

Forensic Case – Homicide of Punky Gustavson Part I

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Dedicated detectives persevered for Punky: LAW & ORDER, PART 1 / Hard work, attention to detail and dogged determination define the Punky investigation. Next week: DNA science improves, police crack the case and the prosecutors secure a conviction.

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EDMONTON -- Det. Terry Alm could see the storm coming. Thunderheads towered overhead, threatening to drench the crime scene and wash away crucial evidence.

Alm and his partner, Det. Al Sauve, drove through Edmonton's streets towards Refinery Row, the complex of oil and gas plants on the city's eastern boundary. Their destination was an isolated trucking yard near Sherwood Park where the body of six-year-old Corinne (Punky) Gustavson had been found.

Both Alm and Sauve were veteran officers in the Edmonton Police Service (EPS), Alm with 16 years service, Sauve with 13, but both were newly transferred to the homicide unit. They had been assigned the Gustavson file earlier that day of Sept. 6, 1992, when there was hope the little girl was alive. She was still missing after a two-day search, Staff Sgt. Kurt Schmidt told Alm and Sauve. If things went sour, Alm would be the primary investigator, Sauve the secondary.

Schmidt had no choice but to give the file to the two rookies. All of his more experienced homicide investigators were busy working on unsolved files of their own.

Alm and Sauve talked to EPS investigators that afternoon at the northeast Edmonton police subdivision, the headquarters of the search for Punky. That evening, with things still quiet, Alm went home. He was stirring the contents of a pot on the stove when Schmidt called.

"They found her body," he said, then told Alm the location. "I'll see you out there."

Right then, Alm's heart started to pound.

The Punky abduction was already front-page news. When Alm and Sauve drove up to the muddy, gravel trucking yard, they saw not just a crime scene, but a circus. Two helicopters hovered overhead, one from the RCMP, the other hired by news media. TV cameramen and photographers were also on the rooftops of surrounding buildings. Forensic specialists combed the area. Some pulled out tarps to protect tire tracks and footprints at the scene against impending rain.

Alm looked over to see two police bosses -- Insp. Murray Barker of the EPS and his RCMP counterpart -- sitting in a van, haggling over which police service would lead the case. The crime scene was just outside of Edmonton, placing it in the RCMP's jurisdiction, but Barker successfully argued that EPS detectives should lead the investigation, as Punky's family and numerous witnesses were in Edmonton where the abduction had occurred.

The case belonged to Terry Alm. For a moment, he felt paralysed. Holy crap, what a file to be landed with, he thought.

"It was bigger than big," Alm says today. "It was overwhelming, even at the time. It was totally overwhelming."

In the end, of course, things came together rather neatly to solve the case: semen was found on the girl's clothing, DNA tests proved the semen belonged to 42-year-old convicted rapist Clifford Mathew Sleigh, and he was found guilty of first-degree murder. But any notion that the investigation and prosecution of Sleigh were straightforward is an illusion. Doubt and anxiety pervaded the investigation. The burden of solving it was immense, and it dragged on for more than 10 years, as Sleigh proved to be a cool, manipulative, remorseless adversary.

To this day, the case haunts city police. "No one wants another file like that one," says Det. Albert Lacher, who took over as the primary on the Punky file when Alm retired in April 2002.

The overwhelming nature of the file derived from the complexion of the crime -- the abduction, sex assault and murder of a young and adorable child by a stranger. No type of crime is tougher to solve and, human nature being what it is, no crime inspires more of an outcry to solve it. EPS officers such as Alm and Sauve felt personally responsible to arrest Punky's killer before he raped and murdered again.

"If there ever was a case that everybody wanted to solve more than anything else in the world, this was it," says Tom Peebles, a key investigator on the file, now retired. "This was one bad guy we all wanted."

The doubt, the pressure, the mystery, the outcry, the hunger for an arrest, the elusiveness of the killer -- all of it combined to turn the Punky file into not only the biggest and most expensive investigation in EPS history, but also the most anguished.

An early snowfall sprinkled down on the morning of Sept. 6, 1992. Despite the cold, Corinne (Punky) Gustavson -- a sprightly child who had been given her nickname because of her spiked blond hair -- decided to head out and play with her five-year-old friend, Lindsay Moosewah, in front of their homes in a northeast Edmonton townhouse complex. At some point, a man approached the little girls, grabbed Punky and escaped. At once, Moosewah rushed inside.

"A murderer took Corinne!" the little girl told her mom, who at once called the police.

