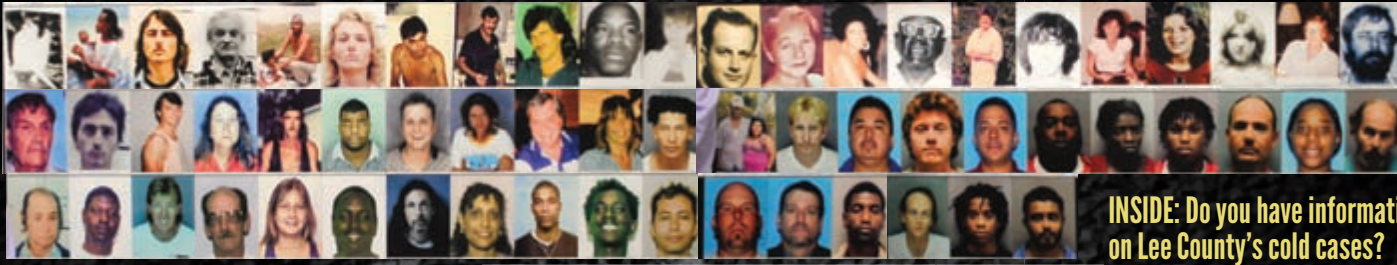


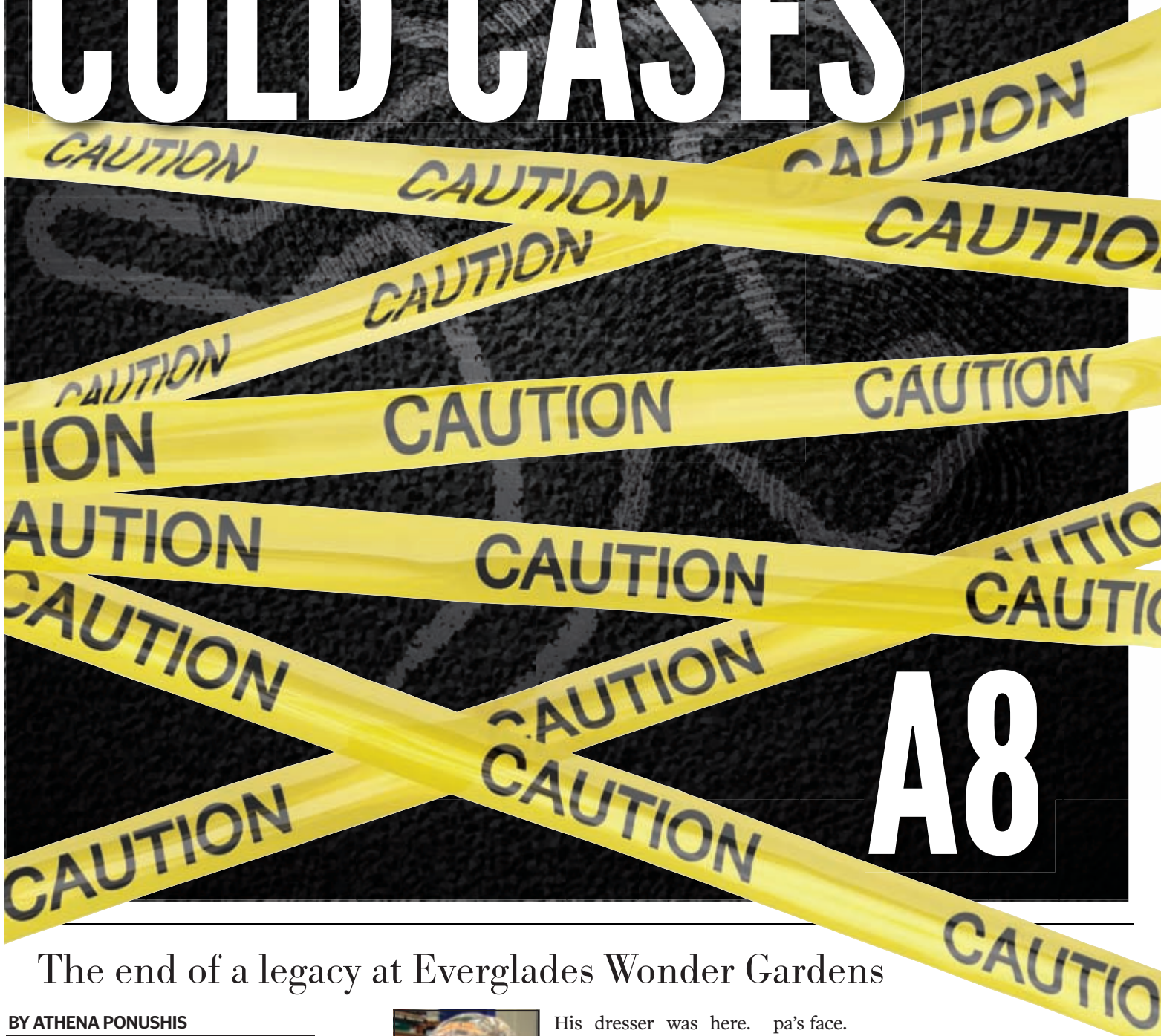
BY EVAN WILLIAMS • EWILLIAMS@FLORIDAWEEKLY.COM



INSIDE: Do you have information on Lee County's cold cases?

Investigators work to heat up Lee County's

COLD CASES



The end of a legacy at Everglades Wonder Gardens

BY ATHENA PONUSHIS
 aponushis@floridaweekly.com

Four days before David Piper closed down his family business, he sat in the back office at Everglades Wonder Gardens. He vacillated between memories of his grandfather and business talk, as if he couldn't sit with either thought too long.

"This used to be Grandpa's bedroom," he said of the office space. "His bed was here.



PIPER

His dresser was here. He would pull out a cot for me here when I was a little boy spending the night."

Mr. Piper has a portrait of his grandfather, Lester Piper, tattooed on his inner right forearm. Every place he points, you see his Grand-

pa's face.

Lester Piper opened the wildlife attraction with his brother Bill on Feb. 22, 1936. Closing it down 77 years later, David Piper looked like he was losing his Grandpa and his childhood all over again.

"The best way to describe it, it's like somebody has cut your umbilical cord," Mr. Piper said. "It's a big, big deal."

SEE GARDENS, A14 ▶

INSIDE



'Alive in the World'

Arnold McCuller returns for regional fundraiser. **C1** ▶



Yappy Hour

And other society shots around town. **C25-28** ▶



Going potty

When being in the toilet is a good thing. **B1** ▶



Flashes of color

Two striking birds passing through town. **A6** ▶

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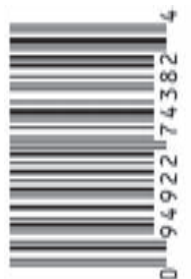


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Lee County Cold Cases

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

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AFTER NEARLY 14 YEARS, INVESTIGATORS ARE closing in. Detectives with the Lee County Sheriff's Office are expecting to arrest a suspect in the old murder case of David Haire, a 52-year-old Lee County man who was killed in an office near Page Field at the end of summer 1999.

