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Missing the Grim Sleeper by a Hair

LAPD stakeout in 1988 was three houses away from suspect Lonnie Franklin Jr.'s home

By Christine Pelisek and Jill Stewart

Soon after LAPD Detective Rich Haro got the call in 1988 about a woman clinging to life at Harbor-UCLA hospital, he learned that telltale markings on a .25 caliber slug dug from her chest matched those from bullets fired by a serial killer who had slain Debra Jackson, Henrietta Wright, Thomas Steele, Barbara Ware, Bernita Sparks, Mary Lowe, Lachrica Jefferson and Monique Alexander.

Thrilled to have a hot lead, Haro interviewed the groggy survivor, Enietra Margette Washington, in her hospital bed.

A month later, when Washington could sit up, Haro drove her through the rough streets of South Los Angeles looking for the spots where a charming, well-spoken black man had struck up a conversation with her, taken her for a ride, stopped at his uncle's house to get money, then, blocks away, pulled a gun and shot her.

Washington told Haro how, after being shot, she was jolted back to consciousness by a flash of light to find the man raping her — and photographing her with a Polaroid camera. The attacker shoved her from his car and left her for dead. She remembered that he drove an orange Ford Pinto that "looked like a Hot Wheels car" with a tricked-out interior.

Inside Haro's LAPD car, driving up and down the streets, Washington spotted a small, neat Spanish bungalow on West 81st Street and excitedly cried out, "This is the house!"

It was the home of Othus White, a now-deceased neighborhood fixture who often hosted a game of cards or dominos on his front porch in the shade of an evergreen tree. After work, friends and locals dropped by to enjoy a beer with the affable White.

Police canvassed nearby houses, where a neighbor said she had seen a rust-colored Pinto parked on the street. The LAPD quietly set up a surveillance team kitty-corner from White's home in a closed-down business on Western Avenue that is now an abandoned church.

For a month, teams of police watched and waited from inside the cold, darkened storefront. In that era, police had to call in on a pay phone and type up their reports on electric typewriters. Any clue took far longer to check out than it would today.

"We probably exhausted all the leads," Haro recalls today, eight years after he retired. "There were a lot of things we did."

But one thing, they missed.

The home of Othus White, the center of the LAPD stakeout for a full month in 1988, was just three doors away from the home of Grim Sleeper suspect Lonnie David Franklin Jr.

White's house on West 81st Street was number 1742. Franklin's is number 1728.

Until Franklin's arrest last week, police never knew that they nearly had the suspect more than two decades ago, or that he slipped away allegedly to kill again.

Detective Dennis Kilcoyne, supervisor of the Grim Sleeper task force, says much remains unknown about how close police got to the Grim Sleeper in 1988, and why they never knew.

"I don't believe they knocked on Franklin's door," Kilcoyne says. "I don't know."

Police say Franklin, 57, went on to kill three more people in the 2000s — Princess Berthomieux, Valerie McCorvey and Janecia Peters.

"We were that close?" says Donnell Alexander, the brother of victim Monique Alexander, a teenager who vanished in September 1988 after asking her dad if he wanted anything from the liquor store, and never returned home. "He was right there, under my nose."

Donnell Alexander has attended every press conference and vigil since *L.A. Weekly* broke the story of the secret task force in 2008. The *Weekly* was the first to inform the victims' families that their daughters and sisters had been murdered by a serial killer — information that the LAPD, for reasons former chiefs William Bratton and Daryl Gates never fully explained, chose not to share with the families.

Says a shocked Yvonne Bell, victim Lachrica Jefferson's aunt, "He lived right next to me!" during the 1988 LAPD investigation that focused on White's home. Yet she does not recall being questioned by police at that time.

Says Kilcoyne: "We were very close, but not close enough, honestly." His only explanation is, "We had nothing to push us over the edge."

Lost in the fog of faded memories is whether Franklin was ever directly questioned by police, though he lived just three doors away.

Did they knock on his door? Did he sweat it out?

"We talked to hundreds of people," says Haro, who still seems moved when talking about the efforts the police undertook. "Today, you have DNA and Facebook and information on YouTube. Back then we had to rely on fliers and going to midnight roll calls" at police stations to find new clues that might be related.

Some critics of this long saga would argue that if a white woman or a middle-class victim had been shot in the chest, people throughout the community would have been warned back then that a serial killer was afoot.

Activist Margaret Prescod, a well-known Los Angeles radio host, demanded in the mid-1980s that police set up a task force to address other killings. At the time, a rash of murders were

thought to be by one person, dubbed the "Southside Slayer." Her efforts led the Los Angeles City Council and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to offer a \$35,000 reward. "Our job was to let the people know there was a serial killer out there," Prescod said a few years ago.

LAPD Chief Daryl Gates "wanted us to call off the weekly vigils. We said, 'No thank you very much.'" (In fact, those killings turned out to be by several men in the area.)

The LAPD was a different animal in the late 1980s under the recently deceased Gates. Relations between officers and minority residents were bad and getting worse. The city was in a bloody low period, with more than 1,000 murders each year, many of them black-on-black killings.