Fifteen officers were soon on the scene, going door-to-door, searching for Punky. Forty neighbours and friends joined in the first-day search. Radio and TV broadcasts quickly got out the news.

"Please let her go," Karen Vallette, Punky's mom, pleaded over the airwaves. "Let her come home to her Mommy."

That night Karen slept on the living room floor, cradling a photo of Punky.

A number of children in the townhouse complex quickly came forward as eyewitnesses, each with their own version of the abduction. Gossip and rumour had already ripped through the complex, and the police struggled to ascertain which of the accounts was accurate. Only two of the eyewitnesses seemed somewhat credible, the first being Lindsay Moosewah, who was interviewed right after the abduction and several times later. In these interviews, the little girl tried to please the police as much as she could. She told them many things, only some of which were true. A man with a gun took Punky, she said. He had three earrings, possibly a thin moustache, dark skin and dark hair, with a white patch on top, she said. The man had blood on his hands. He put Punky in a garbage bag. He had come out of one of the townhouse apartments. He put Punky into the backseat of a four-door car with a red interior. There were three other children in the car.

In the end, after repeatedly sorting through it all, the police were only certain of one thing: that Punky hadn't wandered off, that Lindsay had seen an actual abduction.

The second eyewitness account came from a teenage boy, Joseph Gladue. He told police he had seen a man with grooves cut in the hair on the side of his head carrying a little blond girl into a blue van with rust patches.

The police released elements from Moosewah and Gladue's stories to the public, hoping the information might lead to Punky while she was still alive. At once, any male in Edmonton who owned a blue van or matched the description became a person of interest to the police. In the Gustavsons' townhouse complex lived a man nicknamed Skunk, who had a streak of white hair and also earrings. Police interviewed Skunk and quickly determined he had nothing to do with the crime, but with news of Moosewah's description circulating, he was targeted by neighbours. Someone tried to run him down with a vehicle.

For two days, hundreds of civilians and police officers searched for Punky. At last, late in the afternoon of Sept. 8, trucker Larry Rathburn was walking around his rig at his trucking yard, inspecting it before a job, when he spotted something that looked wrong to him, as if a doll had been left in the mud. At once he called the RCMP. They arrived right away, identified the body of a deceased child and sealed off the area.

At the search headquarters, Staff Sgt. Ulysses Currie stood on a chair in front of dozens of officers and volunteer searchers.

"I regret to inform you we have found the body of the girl," he said. "There's nothing more you can do right now, I'm afraid."

Many people broke down weeping. Fear spread. As a direct result of Punky's murder, many Edmonton parents changed their behaviour, starting to walk their kids to school each day.

Outrage erupted as well. "Catch the bastard!" roared a tabloid headline.

"I believe in the death penalty," said Steve West, Alberta's solicitor general, in relation to the case.

"There isn't a punishment that's hard enough for a crime like this," said Premier Don Getty's wife, Margaret.

Private donors, big and small, put together a reward of \$100,000 for information leading to the culprit's arrest. Punky's family started a petition to bring back the death penalty for child killers. Thirteen city shopping malls held a special event in mid-September 1992 to have customers sign the petition.

"I hope they catch him and turn him loose in a room full of mothers," said Heather Airth, spokeswoman for Edmonton's Emergency Relief Services.

The first crucial clues to the murder were found at the crime scene. Punky's body looked to have been stuffed haphazardly into her clothing, then left face-down and shoeless, hidden between a number of large trucks and trailers. There was no sign of a struggle, no fingerprints or scuffle marks. The police concluded that Punky had almost certainly been raped elsewhere, then dumped in the trucking yard.

But where was the site of her rape and murder? After an extensive search, the police found a number of possible locations. Alm enlisted Dr. Marvin Dudas, a University of Alberta soil expert, to compare the

dried soil found at these sites with the soil found on the bottom of Punky's socks -- soil which didn't match the dirt from the trucking yard. Dudas found a few possible matches, but nothing conclusive.

Another clue was a pair of distinctive footprints leading away from Punky's body. The prints appeared to have been made by a cleat. Forensic investigators, Constables Brent Ball and Joe Pendleton, determined the prints most likely came from a popular make of shoe, the Mitre baseball cleat, most likely in a size six.

Forensic examiners also made casts of tire tracks from the killer's vehicle at the crime scene. Pendleton calculated the turning radius of the tire marks was too small to have come from a van. The tracks had to have come from a car, most likely a "K" car, or some North American mid-size front-wheel-drive model, with badly worn summer tires on the front. If the blue van tip was solid, the investigators concluded the killer had likely used the van to abduct Punky, then used a second vehicle to dump her body.