If a suspect is apprehended, it will be the 10th case the Lee County Cold Case Unit has solved since it was created in 2006. Ten cases representing 12 suspects and 12 victims; 24 lives brought to some kind of resolution for people left behind.

Ideally, the trials mete out just punishment and finally bring something often called "closure," although Mr. Haire's long-time girlfriend, Vicki Miller, wouldn't describe it that way. They lived together for 18 years before his life and their future was suddenly canceled.

"There's not a day that goes by that I don't think something about it," Mrs. Miller said.

Since 2000, she has started a new life, working at Kenyon College, a small liberal arts school in Mount Vernon, Ohio. She eventually met a man named Rick Miller and they married.

Disturbing memories of driving up to a chaotic crime scene or the details of Mr. Haire's murder — he had been beaten — have softened with time. Instead of that violent ending, she more often remembers the good chapters of their life. They had just come back from vacation when he was killed, and on the drive back they'd had a lot of time to talk. He had told her, "If I died tomorrow, I have no regret. I have lived a good life and I'm happy."

The idea of a court trial returning her to that dark August is something she dreads but also hopes for very much.

"I believe that justice needs to be served but will it bring any closure?" she asked. "I don't think so. Nothing's going to bring back the person that was murdered, nothing will bring back the life that I had."

Cold Case offices

If a sign hanging in the LCSO building off Six Mile Cypress Parkway is any indication, justice will arrive, at the very least, in the form of a stern Old Testament God. In the reception area of the Major Crimes' division offices, found down a long white-washed hallway, a prominent gold-colored plaque is embossed with the words "Thou Shalt Not Kill" in an old English typeface. It hangs over a colorful patchwork poster composed of 61 faces, representing a little more than half of all the open cold case files in the county.