And the general area surrounding and including 81st Street was a hellhole of crime, anger and unemployment. Mothers addicted to angel dust showed bizarre physical attributes, wandering bug-eyed in alleyways and leaving babies unattended in cribs. Men exhibiting superhuman strength broke out of hospital gurneys while overdosing. On Friday and Saturday nights, chaos reigned.

Just 11 blocks away from Lonnie Franklin's home, four years after police came knocking on White's door looking for possible leads to the serial killer who used the same .25 caliber gun on his victims, the Rodney King verdict set off the 1992 Los Angeles riots at the corner of Florence and Normandie.

Despite the bad relations between police and residents in Franklin's neighborhood, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and LAPD set up a Southside Slayer serial-killer task force because they were finding dozens of dead women in alleyways and Dumpsters. That task force later spun off some LAPD detectives to look solely into the crimes that became the Grim Sleeper case.

Eventually, LAPD and Sheriff's detectives realized that many men were killing women in South Los Angeles during the 1980s, '90s and 2000s, creating an impossible, multilayered, sinister chess game for detectives.

It is now known that besides the Grim Sleeper, the other serial killers of the era who overlapped in South L.A. were former pizza-delivery man Chester Turner, machinist and sailor Michael Hughes and Watts resident Louis Crane. All three were convicted.

In that atmosphere, determining that the Grim Sleeper's victims were all killed by one man was harder than looking for a needle in a haystack, says Cliff Shepard, a current LAPD cold-case detective who worked the case in recent years. "It was more like a needle in a hayfield," Shepard says.

"You couldn't separate things, and there was no technology at the time. A lot of them seemed to be related to each other."

Eleven of the killings turned out to be the work of the Grim Sleeper (and police are taking a closer look at the killing of the only man, to see if the bullet markings really do match).

In fact, police say that Lonnie Franklin Jr. quietly killed those around him: his neighbors, his acquaintances from favorite bars, the daughters of friends of friends.

Directly next-door to White's shade-protected Spanish bungalow, and four doors away from Franklin's home, is a 12-unit, drug-oriented, *Animal House*-style apartment building that in the 1980s was the spot to buy crack and pot. A murder went down inside one year, and nobody was that surprised. Lachrica Jefferson lived there, a troubled young woman who abused crack.

Many of the victims were troubled, and used drugs. But it has been widely misreported by the media that many Grim Sleeper victims were prostitutes. In fact, few were working prostitutes, certainly no more so than white girls in Beverly Hills and Santa Monica who in those years poured into the Red Onion on the Westside to snort coke in the bathroom and go home with cute guys.

"Everyone knew my sister and she was well-loved," says Romy Lampkins, sister of Lachrica Jefferson. Lampkins recognized two of the other dead women because she saw their photos in the *Weekly* after it published its Grim Sleeper exposé in 2008.

Porter Alexander says of his daughter Monique, who died at age 18, that if she had a failing it was that she was too friendly and trusting. "She would pick up everyone — and bring them to our house. She would bring friends over.

"Something led her into it" the evening she disappeared, he says.

Porter Alexander has spent many nights awake in bed thinking about where the Grim Sleeper was, and how he went about mapping out his terror. Now that he knows Franklin lived only 11 blocks away from his family all those years, Alexander says he feels "satisfaction and peace, knowing he won't hurt anyone else."

One week after Jefferson moved out of the druggie apartment building four doors down from Franklin's tidy bungalow, police say, she returned to the building to visit a friend. After she left, she was never seen alive again. Her body was found several dozen blocks away, her chest shattered by the telltale scratched bullet from the same .25 caliber gun that killed the others.

Because police in those days saved saliva left on bodies as a way of performing blood-typing — saliva and blood share many of the same components — much of the Grim Sleeper's DNA evidence was inadvertently preserved by LAPD's Haro and others. Those cops of yore had no way of knowing that the science of DNA testing would soon become a key part of the prosecution's repertoire.

When Detective Shepard began to go back over the unsolved 1980s killings in recent years, he discovered a trove of carefully preserved saliva and semen containing the Grim Sleeper's DNA. Police have never explained why they often found saliva at the crime scenes, but did not find sperm on many of the bodies.

What went wrong in 1988? How could Detective Haro, who staked out White's home for a month and set up a surveillance team in a closed storefront, perhaps miss out on questioning the actual Grim Sleeper?

How could the LAPD, as Kilcoyne describes it, fail to make it over "the edge" when it came within a few doors of surveilling the alleged killer himself?

Before everything went wrong, a lot went right. Haro, now 64, was doggedly directing extensive "street sweeps" of South Los Angeles during the monthlong investigation of the area around 1742 81st Street — where the orange Pinto stopped the night survivor Washington was raped and shot in the chest.

Cops were peering down alleys, and scouring three boxes that contained DMV records for every Ford Pinto in Los Angeles County. They were conducting a major investigation.

But it suddenly took a very different direction a few months later, in February of 1989, after Los Angeles County Sheriff's narcotics investigator Rickey Ross, a black man, was arrested on suspicion of having killed three prostitutes in the fall of 1988.

