



E23 Blunt Force and Fire — Four Victims and the One Who Got Away: Case Study of a Serial Murderer

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better appreciate the efficacy of collaborative working relationships between the various professional disciplines involved in criminal investigations.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by exposing participants to some of the key steps that were utilized in solving a difficult serial murder investigation.

In the early morning hours of August 1, 1995, a man walking on the railroad tracks in the Allapattah produce district of Miami discovered the body of Vida Hicks. There was trauma to the victim's head and she was partially burned. It was not readily apparent if she was the victim of an accident or homicide. Nine weeks later, the body of Diane Nelms was discovered approximately 20 feet away at the same location. She had also sustained blunt trauma to the head and was burned postmortem. The similarities between the two cases were striking. The police presence in the area was immediately intensified and the business owners reacted by removing all foliage and debris to prevent cover for further attacks. This tactic effectively worked for the produce district but moved the offender a mile away. Cheryl Ray was attacked in a cemetery across from Biscayne Bay approximately three months later. Like the first two victims, she was bludgeoned, doused with an accelerant, and wooden matches were used to start her clothing on fire. A witness came forward who reported seeing Ms. Ray sitting on a bus bench outside the cemetery. She was talking with an African American male who had his hair styled in long dreadlocks. The witness assisted a police artist with a composite of the suspect. The intensity of the investigation increased significantly along with the area of patrol. Two months later, the offender struck again. Janice Cox was attacked inside an abandoned gas station west of the previously targeted areas in a very similar manner. The indoor scene provided a distinctive boot print that had not been available in the three previous outdoor scenes.

With the attacks occurring over an eight-month period of time, law enforcement strongly suspected that the offender was local to the area. The victims were all similar in age and appearance. The perpetrator most likely brought a weapon to the scene along with an accelerant and matches. Investigators suspected that the purpose of the fire was for some reason other than to destroy evidence and the offender apparently did not remain at the scenes to watch the fire. A task force comprised of law enforcement officers from the Miami Police, Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation flooded the area in an effort to prevent further attacks, develop new leads, and hunt for the perpetrator. The investigation seemingly turned a corner when a woman they interviewed reported that she had previously fled from a man who attacked her and struck her on the head — before the murders began.

The investigation was successfully concluded due to the synergy created by the collaboration of the law enforcement and forensic community.

Serial Murder, Case Linkage, Interrogation