The human panoply spans decades, starting in 1949, when J.P. Lattimore was killed. His young face, in the top left corner of the poster, is now a yellowed black-and-white. The suspect, whoever she or he is, is likely dead by now too, but Mr. Lattimore will remain on file indefinitely.

"A case is never closed unless there's an arrest," said Trish Route, coordinator of Crime Stoppers, which operates the hotline for criminal cases in the five-county Southwest Florida area. She adds, don't hesitate to call even if you think the information might be repetitive or false.

The three detectives in charge of cold cases work on just a handful of them at a time, prioritizing based on a number of factors, including call-in tips to Crime Stoppers. Since the unit began seven years ago, detectives have created a database of unsolved homicides and also used a grant to retest all the DNA



EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY
Above: Detectives William Murphy, Matt McDaniel and Kevin Ferry in the Major Crime Unit's reception area. Right: Cold case files.

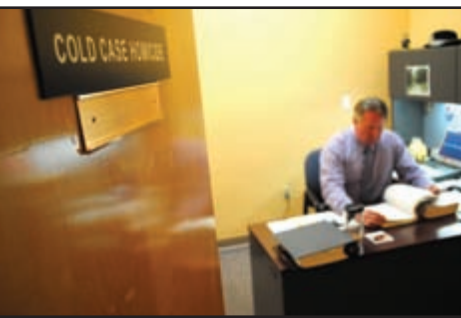
evidence in the department going back to the 1960s.

"We have a great deal of support from our command staff," said Lt. William Murphy, a detective and supervisor of the Cold Case Unit. "It was a commitment early on by the sheriff (Mike Scott) to see that this was done."

The real cold case detectives

The three detectives making up the Cold Case Unit have nearly a half-century of violent crime investigation and law enforcement experience among them — enough to know that a lot of the television shows about homicide detectives are "as fake as the day is long," as Capt. Kevin Ferry put it.

He moved to Lee County from New Jersey in 1995 along with his father, who at the time had just retired as a state



Detective Matt McDaniel pieces together old clues at the sheriff's office headquarters.

policeman there. Bright, tall and athletic, the 44-year-old is married with two children. He's also a two-time survivor of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

He and Lt. Murphy both avoid watching most of the shows about cold case detectives, saying their jump-cut dramatics raise false expectations for the time frame in which cases are solved.

"The only shows I watch that have any hint of reality are 'Law & Order' — the original — and the show 'Cold Case' based in Philadelphia," Capt. Ferry said. "But 'NCIS' and all that crap, I don't have any time for that."

The detectives take their cases personally. Detective Matt McDaniel, the newest member of the team, likes to carry a picture of the victim of whatever case he's working on with him. It's a reminder of their full lives, and especially the loved ones who miss them.

Showing this reporter around his office, Detective McDaniel was gracious, thoughtful and sunburnt from riding his motorcycle. The 49-year-old took the place of Detective Mike Carr (still with the LCSO) last month. A Fort Myers native, Detective McDaniel worked as a



"torpedo man" on submarines in the U.S. Navy before realizing his early ambition to be a police officer.

His office recalls that of a psychiatrist or therapist with its warm lighting and soothing cantaloupe-colored walls, except for this: a polaroid sitting on his desk of a person who appeared bloody, beaten and dead.

Down another hallway, whiteboards covering a long white wall list unsolved homicide cases from the past few years. These cases are cooling if not cold, having missed the window of opportunity just after a murder has taken place when it's easiest to find the killer or killers. Detective McDaniel notes that optimism in the face of tough, discouraging cases is important for cold case investigators, as is experience.

"Odds are the original detectives on the case were good detectives," Lt. Murphy added. "These cases are cold for a reason."

Which makes it all the more exciting to solve one. Informing the family of a victim that an arrest has been made is a highlight in Lt. Murphy's career. He recalled when in 2007 he told Broderick Strong's mom that "they were on the way to the jail" with the man who shot and killed her son in 2003.

"I've been blessed with a couple of opportunities to be involved in that," he said.

