ends of the forearm bones – showed cuts or hack marks, cuts that probably occurred around the time of death.

All the fragments were taken to the medical examiner’s office and laid out on a gurney for autopsy.

The basement of the Helen Apartments had one more bit of evidence to yield up. In closely examining the scene, Detective Gilmore found a clump of hair with a section of scalp attached to it that had gotten snagged on some pipes in front of the furnace.

Then Gilmore checked medical records – and found material still intact from a 1997 medical test Conway had taken. The hair/scalp evidence and Conway’s medical test materials were sent to the Washington State Patrol Crime Lab in Spokane for analysis. They were a perfect DNA match.

At his trial in the summer of 2000, Pietrzak testified that he awoke in bed with Conway one morning and found that she was dead. There was talk of pills and alcohol, but he said he didn’t know what had happened to her. In his testimony, he said he stored her body in the basement room that used to be a cooler, that he returned to clean his apartment and throw out her belongings. He said he later dismembered her body and burned her remains in the furnace – but put her head and hands in a bag and tossed them into a garbage truck. He claims he did not kill her.

On Tuesday, Aug. 22, 2000, a jury found Stanley Pietrzak guilty of first-degree murder after just four hours of deliberation. He was sentenced to 40 years in prison.

The jury never heard about possible cannibalization or about the other women who had died in Pietrzak’s company.

What they did hear about was more than good enough for a conviction – Pietrzak’s own words, good police work and good forensic evidence, much of it provided by Eastern’s expert forensic anthropologist.