Chief Gates announced that Ross had been spotted with a prostitute in an unmarked county-government car, that a loaded 9 mm gun found in the car matched the gun used in "three murders of prostitutes," and that Ross was "unable to explain what he was doing" with a prostitute he got caught with in 1989.

Police promptly suspected him of also being the South L.A. serial killer — and of raping and shooting Washington.

Ross's colleagues were blindsided by the arrest of Ross, a born-again Christian. DEA agent Warren Rivera, who worked with Ross for two years, recalls to the *Weekly*, "He had a great reputation till he got arrested."

Then, in a development that riveted Los Angeles, Ross was released from jail after independent experts determined that the LAPD had wrongly claimed Ross's gun matched the one that fired the bullets that killed the three prostitutes.

In fact, no evidence linked him to any of the previous eight slayings with the .25 caliber gun, either. Even so, Ross was fired from his job by then-sheriff Sherman Block for allegedly abusing alcohol and drugs, and consorting with prostitutes.

Timing is everything. The timing of Ross's arrest just three months after Washington ended up in the hospital clicked with Detective Haro. He believed Ross was the killer even after his release from jail. It is not an exaggeration today to say the LAPD became so certain of Ross's guilt that the investigation moved in that direction for a number of years.

Ross died in 2003. But serial killings continued. *L.A. Weekly* contacted Haro in 2008 to tell him that someone with the same DNA and saliva as the killer in the 1980s had struck again, after a 13-year lull. Of Ross, Haro said, "I guess it wasn't him, then."

But such are the pitfalls of police work, becausee they have to follow every potential lead.

In Inglewood, where 14-year-old Princess Berthomieux was killed in 2002, police decided they should leave no stone unturned, despite knowing that the living eyewitness was sure the attacker was a black man. They spent time investigating a white man, Roger Hausmann, who talked openly of whacking prostitutes in South Los Angeles. That turned out to be a red herring.

When Franklin's neighbor White was questioned by police in 1988, he told them he did not know anyone with a Pinto, nor anyone strange who stood out in the neighborhood who might have hurt a woman.

In recent days, police have disclosed that Franklin stole cars, fixed them up and resold them. If Franklin had stolen the orange Pinto, it may have moved through his hands too quickly for police to check it out and track it to him. A stolen car may be out there somewhere, perhaps in a wrecking yard, still containing the blood stains of Enietra Washington.

And when police did get razor-close, surveilling the very block on which the Grim Sleeper allegedly lived, the residents of South Los Angeles did not see the monster before their own eyes. Apparently, nobody told the cops that the inexpensive neighborhood auto mechanic down the street gave some of the women the creeps and muttered ugly things about prostitutes.

Now, the victims' families are assessing just how close they and their loved ones were to a hidden danger that persisted from the first known killing in August of 1985 until the suspect's arrest on July 7, 2010.

Mary Lowe was last seen at the Love Trap bar on 91st and Western, a short walk from Franklin's home.

Victim Jefferson lived just down the street from Franklin, as did her sister Romy Lampkins.

And Lampkins' friend Dee Harrison dated Franklin in the early 1970s, apparently before he began his killing spree, when he was a young Army soldier.

These days, Manfred Manson jogs each morning with his best friend Donnell Alexander, the bereaved brother of Monique Alexander. Donnell Alexander has been much-quoted in the media of late. Franklin has changed the oil in Manson's car and even had a beer with him.

"That was my best friend's sister," says Manson. "My friend, someone I see running every day, lost her. It's unbelievable."

They are all intertwined: good, decent people. Troubled adults and teenage children who were in need of help because they were drug abusers. Longtime neighbors. Alleged killer.

"To think the guy was right down the street. I felt like I was taunted and haunted," says Lampkins.

Lampkins became convinced that her sister's killer was someone in the neighborhood. She says she felt it was somebody close and never shook that feeling. "I was asking people, 'Do you know who killed my sister?' I believe my sister can now rest in peace."

As of this week, police have gathered more than 400 items from Franklin's cordoned-off home, finding 10 rifles and pistols. They are not saying if they have found "the gun." However, one of the confiscated weapons is a .25 caliber in size. Police also discovered more than 100 Polaroids and other photographs of "unknown females," some in unusual and provocative poses.

One neighbor, angry at the media onslaught that has brought camera crews and global attention

to West 81st Street, tells *L.A. Weekly* that a few nights ago somebody shot at the suspect's home from a passing car.

Police say Franklin's apparently unsuspecting wife, an administrator with Inglewood Unified School District, has moved.

A Doberman pinscher has been installed in the fenced yard, and the dog has knocked over the garbage can. Children's toys have fallen from the trash, and are believed by onlookers to be the recently discarded toys of Lonnie David Franklin Jr.'s grandchildren. Until last week, they were regular visitors to the bright-green house. Now, the toys are strewn around the well-tended front lawn.

"The fact that he was right down the street — the bastard," says Lampkins. "How could you live with yourself?"