

Painful Memories of Teen's Death

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Newsday (1940-1988); Feb 1, 1988; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Newsday

pg. 6

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By Tom Demoretcky

Each work day, James Parker drives along Sunrise Highway through Lindenhurst, passing a short distance from a vacant lot where the skeletal remains of his 14-year-old daughter were found. He passes the church where her ashes are kept.

He never gets past the mystery of her death.

"I think of it every day," he said recently in his Holbrook home. "Sometimes as I drive down Sunrise I go over the whole thing step by step. It's very vivid."

Almost four years after the death of Laura Parker, then a ninth-grader at Lindenhurst High School, two Suffolk homicide detectives also are going over it step by step. Dets. Mike Carmody and John Pflanzgraf are convinced they are dealing with a murder, though no evidence of violence was found.

"We believe she was murdered the same day she disappeared," Carmody said. "If she was a murder victim we believe the murderer was someone known to her." The killer probably was from the neighborhood, Carmody said, because few outsiders knew the area where the body was found, in a former teen hangout in the lot on Frank Street, not far from the junior high and high schools. Laura Parker disappeared on May 23, 1984, and her remains were found on Sept. 10 that year.

The skeleton was found by neighborhood youths in the partially filled-in hole, amid lumber and refuse in the "fort" in the lot. The remains were covered with a carpet.

"All we have is she's found in this hole, and she's covered up with a carpet, so we don't know how she died," Carmody said. But he said the position of the skeleton was such that she could not have fallen into the hole. Carmody said the medical examiner had tested her bone marrow for drugs and found none. "We aren't ruling out that she was strangled or smothered," he said.

Police are still seeking information in the mystery, and still hoping someone with information will call the homicide squad's number—286-53392.

Laura had left the school grounds to hang out, alone but without her purse, police said. At first, police, school officials and neighbors thought Parker or at his wife Patricia that the disappearance was voluntary. But when the daughter's body was found, they would be back.

"They overreacted. They thought she ran away, everybody said she was back, that it was a prankster," James Parker recalls.



Newsday / Julia Gaines

James and Patricia Parker at their home in Holbrook, and, at left, their daughter Laura, whose remains were found in a vacant lot in September, 1984.

didn't believe that," Parker said that although police, volunteers and the FBI were looking for his daughter from the beginning, they thought they were searching for a live girl. This, he said, could explain why nobody searched a vacant lot just blocks from her school. "We weren't looking for a body; we were looking for a girl," he said.

But Patricia Parker thought the worst. She recalls that she had a dream the night before Laura disappeared that she would never see her again.

The Parkers and police are nearly certain the girl never left Lindenhurst and that she was dead the same day. Police note that they found on the skeletal remains the same clothing Laura had been wearing when last seen by friends that day in school, and that she had left behind her pocketbook in school. Still there were reports of sightings.

Dr. Stephen Steidel, commanding officer of the juvenile service unit, said that of the approximately 1,800 reports of missing children in Suffolk each year, about 99 percent turn out to be voluntary runaways. Police officer Thomas Howard, who investigated the first case, said that other students

had mistakenly thought and reported they saw Laura around the community right after her disappearance.

At one point, after a truck driver reported seeing the girl in New York, James Parker started stalking the streets of Manhattan.

"I walked the streets in the city for seven days, all night," he said. "I walked down streets Charles Bronson wouldn't walk on."

On one occasion, he thought he saw his daughter as he was sitting in his car. "There was a girl I saw walking toward me. She was almost to the door and I was going to jump out and grab her." Then he realized it was someone else.

There were also ugly incidents. "About a month after she was missing, I got a phone call," James Parker said. "A girl said 'Daddy, will you come and get me? I kept saying, 'Where are you?' then I heard another girl laughing in the background.'" The prankster then hung up, he said.

James Parker said he was angry at some parents of children at school because he said they had told their youngsters not to talk to police. Carmody and Pflanzgraf described cooperation of stu-

dents in the school as "poor."

The Parkers, both 56, moved out of Lindenhurst. They said they couldn't live with the memories there. They and their son James Jr., now 10, have a condominium in Holbrook. They also have a retarded daughter, 33, who lives in a hostel. Laura was adopted as an infant, Patricia Parker said, after six miscarriages and an infant who died days after birth.

Of her adopted daughter, Patricia said: "She cared for people. She had the right to have a burial. She didn't have to be thrown in a hole like that." She said her daughter loved chorus in school and talked about being a singer. The Parkers added that Laura was careful about getting into other people's cars, didn't cut school and had never run away.

James, an airline equipment maintenance worker at Kennedy Airport, recalled watching a police officer carry his daughter's remains from the lot in a bag. "He carried it in one hand," he said. "How could anyone leave her like that?"

"If they have any mirrors in their house, how can they look themselves in the face? How can they keep something like that to themselves?"