Forensic experts also studied Punky's clothing and body for clues. Dr. Graeme Dowling, Alberta's chief medical examiner, conducted a laser exam and autopsy on the three-foot-10-inch, 39-pound girl. Dowling noted that aside from a few scrapes and bruises, her body was unmarked. Her internal injuries were severe, though, leading Dowling to conclude that Punky might have died from blood loss related to the rape. It was also possible she had been suffocated.

Dowling took anal and vaginal swabs to see if the culprit had left behind semen or skin tissue. A dark, seven-centimetre hair, clearly not from Punky, was found caked on to the girl's ankle with mud. It was removed and given the exhibit label of MA-7. Her clothing was also removed, and sent with the swabs to the RCMP's Vancouver crime lab. Forensic examiners hoped to find the killer's DNA, but in lab tests completed in October 1992, serologist John Elsoff found no DNA on the swabs or the clothing.

In Edmonton, RCMP forensic scientist Dr. Peter Bilous removed the bulb of the MA-7 hair, which lab tests had shown to be a pubic hair. Bilous hoped that MA-7's root might contain the killer's DNA, but when Bilous examined the bulb, he saw no obvious genetic matter, either. If there was any DNA present, it was just a microscopic amount, not enough to conduct genetic testing using the RFLP method, the standard DNA procedure of that era.

The initial lab work had failed to strike gold. Any hope of finding a quick path to the killer through forensics was gone.

There was one cause for hope, though. Bilous told the investigators that at some future date new DNA technology and techniques might yet yield the killer's genetic profile. Of course, any DNA of the killer found on Punky's body or clothing would only be useful if the police also had the DNA profile of the killer himself for comparison. With this in mind, investigators started to ask suspects to supply saliva, head hair, pubic hair and blood samples, "DNA standards" as the investigators called them, for future testing and comparison. Suspects almost always complied when the police made this request. "If they weren't involved, they wanted to wash their hands of it. They were more than willing," says Lacher, who was one of 50 investigators who originally worked on the Punky file.

Most often, the simple act of providing a DNA standard was enough to set aside a man as a suspect. "How would we eliminate a guy?" Lacher asks. "OK, he voluntarily provided samples. Good enough. I mean, at that time, when there are 200 other suspects and tips sitting there to investigate, how can you justify spending another month on this particular tip?"

Even the worst of criminals -- cons who had never co-operated with the police on any matter -- were keen to distance themselves from such a despicable crime. Early in the investigation, Alm and Sauve confronted 33-year-old Luc Gregoire of Calgary, who had committed a heinous sex assault and murder of a 22-year-old 7-Eleven clerk.

Alm and Sauve were interested in Gregoire because he was a roofer and a baseball player, a man who wore cleated shoes. They confronted him in jail. As soon as he saw they were police, Gregoire snorted, "I'm outta here!"

Just then, Sauve flipped an 8-by-10 picture of Punky in front of Gregoire.

"Hey, just a minute now, no, no, no," said the suddenly co-operative killer. "I've done some bad things, but I didn't do this."

In the first weeks of the investigation, with the city in an uproar, a tidal wave of tips flooded in. At times, tipsters had to wait on the phone for as long as four hours to talk to a police officer, but still they waited. "In 30 years, I've never seen a community response like this to a crime," said Deputy Chief Jim Henderson.

The police felt the same imperative to act. Alm and Sauve worked long days, but when they went home they found they were too restless to sleep much. "You just couldn't wait to get to work in the morning and grab that pile of files and start going through, not knowing if the next one was going to reveal the killer," Sauve says.

Fifty thousand questionnaires were sent out in northeast Edmonton, asking people what they had been up to on Sept. 6 and if they'd seen anything suspicious.

Most murder investigations get about 10 tips for the police to work on. The Punky file got 5,261 tips, and each tip had to be thoroughly investigated and documented. In the end, a mountain of paperwork was created, enough to fill two rooms at EPS headquarters, more than a million pages in total, according to Peter Royal, Sleigh's lawyer.

The flow and volume of tips and paperwork constantly threatened to swamp the investigation. "It was just a herculean task for the police in terms of the volume of information and the number of tips that were suspects," says prosecutor John Benkendorf, who assisted the lead prosecutor, Jason Track, on the case.