Lt. Murphy is quiet and attentive, watchful and self-effacing, dressed in a dark suit and tie. The youngest of the group and its supervisor, the 40-year-old is married with two children. He's loyal to the great sports trifecta of the Boston Red Sox, New England Patriots and Boston Bruins. His hobby is his profession.

Down another hall, there is a large walk-in closet filled up with standard office storage boxes, each filled with files about a crime. Detective McDaniel likened each crime to "a pebble thrown into a quiet lake and the ripple goes out..."

And now after all these years the ripples have become wider and fainter, without ever really disappearing all together.

"This is never going away for the families and it's not going away for us," he said.

Golden oldies

There are advantages to being old, if you can believe that.

"What's different now is you can look back and take your time," Detective McDaniel said. "In a conventional homicide, time becomes an enemy, but if you wait long enough time can become your friend."

Time to develop new theories, to "Take (a case) apart and put it back together. Take a case apart and put it back together. Take a case apart and put it back together," Detective McDaniel said.

Capt. Ferry rattled off any number of ways a cold case gets warmer: "The phone call from the once-a-year relative who calls every year to remind you. And tips. People may just call in. Something's been bothering them for years.

"Or they may call Crime Stoppers, or they're a friend of the person, not to mention relationships: the wife at the time is now the ex-wife and she's mad at him because he hasn't paid his child support, something he told her to keep quiet about. "Or someone in jail: a con wants a deal. He wants 10 years off his sentence if he tells you what his roommate just told him."

In the last few years, cold case detectives gathered all the old DNA evidence in the department — blood samples, cigarette butts, clothing, fingernail scrapings, hair samples, all of it — and had it retested with up-to-date technology. That helped lead to the arrest and prosecution of James Edward Sims, who shot and killed Roy Radabaugh at the Fox Den Lounge on Fowler Street in 1981. LCSO civilian analyst Myra Simmons finally located Mr. Sims for the Cold Case Unit. He was living in a southern California neighborhood with small, manicured lawns and cookie-cutter homes, recalled Capt. Ferry.

"Mr. Sims had killed a guy in 1981, went home, packed his bag, and walked out on his wife and kid never to be seen again," he explained. "Our analyst, Myra Simmons, found him in California. He'd been living there for the last 20-something years under the name of a dead guy, using a bad Social Security number. We flew out there and caught him walking out his front door. He was quite surprised. He was extradited back and last year got 17 years for manslaughter."

Lt. Murphy wishes Mr. Sims had been given a tougher sentence. "Unfortunately that was sentencing guidelines when the crime was committed," he said.

Capt. Ferry added, "Needless to say he's 70-something. He'll end up dying in jail" — he knocks on the table the three detectives were sitting around — "if we're lucky."

Mr. Sims was surprised to see the past catch up with him. Some witnesses though, especially if they aren't criminals, seem to think it's always just been a matter of time. And maybe it is.

"Witnesses, you'd be surprised at how much they remember," Capt. Ferry said. "And they're not totally surprised to see you. How many times are you going to be involved in an incident that results in someone's death? It's kind of a benchmark moment in your life."

The Sims arrest was a benchmark for him.

"You can almost go back 30 years to when this thing happened and I was 13," Capt. Ferry said. "And you think about all the things that happened in that amount of time and what he's done and what I've done and it gets to that point where you're in California waiting for this guy."

Waiting for the man

Fourteen years after Vicki Miller stood outside a Fort Myers crime scene "flushed and eyes welling with tears," according to a newspaper report at the time, she may finally be able to see the person who

killed Dave Haire brought to justice, said Detective McDaniel.

Asked if printing that information would give away too much, LCSO Detective Matt McDaniel said, "You can say that (I) feel an arrest is forthcoming, in the near future." He added, "I'm putting the case together and taking it to the state attorney."

The developments in the case are good news, even if they stirred Mrs. Miller's memory of both the good times and bad. Both she and Mr. Haire grew up in Ohio, her in Columbus and he in Mount Vernon, the town where they first met. After moving to Southwest Florida, they ran a custom reconstruction business and later started a computer business.

"He treated me like a princess," she said, describing Mr. Haire with the words "tall, good looking, charismatic, good-hearted, giving and brilliant."

But some of his best qualities may also have been fatal flaws, she suggests. Sympathetic to the plights of employees on their construction crew, Mr. Haire would on occasion lend them money — but only if Mrs. Miller, who didn't approve, wasn't around. She suspects one of the workers may have tried to rob him. He was trusting, she said, leaving the door to his office open while he was gone to let the cigarette smoke dissipate. It wasn't unusual for him to leave his car unlocked, even in the sometimes-sketchy part of town. And he liked to work at the office at night.

