

Beach Murders Re-examined

By Ken Kolker Published: August 14, 2014

JENNER, Calif. (WOOD) — Every Aug. 15 since a Zeeland man and his fiancée were shot to death in their sleep on a secluded California beach, their parents have gotten together to pray and remember.

But on Friday, on the 10th anniversary, for the first time since the deaths, they will be apart.

Lindsay Cutshall's family, from Fresno, Ohio, plans to mark the day on the beach in Jenner, northwest of San Francisco, with some townspeople who can't forget and some of the detectives who won't forget.

Jason Allen's parents, of Zeeland, are with family in northern Michigan.

"We knew we wanted to be with our other two girls and the grandchildren," Allen's mom, Delores Allen, said.

But, that doesn't mean their resolve has changed.

The crime needs to be solved, they said, not so much for their son and his fiancée, but for the detectives who have worked so hard and for any others who might be targeted by the same killer, wherever he is.

It's never been about vengeance, they said, because then, they wouldn't be at peace.

"We do hope that it's solved," Delores Allen told 24 Hour News 8. "But, if it's not, we're OK with that because we know that everything will be taken care of in the end anyway. Meaning the Lord is the final judge, and a person can't do something like this and totally escape the consequences from it."

THE DRIFTWOOD INN

Their son's last written words are on their dining room wall — cross-stitched by a friend under a photograph of the beach just north of Jenner.

It was from a "guest-book" at the "Driftwood Inn" — a lean-to made of driftwood built up against the rocks at Fish Head Beach. Jason and Lindsay had signed it their first night there.

"As I stir this Mac & Cheese, I think to myself what a wonderful life. I've just spent two awesome days with my fiancée Lindsay. Can life ever be so perfect. Only with a person who is so great. God gives me this privilege in life and He has given me a wonderful woman to enjoy it. Jason from MI. Aug. 14, 04."

His fiancée wrote about the sunset.

Their parents hang onto the words.

"They were very happy, their last moments here on Earth, and we know that from the journals that they wrote," Allen's mother said. "So that was a gift to us."

Jenner is a town of about 130 people on Highway 1, north of San Francisco, on the edge of wine country.

“People like myself come here to kind of escape from the world,” said one long-time resident, who didn’t want to be identified. “It’s a real good place to hide out. You can just be a recluse and nobody will bother you. It was a situation where the ugliness of the outside world came and visited us.”

Fish Head Beach is difficult to reach — off a curve on the highway, down a winding trail, then down the edge of a steep cliff. In the morning, it’s often foggy; in the evening, often orange and red from the setting sun. Just up the coast, seals sun themselves on a small island where the Russian River empties into the Pacific.

“This is an amazing spot in the universe,” said long-time resident Patrick Lizza, as he walked the trail to the beach. “It’s a beach where you can be a little bit alone, sometimes feel somebody looking down on you from the cliffs.”

The fact the beach is so hard to find raises questions not only about how Allen and Cutshall reached it, but whether the killer was local, or perhaps one of the transients who spent nights there.

SATAN ON DRIFTWOOD

Then, there were the drawings of Satan on driftwood, and the hateful graffiti on rocks.

Residents had seen it there earlier. Lizza said he’d reported it to authorities.

“It was black, it was yellow writing on black and it was in such a way, so prominent facing the south, the direction of where the kids were laying, it was scary,” Lizza said.

Allen and Cutshall were getting married in three weeks.

“The lifestyle that he lived, he really didn’t think he’d ever find a girl that would want to share that with him,” Allen’s mother said.

Their son was 26, lived out of his Astro van with a bed in the back and totes jammed with clothes, had never made more than \$3,500 in a year, worked at Christian adventure camps and wanted someday to run his own.

Then, he found Cutshall, 22, the daughter of an Ohio preacher.

They were working at a Christian camp in California when they decided to spend a weekend together — away.

Only they knew where.

Police later learned they were at the Jenner beach on Aug. 14, 2004 — because of the journal entries.

Lots of visitors had signed the journal before them. One signed it “Spiderman,” another entry was about Santa Claus, leprechauns and the tooth fairy.

Police wonder if their killer had once signed in.

They were killed on Aug. 15 as they slept, each in their own sleeping bag.

“It was on a moonless night, no light at all. To go down that path without any light,” Allen’s father, Robert Allen, said, his voice trailing off. “Wasn’t even a moon out.”

That means the killer had to make his way down with a flashlight and with the Marlin .45-caliber rifle he used to shoot them once each in the head.

“We found out they were shot in the head, never felt any pain, that was a relief,” Robert Allen said.

“You think of all kinds of scenarios,” his wife said. “Was there someone already there camping when they showed up on the beach? Or did they meet someone in one of the small towns there and later he came out? Whoever did it was very evil, we know that.”

NO KNOWN MOTIVE

But, what about a motive?

“They didn’t rob them, they didn’t sexually assault them,” Allen’s father said.

“Which we are thankful for,” his wife added.

It was the camp where they worked that reported them missing.

At first, Allen’s family wondered if they’d gotten lost while hiking, then they learned they’d stopped in San Francisco. They feared somebody killed them there.

On Aug. 18, 2004, police found their bodies.

“Minding their own business and on a beach, totally secluded,” said Sonoma County Sheriff’s Sgt. Dave Thompson, among the first detectives to work on the case. “I can’t imagine why anybody would do anything like that.”

“When I hear the word Jenner, that’s naturally what I go back to is that case, or if I hear ‘2004’, my mind goes back to August 2004,” Thompson said. “It’s still on my mind very much.”

Thompson still keeps in touch with both families.

“We knew it was going to be a hard case to solve, but 10 years, I don’t know,” said Allen’s father.

“They made a promise to us that they would not allow it to be a cold case,” his wife added. “That they would always work on it.”

Thompson said his department has kept that promise. Detectives reportedly traveled to the East Coast recently to work on it.

“This case is always handed off to another detective, and we are always getting new tips and things just to keep it fresh,” he said.

But the leads keep leading nowhere.

“That’s the tricky part about this case,” Thompson said. “Usually, you try to look closest to the victims and see who’s in that circle and you start moving out. Since they’re not from here, it’s really hard to say who the circle of suspects may be, and you have to keep everybody in mind.”

Among the dozens of persons of interest they’re no longer focusing on — Joseph Henry Burgess, 62, who was wanted for a similar shooting of a couple in 1972 as they lay in their sleeping bag on Vancouver Island in Canada. He was killed in a shootout with New Mexico police before he could be questioned. But, police later learned, his DNA didn’t match DNA left at the Jenner beach.

FAITH CARRIES THEM THROUGH

Jump ahead to the present, or the present that might have been.

Allen’s parents figured their son and his wife would have been running their own Christian camp by now, with rafting, rock climbing and hiking.

“He had a dream of being able to raft down a river for three or four days and spending that time with these kids and having them open up to their problems they were going through and being able to help them with that,” Allen’s father said.

The Allens said their faith has led them through this.

The deaths, they said, are for God’s glory. And that, they said, is watching people get closer to God through the deaths of their son and his fiancée. They watched it happen with one of the detectives, who is now the Sonoma County Sheriff.

“That’s a really big comfort for us, when we can see, and that’s just one example, when we can see how their lives, more particularly their deaths, changed people’s lives for the better,” Allen’s mother said.

“That’s what they wanted to do, that’s why they were in ministry, was to bring others to Christ,” she said.

So, in their deaths, she said, their ministry goes on.

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