Alm wasn't helped by the fact that in the early 1990s the EPS had no formal method of organizing and tracking information that came in on major cases. He struggled to keep up. As he puts it: "I was just trying to keep track of flavour of the day and who's who in the zoo. ... For one person to take all this in, it was just too much."

"Everyone is talking to you and everyone wants a piece of your attention," Lacher says. "I don't think you can define pressure until you were in our shoes and going through that."

Alm never wanted to put the brakes on any investigator who was hot after a suspect; he knew creativity and an open-minded approach were crucial to his team's success, but he was constantly being pressured by fired-up officers, certain they had found the killer.

"I was bombarded," Alm says. "It was quite daunting to deal with all this, with everybody's theories. . . If I had a nickel for every rumour about people that were responsible or were good suspects, I'd be a millionaire."

All the tips had to be thoroughly investigated, but not all the tipsters had the best or sanest of motives. A number of vindictive women made spurious reports. One such woman from a reserve in Saskatchewan called the EPS to report she'd found runners in her boyfriend's car, the same kind of runners that Punky had been wearing the day she went missing, but the police had never been able to locate them in their searches. The woman reported to the EPS that when she had confronted her boyfriend with these shoes, he had snatched them out of her hand and thrown them down a toilet. When the police checked further, however, they found aspects of the woman's story that didn't make sense. In the end, she recanted her accusation, but only after police had spent days and had travelled to Saskatchewan to investigate her claims.

Alm found himself dealing with an unending series of time-wasting jobs, such as psychotic people calling in with tips or even to claim responsibility for the crime. Some tipsters complained bitterly if they felt the police didn't investigate their tip thoroughly enough. One or two went so far as to enlist politicians and the Gustavson family to complain to the police, which forced Alm to write memos to his superiors, defending the work of his team.

Most sex assault and homicide investigations are committed by the so-called "nearest-and-dearest," the friends, family and neighbours of the victim. Accordingly, both of Alm's direct superiors, Staff Sgt. Schmidt and Staff Sgt. Don Forrest, who came in to assist the homicide unit on the case, believed the killer either knew Punky or lived close enough to have kept an eye on her. EPS officers went door-to-door in an ever-widening area around Punky's townhouse, checking out the alibis of an ever-increasing number of people. One of them looked extremely suspicious; he had salt-and-pepper grey hair and was found to have a life-size cloth doll made out of women's panties and bras. When the police investigated him, though, they found he had nothing to do with Punky, but had sexually assaulted his own stepdaughter.

The police quickly discovered that Punky's neighbourhood at that particular point in time was full of shady characters, men who had been convicted of violent crimes, including sex offences. As one frustrated investigator noted wryly: "You can't swing a dead cat without hitting a pervert."

The police cast such a wide net that they quickly came upon Clifford Sleigh, though they had no idea he was a suspect, let alone the killer. In early November 1992, the police decided to track down the whereabouts of every single man who had played at a major Sherwood Park softball tournament on the Labour Day weekend. Almost every player would have been wearing cleats, which made them of interest to the police. The investigators next tracked down the ball players' relatives, thinking they might be suspects, too. One such investigative path led the police to a woman named Gail Smith. Her ex-husband, Lionel McKay, and his nephews had been at the tournament. A Sherwood Park RCMP officer talked to Smith, who confirmed the alibis of her ex-husband and the nephews.

Gail Smith also gave the RCMP a tip, which she said came from her current common-law husband, Clifford. Clifford had told Smith that on the morning Punky went missing, he had seen an acquaintance, a man driving a blue or grey van near the IGA at Abbotsfield Mall, which was located close to Punky's townhouse. Maybe this man should be looked at, Smith suggested.

Neither Gail Smith nor Sleigh himself would be interviewed for this story, but it's evident that in the fall of 1992, Sleigh and Smith had talked about the Punky homicide, and to avert any suspicions Smith might have had about him, Sleigh had pointed the finger at another man.

But Sleigh had no interest in sharing anything with the police. When the RCMP's Ed Comaniuk tracked down Sleigh on Nov. 6, 1992, to ask about this tip, Sleigh denied knowing anything. He told Comaniuk he didn't even know where that particular IGA was located. The matter was dropped.

As weeks turned into months in the investigation, a number of EPS officers started to bash Alm and Sauve, mainly because the two men always seemed to be around the office. They should get out and beat the streets, the critics said; that's the way to catch the killer.

"Being junior, we took the criticism hard," Sauve says. "We talked about it, wondered if it was fair. Were we on the right track?"