"He was nocturnal," she said. "He'd sit there on the computer and do all this stuff and nod off with the door open."

They had just returned from vacation in the last week of August 1999, on a Sunday. He wanted to be alone at the office to catch up, sort through mail and return phone calls. She wanted to go home. They'd argued about it. He ended up taking her back to their home in Estero, and went back to the office. It was the last

in the know

If you have a tip on these Lee County unsolved cases call Crime Stoppers at 1-800-780-TIPS

David Haire

On Aug. 31, 1999, the victim, David Haire, was found murdered at his business located at 504 Center Road, Fort Myers. A business partner of Mr. Haire's discovered him around 9 a.m., lying in a pool of blood. Mr. Haire died of multiple stab wounds.



HAIRE



COMPARETTO

David Comparetto

David Comparetto was murdered in October 1993. Detectives found his charred remains in the trunk of his car in Lehigh Acres. The victim frequented clubs in the Fort Myers area and authorities believe the killer

might be linked to the nightclubs, namely Mermaids and Bert's. The clubs are no longer in business. A black four-door mid-size car might be linked to Mr. Comparetto's murder. It was likely driven by someone who frequented those clubs.



MIRALDA-GALEAS



RAMOS

**Aner Joel Miralda-Galeas
Dagoberto Ramos**

On Nov. 12, 2011, at approximately 5:30-6 a.m., 26-year-old Aner Joel Miralda Galeas and 26-year-old Dagoberto Ramos were shot and killed in North

Fort Myers near the intersection of Pine Island Road and Lansdale Road behind a closed business. The motive for the murders is unknown.

Abdaris Hernandez

On Sunday, Aug. 22, 2004, the Lee County Sheriff's Office received notification of the discovery of skeletal remains. The remains were found when someone happened to stumble upon them. The discovery site was in a remote area of Lehigh Acres.



HERNANDEZ

The bones have been identified as belonging to Abdaris Mendez Hernandez. Ms. Hernandez is a Hispanic female who lived and was last seen in Cape Coral.

Source — Lee County Sheriff's Office

time she saw him alive. She didn't hear from him that evening or on Monday; but it wasn't uncommon for them to spend some time apart when he was busy. On Tuesday, an assistant with their burgeoning computer company instant messaged her, concerned about Mr. Haire. Then a foreman who worked for their remodeling company called, telling her to get to the office right away, but wouldn't tell her over the phone what happened. She drove up to find a crime scene. "And it was like a nightmare after that," she said, "completely surreal." For a while she thought she'd wake up "and everything would be OK." But it was the nightmare she woke to instead of the

dream, the incident "a trauma to your body, physically and mentally," she said. That January, shaken and feeling at-risk since the case was unsolved, she moved back to Mt. Vernon to start over. Promising leads in the case fizzled. Time passed. The ripples in the smooth lake of her old life grew wide and faint. She's still an administrative assistant in the academic advising office of Kenyon College — 13 years in July. Last year she got a call from the LCSO, explaining that new DNA evidence had been found in the case. Detective McDaniel feels the person responsible for Mr. Haire's death is close to caught. And Mrs. Miller is ready for the "roller coaster" of emotions

that could return if a suspect is arrested. "And maybe nothing will happen," she says, not willing to get her hopes up too much. Detectives had been close once, many years before. Since then, she made her own kind of peace with the killer. "I don't hate the person who did this," she said. "I think this person made some really wrong choices and I forgive that person because I have to forgive that person. I don't think it's good to harbor hate. I don't know if justice will ever be served here on earth. I hope it does. But I know that if it is not justice will be served with God. So I have to make that peace in my heart in order to get through the rest of my life and that's what I've chosen to do." ■

ask the doctor

Q: I had a sling for bladder control problems, six months ago, but I still have urinary leakage. What can I do?

A: Although technical or healing issues can play a role, other factors may have been involved with your leakage in the first place. A careful history and examination as well as computerized urodynamic tests and cystoscopy will help to determine if you have an underlying bladder condition. Technical issues related to the sling procedure can also be determined and often a minor adjustment of the sling, addition of a medication, local injection of a urethral bulking agent or even Botox will resolve such a problem.

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