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Two missing counselors murdered on Sonoma County beach

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Bob and Delores Allen, left, along with Kathy and Chris Cutshall, right, listen to a question concerning the murder of their children, during a news conference held at the First Baptist Church in Placerville on Friday, Aug. 20. The bodies of Lindsay Cutshall and Jason Allen were found shot to death Wednesday on a remote Sonoma County beach. AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli

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[Updated at 6:30 p.m.] SANTA ROSA, Calif. - Two soon-to-be-married Christian camp counselors died almost instantly when they were shot in their heads in their sleeping bags on a remote Sonoma County beach, authorities said Friday as dozens of officers joined the hunt for the killer.

Police have no suspects in their slayings, which apparently occurred Sunday or Monday, Sonoma Sheriff's Lt. Dave Edmonds said.

"We are scouring the coastline in hopes of developing leads," he told a crowded news conference Friday. "The crime is obviously horrendous. We haven't been able to establish a motive."

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The bodies of Lindsay Cutshall, 23, of Ohio, and Jason Allen, 26, of Michigan, were discovered by chance Wednesday on remote Fish Head Beach, when deputies rescuing a stranded hiker spotted the crime scene from their helicopter.

There were no signs of trauma, sexual assault or robbery, and the possibility of a murder-suicide was ruled out because no weapon was found at the scene, he said, adding that they died "nearly instantly."

"They were shot in the head, presumably in their sleep because there was no disturbance at their camp site," Edmonds said earlier. "From all indications, the victims were very upstanding citizens, they were very honorable people. They had an absolute absence of enemies."

Investigators were searching for DNA evidence, like hair or bodily fluids, at the scene, but such clues have proven difficult to find on the sandy, wind-swept beach, which lies below a huge cliff and is strewn with rocks and driftwood.

The Sonoma Sheriff's department has devoted about 25 of its 40 detectives to the case, Edmonds said.

As they canvassed the area and checked out about 50 tips from people claiming to have seen the couple, their parents flew from Michigan and Ohio to the camp in California's Gold Country where the two had spent their summer leading high school and college students on nature hikes and rafting trips.

Clenching hands in a Baptist church in Placerville, cloaked in their faith, the families were "grateful to God for taking our children home," said the slain woman's father, the Rev. Chris Cutshall, an evangelical minister in Fresno, Ohio.

The young couple had been engaged about two years. They had planned to marry in September and to spend their honeymoon camping in West Virginia on the Gauley River, one of the nation's wildest whitewater rivers.

Cutshall said the couple was likely camping overnight on the beach to spare the cost of paying for a hotel room.

"It didn't surprise us that they looked for a secluded place where they would be safe," Cutshall said. "It didn't turn out that way."

Referring to the "cold-blooded insane killers," he said he felt justice would ultimately be served.

"If not in this life, certainly in the life to come."

Cutshall and Allen were missionaries who were spending the summer as whitewater rafting guides at Rock-N-Water, a Christian outdoor adventure camp in Coloma, in the Sierra foothills about 40 miles east of Sacramento.

The Christian camp closed for the season after the two disappeared and campers were sent to nearby camps, said office manager Patty Salee, who was answering phone calls from a trailer at the camp located on the American River a few miles downstream from where gold was first discovered in 1848.

The camp's rafting paddles were inscribed with biblical passages. One paddle included a verse from Romans saying, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

"They were great kids, shining beacons of Christian young adults," Salee said.

Cutshall and Allen were reported missing to the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department on Monday after they didn't return to camp. They were last seen around 8 p.m. Friday, when they said they were going to visit friends and said they would return on Sunday.

Detectives believe they arrived last Saturday in the Jenner area, about 60 miles north of San Francisco, after visiting San Francisco, where records show Cutshall used a credit card to buy miniature Tabasco sauce bottles on Pier 47 at 1 p.m. Saturday.

Cutshall's mother said her daughter wanted to visit San Francisco before coming home to plan her wedding.

The two bodies were spotted by a helicopter crew sent to rescue a 17-year-old boy who had fallen about 50 feet down the cliff while trying to retrieve a purse dropped by his girlfriend.

The dead couple's red 1993 Ford Tempo was found near the scene, parked on Highway 1, more than 200 feet above the beach, which is about three miles north of Jenner. The vehicle, which has a kayak rack and Ohio license plates, was locked, and the keys were found as well.

Their bodies were found fully clothed, side by side and zipped up tight in sleeping bags near their belongings, which included a Christian book, wedding literature, camping gear and backpacks.

The couple were both experienced whitewater guides who met at Appalachian Bible College in Bradley, W. Va., where Allen, a native of Zeeland, Mich., graduated in 2001 and Cutshall graduated in 2003. Both were described as "quiet and reserved" by the president of the 325-student school.

"He was just a good kid," said David Boss, a neighbor of Allen. "They're very good people."

Cutshall grew up in Fresno, Ohio -- a tiny, unincorporated farming community of about 300 people about 80 miles south of Cleveland where houses are far apart, people are friendly and no one locks their doors at night.

After college, Allen had moved to a nearby farmhouse to be close to her.

Cutshall's father has been the pastor of the evangelical Fresno Bible Church for nearly 20 years and had planned to preside over their marriage ceremony next month. Cutshall was supposed to return to Fresno this Sunday to help prepare for the wedding.

The couple also had planned to move to West Virginia for the fall river season.

Word of their disappearance -- and the subsequent confirmation of their deaths -- spread quickly in her small town as families called one another to break the news.

Emily Horsfall, 18, a member of the Cutshall family's church, said the congregation held a prayer meeting to pray for the slain couple and to deal with their grief.

She said the couple appeared very happy together and that Lindsay was very devout.

"She was very sweet," Horsfall said. "She just was really sold out to God, very dedicated to him."

-- Associated Press



Oars with various biblical passages written on them are shown leaning against whitewater rafts at Rock-N-Water, a Christian outdoor adventure camp in Coloma on Friday, Aug. 20. The camp was closed for the season after the two disappeared and campers were sent to nearby camps, said office manager Patty Salee. AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli

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