Maybe a more experienced investigator should run the show, Alm started to think. "It weighs on you not being able to solve it. You often wonder, 'Am I in over my head?' "

But Schmidt never lost confidence in his two investigators. He could not think of one thing he would do differently on the file. Yes, Alm and Sauve were in the office all the time, but they had to be in order to comprehend all the incoming information.

When critics blasted the two men to Schmidt, Schmidt blasted back. "I'd say, 'If you're so smart, you come and do it.' Then they'd start to stutter."

To help Alm and Sauve, EPS brass put in a new system. A senior officer, Det. Tom Peebles, was assigned to manage manpower requests, work schedules and to review work done on tips. The process of elimination on the tips became like an assembly line, Sauve says, very mechanical, though it was fuelled not by oil but by hard work. Peebles was impressed with the commitment of his detectives. "They just worked their hearts out," he says. "With the volume of tips we were getting, a lot of them were just crap. ... The investigators knew they were crap, too, but they knew they had to be done."

The new system allowed Alm and Sauve to focus on only the most promising suspects. On a few occasions, a number of investigators believed some of these suspects were actually the killer, and that an arrest was close.

In one such case in November 1992, an RCMP officer, Bill Robinson, focused on a mentally handicapped teenage kid, who became a person of interest because little Lindsay Moosewah had told her mom, "The babysitter knows who did it," and the handicapped teen had once babysat Lindsay. The top EPS interrogator, Det. Rick Gagnon, went in with Alm to interview the teen.

Gagnon talked calmly to the young man about criminal intent and whether or not Punky's killer had really intended to kill the girl and what kind of person the killer really was.

"I'm sorry, I didn't intend to do it," the suspect said.

"Do what?" Gagnon asked.

"Having killed Punky."

Sauve heard the confession from an adjoining monitoring room. The good news spread quickly through EPS headquarters. Other officers, including top EPS brass, packed in to listen to the confession. "You kind of get caught up in that frenzy," Sauve says.

As Alm puts it, some on the EPS team "had the champagne on ice."

Gagnon attempted to validate the confession by asking the teenager specific questions about the crime. The teen's answers were disjointed and murky. The teen also appeared to be functioning at a low level intellectually, which concerned Gagnon. "You have to be very cautious with low-functioning individuals," he says. "When they get stressed, sometimes they may say something to try to appease you, especially if you've developed a bond with them."

At last, Gagnon left the room and told the investigators: "I don't believe he's your guy."

Instead of arresting the suspect, the police took him to Alberta Hospital for a psychiatric assessment.

"What a downer!" Schmidt says of the false confession. "Some people cried. Honestly, some people cried."

Sauve was despondent. "That's when Terry and I started to talk about the roller-coaster we were on and how much longer we could stand it," he says.

Perhaps the most promising tip came from a jailhouse informant in Quebec. The informant had strangled another con, a convicted child killer, after the con had let it slip he had killed Punky. The jailhouse informant passed on his information to a guard. The news made its way to Alm. Alm and homicide detective Freeman Taylor flew to Quebec to talk to the informant.

"I got no reason to lie to you," he told them. "This guy confessed to killing Punky. So I killed him."

Alm and Taylor travelled to the child killer's hometown in New Brunswick. They also did credit card and motor vehicle searches. In the end, they ascertained the child killer had never been out of New Brunswick, and certainly wasn't in Edmonton in September 1992. He wasn't the guy.

Blinded by the nearest-and-dearest theory, a number of EPS officers became convinced that Punky's uncle, Ron Davies, was the killer. The police had no indication that Davies was any kind of criminal whatsoever and as soon as police asked, he gave DNA standards. Alm and Sauve always felt Davies was innocent, but one EPS staff sergeant berated Sauve for badly screwing up by not focusing on Davies.

"It's the uncle, isn't it?" other officers often said to Alm. "You just can't prove it."

In their minds, Ron Davies made sense as the killer because of circumstantial evidence, such as the fact he was close to Punky, he was a trucker, he reportedly looked nervous at the north division station when it was announced her body had been found, and the front tires on his car were bald. Alm allowed one particularly gung-ho investigator to interrogate Davies. The session lasted for six hours. At one point, the officer tried to pressure Davies by lying to him, saying Davies's car had been spotted that weekend at the Sherwood Park trucking yard and his licence plate number had been written down.

"Well, that's bullshit," Davies shot back. "I wasn't in the parking lot."

The police continued to hound Davies, he says, and angry zealots phoned his house with crank calls and death threats. Eventually, he agreed to take a polygraph test. He passed with flying colours.

"The police still owe me an apology," he says. "I think hell will freeze over before they give me one."

The fall of 1992 ended, winter came, and still no clear suspects had emerged. Alm and Sauve were near burn-out. They had failed to eat, sleep and exercise properly for months. They realized they had to do something to keep from imploding, so they started to go to the Kinsmen Fieldhouse when it opened at 6 a.m. to run madly around a track or on a treadmill. They asked the Kinsmen if the doors might not open even earlier for them, so they could get done exercising and get to work more quickly.

A particularly low point came in February 1993. A hot tip came in about a fellow who had lived in Fort McMurray, played baseball and had borrowed a friend's blue van to go to Edmonton on Labour Day weekend 1992. The suspect now lived in Castlegar, B.C., where he worked at a sawmill. Alm flew into Penticton, but found his connecting flight was grounded because of a blizzard. He rented a car and headed out. For one long stretch, the snowstorm was so severe that Alm could no longer see the road. He only made progress by following the red tail lights of a truck in front of him. When he got to Castlegar, he talked on the phone with Sauve, who along with six other investigators had checked out the suspect's background in Fort McMurray. Sauve told Alm that the suspect hadn't gone to Edmonton that weekend in a blue van. The suspect didn't play baseball, either. In fact, nothing linked him to the crime at all any more.

"My road trip from hell," Alm says.

"After a while I think you just become numb," Sauve says.

Homicide detectives tend to be driven and competitive. If one investigator starts to get a number of unsolved cases to his name, he gets derided, and so it was with Alm. A few of his colleagues started to kid him, pointing out this was his one and only murder file and he had not cracked it. They nicknamed him, "O-fer," a reference to the baseball term for a batter who doesn't get a hit in a game, going 0-for-3 or 0-for-4 at the plate.

Alm faced his first major crisis of confidence as a police officer. Part of Alm was perfectly suited for his present task of working on a big team. He had never seen himself as a superstar, just an Average Joe investigator. He had come from a blue-collar family in Edmonton's tough north side. He grew up working hard, both at part-time jobs and on his high school football team. He had been a strong football player, a solid five-foot-10-inches tall, weighing 210 pounds. Not a glory-seeking quarterback or running back type, Alm was an offensive lineman who knew his assignment and took pride in slugging it out in the trenches for the good of the team. And now, this is just what he was doing on the Punky file.

But another part of Alm strove for perfection. He had worked in a nursery and garden centre as a teen, which fostered a lifelong love of gardening. He came to take pride in having an immaculate yard and garden. He loved to nurture plants, to do all he could for them. As a police officer, that same trait came through in his handling of suspects and witnesses; he pushed and prodded until he understood every single detail of their stories; that way he could make sure he was guiding his investigation along to its proper conclusion. But with the Punky file, this level of care was impossible.

The file had become a painful conundrum. In one sense, there was no end of things to investigate and document; by Alm's exacting standards, almost every tip needed more work. In another sense, however, there was nothing to do, no way to focus the investigation on one or two prime suspects. Alm had nothing to separate the wheat from the chaff, nothing that would either prove a suspect's innocence or guilt.

"At the end of the day, you don't know what's a good tip and what's a bad tip."

Alm joked with colleagues about placing an ad in the newspaper where he would ask the killer if the investigators had anything right so far. "At least give us a call and say, 'Hey, you're totally wrong on the blue van.' I mean, you see that kind of thing happen in the movies, where the killer calls up."

Many of the investigators on the file started to feel stressed. They were all having to move fast and make quick calls on suspects, even if they didn't have perfect information. Anxious talk started up about eliminating the wrong guy, then having him later turn out to be the killer.

This was Alm's great fear as well, and it pushed him to constantly check and recheck the various tips, second guessing everything that had been done. A few of the investigators started to resent this kind of supervision. Alm seemed like a worry wart to them. Even Sauve had questions. "At first, I didn't know how to take it."

A few times, Sauve told Alm to stop being so anal about things. As the months passed, though, Sauve started to be impressed by Alm's methods, his thorough notes, his astonishing recall of detail, and his compulsion to make sure no tip was left hanging. Rather than bitch when Alm said an issue needed to be revisited, Sauve started to immediately back up his partner's judgment.

Alm wasn't second guessing himself, Sauve came to realize, so much as Alm was second guessing whether or not the right things were done in the investigation for the right reasons at the time. "He was the guardian of all the information, the guardian of the file, and he took that responsibility so seriously.

"What I witnessed in Terry Alm was incredible ... the care he took to handle the file is something I will never forget."

Every time a man sexually assaulted a child in Edmonton, he became a suspect, a blip on the radar screen of the Punky investigation. One such blip came on May 21, 1993, Tip No. 4,411 in the file. Alm learned that 30-year-old Clifford Mathew Sleigh had allegedly raped the teenaged daughter of a friend that day. Sex crimes detectives Kelly Rockwood and Rick Wilks went to interview Sleigh. At his apartment, Wilks found Mitre cleats in the closet.

Rockwood wanted to eliminate Sleigh as a suspect for the Punky slaying so the police could get on with the rape investigation against him, so he asked Sleigh for an alibi for Sept. 6, 1992. The killer told Rockwood he'd been in Calgary at that time, not anywhere near Edmonton. Sleigh coolly denied any involvement in Punky's death. When Rockwood asked for DNA standards for the Punky investigation, Sleigh readily complied.

If the police had had the DNA profile of Punky's killer at that time, the move would have been disastrous for Sleigh. Handing over his DNA was a tremendous risk, but it is also the kind of action that fits with Sleigh's profile as a psychopath, says Det. Paul Link, who would later help conduct a key interview with the killer.

Psychopaths are known to be impulsive. They take action to dominate a particular situation, with little thought to consequences. Sleigh must have realized that alarm bells would ring if he refused to hand over DNA standards, Link says, so he complied with the request. "He's thinking, 'I'll deal with this later, and I'll roll the dice later, but right now, let's eliminate this threat.' "

Rockwood and Wilks took Sleigh's cleats to Const. Brent Ball of the EPS identification section. Ball had looked at hundreds of cleats in the case and had found few, if any, matches. Now he ruled out Sleigh's

cleats as being similar to the killer's cleats. It's not known why Ball erred. Perhaps Sleigh had purchased new and bigger cleats. Or maybe Ball had miscalculated the size for the killer's cleats. "Tire and shoes impressions, it's not an exact science," says Det. Ralph Godfrey, Link's partner.

Rockwood checked Sleigh's alibi by tracking down Gail Smith, who had been living with Sleigh back in September 1992. The two had met in 1991 when Sleigh was an inmate and Smith was a counsellor at a halfway house. Smith fell for the convict and ultimately lost her job because the relationship violated prison rules.

Smith was one of a number of educated, bright aboriginal women who fell for Sleigh. "He's smooth," Godfrey says. "He's a charmer. He's got the tone of voice. I think he carries himself well. He could be an attractive guy, but he's a manipulator.... He's good at identifying weaknesses and playing to those weaknesses."

Gail Smith told Rockwood that on the September 1992 long weekend, she and Sleigh had travelled up from their home in Lodgepole to Edmonton to visit relatives.

Clifford had been with her the entire Labour Day weekend, Smith told Rockwood, staying at her in-laws' apartment.

Sleigh's alibi was problematic, with Sleigh saying he was in Calgary, and Smith saying he was in Edmonton. Alm sent Det. Terry Briscoe to recheck Sleigh's alibi by interviewing Smith's brother and sister-in-law, Louis and Koren Smith. They corroborated Gail Smith's story, saying Sleigh had been at their Edmonton apartment all that weekend. They thought so much of Sleigh, they'd even let him babysit their own young children, Louis and Koren told Briscoe.

Louis and Koren were adamant Sleigh was innocent and there was no reason not to believe them. As Peebles put it: "He was given a bulletproof alibi ... there was no way to refute it."

Sleigh had also provided DNA standards, the supposed mark of a man with nothing to hide. There was also the fact that while Sleigh appeared to be a rapist, he had attacked the teenaged daughter of someone he knew, and had also left his victim alive. This was different than a stranger who abducted, raped and murdered a six-year-old child.

Alm wasn't convinced Sleigh was clean, but he still eliminated him as a suspect, putting Tip No. 4,411 in the "concluded, pending further information" box.

In the years since Sleigh's March 2003 arrest, Alm has wondered if he made the right decision in May 1993. "I beat myself up. Maybe I should have assigned a six-man team to Clifford Sleigh at the time ... God knows ... I don't know.

"There was always something in the back of my head with Clifford. But for every Clifford, I can think of 10 others I felt the same way."

Bad tips bogged down the investigation, but the investigators still needed to keep trying to prod the killer or those around him by releasing newsy tidbits to the media.

"We wanted to squeeze every last bit of information that was out there," Sauve says.

A billboard campaign started, with signs going up around Edmonton featuring Punky's photograph and a message printed in a child's handwriting: "Somebody out there knows."

Alm and Sauve also agreed to work with the Unsolved Mysteries TV show, hosted by Robert Stack, on a segment on Punky. Millions watched the show when it aired across North America in November 1993. More than 500 new tips flooded in, most of them about the blue van. One tipster informed the investigators that he had seen just such a blue van in Australia. After following up on hundreds of the new tips and finding nothing of much use, Alm joked that the show should be called Unwanted Mysteries.

The numbers on Alm's team started to dwindle. By 1994, only Det. Kim Malo, who logged and evaluated tips, was still with him. In July 1994, Alm himself became the primary on another homicide. Soon, he was juggling many files, and he understood that the victims in his other homicide cases were every bit as important to those families as Punky was to her family. Still, the Punky file never left his desk. On his wall he had tacked up a photo of Punky in her kindergarten graduation cap. But he was virtually alone now on the file.

"After awhile your team gets diminished, diminished, diminished. All of a sudden, one day, you wake up and you got nobody working it. But the work never really let up. This file was always there. It's sort of like a bad dream. It's not going away."

Whenever a similar-fact homicide occurred in Western Canada, Alm checked to see if there was a connection. One such case came in August 1994 with the abduction, rape and strangulation of eight-year-old Mindy Tran in Kelowna, B.C. Reporters called Alm to ask if there might be a link. He said little, but was, in fact, investigating Shannon Murrin, the prime suspect in the Tran case, who was subsequently acquitted at trial.

In January 1995, Alm travelled to a B.C. prison to interview Murrin, who had been in Edmonton in 1992 and had been asked to give DNA standards at that time. At one point, Alm threw down a picture of Punky on the table in front of Murrin.

"Do you know her?" Alm asked.

"Yeah, that's the little girl, Punky, yeah."

"A cutie, isn't she?" Alm said.

"That's a sin man," Murrin said, referring to the girl's murder. "I can remember the big signs that were up everywhere: 'Someone out there knows.' I still remember, right. Someone out there do [expletive] know ... But it ain't me. It ain't me."

Despite the strong denial, Alm continued to pursue Murrin for a number of years. Alm went so far as to send the MA-7 pubic hair to a forensic lab in Britain to see if its mitochondrial DNA matched the hairs found at the Tran crime scene, but they did not.

Al Sauve left EPS homicide in February 1996 to run the wiretap unit. He'd had enough of the homicide grind, the uncertainty, the pressure. Still, he felt he was letting down Alm by leaving.

"I knew that Terry wasn't letting go. I knew the file was in good hands, but I felt some degree of guilt."

With new tips coming in all the time, Alm occasionally asked his boss, Kurt Schmidt, for extra help. Schmidt told him that nothing could be done, that other fresh cases needed the resources now. He apologized to Alm for assigning him the Punky file in the first place. But, to himself, Schmidt thought

back to his own days as a homicide investigator and how he had been stuck with many difficult files when he was still a rookie.

That's just the way it is, Schmidt thought. Getting a difficult file was like getting a chronic disease. You just had to live with it.

Alm struggled with his predicament, and how he felt he was being perceived in homicide: as an obsessed cop with a stale file, the tips going nowhere. But while a few detectives offered to help him with tips, others had no interest.

"They couldn't run fast enough," Alm says. "When it looks like it's turning to kaka, nobody wants it."

Alm tried not to talk to his wife, Rose, about the case, even though she was a former police officer herself. He didn't want to sound like a broken record with his complaints. He realized his stress and preoccupation was affecting his family life. He wasn't as patient as he might be.

At times, he felt the case was hopeless. "I felt awfully alone. For about three years, I really didn't have a lot of support. ... There were some dark days."

"It starts to wear you down," Det. Ralph Godfrey says of Alm. "Terry is a very sensitive guy. Combine that with all the jabs and the pressure, I think it took its toll.

"I felt sorry for him. He had no resources. He had this huge file. The EPS has said we never quit on this case, and all that. But Terry never quit."

And, as luck would have it, just as Alm was at his lowest ebb, the federal government started to push forward new criminal legislation for the National DNA Data Bank, a program that would prove to be the salvation of the Punky file.