

Slain camp counselors died in nature they loved

Couple, reported missing Monday, were shot to death, police say

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COLOMA, Calif. - They were young adults from America's heartland with a passion for the wild outdoors, backpacking, sailing and camping when they could, working together as counselors at a Christian retreat and dreaming that they would someday open one of their own.

Then, just weeks before their Sept. 11 wedding date, they were killed in their sleep — perhaps after taking in one last Pacific sunset under the open sky they loved.

They died instantly, each shot in the head as they lay in sleeping bags on a wild shoreline 2,500 miles from their homes and families, Sonoma County authorities said Friday.

Victims said to have had 'absolute absence of enemies'

By all accounts, Jason Allen of Michigan and Lindsay Cutshall of Ohio possessed outgoing physical natures to match their Midwest-grown spirituality. Friends, neighbors and family members recalled a couple who backpacked, sailed and rafted whitewater rivers, some day hoping to open an outdoor Christian camp like the one where they were counselors together.

"They both enjoyed that, and they just wanted to find some mission where they could reach young people for the Lord," said John Hart, a close friend of the Allen family in Michigan.

The couple's bodies were discovered Wednesday when deputies rescuing a stranded hiker spotted the crime scene from a helicopter. "It appears to be a terrible crime absent of motive, which is a concern to us," Sheriff's Lt. Dave Edmonds said.

There were no signs of sexual assault or robbery, and murder-suicide was ruled out because no weapon was found, authorities said.

"From all indications, the victims were very upstanding citizens, they were very honorable people. They had an absolute absence of enemies," Edmonds said. Police said they had no suspects.

Authorities said the slaying apparently occurred Sunday or Monday. Autopsies were being performed Friday.

Couple were set to get married

Allen, 26, and Cutshall, 23, had been engaged for two years. Both were born into active churchgoing families. Allen's father, Robert Allen, was an elder at his Immanuel Baptist Church near the family home in Zeeland, Mich; Cutshall's father, the Rev. Chris Cutshall, is pastor of the Fresno Bible Church in rural Ohio.

The couple was remembered as being dependable and prompt; people took notice when they didn't return to work at the camp as scheduled. But most of all, they were known for their religious conviction.

"As a young man, he gave his life to Christ and from that day forward, has lived a life dedicated to loving and ministering to others in the name of Christ, both through outdoor adventures and in every aspect of his daily life," said Alyn Goossen, a friend of Allen's from Michigan.

Camp provided 'good, clean fun'

In California's Gold Country where the couple lived since June, they guided teens and college students rafting down the South Fork of the American River.

A few miles from where settlers struck gold 1848 in the Sierra foothills 50 miles east of Sacramento, the 15-year-old Rock-n-River Christian camp is hidden off Highway 49, down a dirt road amid numerous other rafting operations.

Camp assistant Patty Salee said the couple provided "good, clean fun" for campers from around the country. Stacks of canoe paddles with Biblical verses written on them bear testament to the camp's theme. A small building houses shelves of religious books.

But Rock-N-Water closed for the season after the two disappeared, and campers were sent to other camps nearby, Salee said. "They were great kids, shining beacons of Christian young adults," she said.

Kathy Cutshall said Allen met her daughter while the two attended Appalachian Bible college in West Virginia. Allen, who graduated in 2001, moved to a farmhouse in Ohio to be near Cutshall after her graduation last year.

The couple's families gathered Friday at a Baptist church in Placerville, Calif. They were "grateful to God for taking our children home," said Chris Cutshall, who had planned to officiate his daughter's wedding.

He said justice would ultimately be served for the killers: "If not in this life, certainly in the life to come."

The couple had planned a garden wedding and a barn reception with a Christian bluegrass band. They planned to honeymoon in a tent on West Virginia's Gauley River, tent camping along the banks of some of the nation's whitewater.

But before they were to fly home Aug. 22, family members said, they wanted to see San Francisco — and take a side trip up the coast. Authorities believe the couple arrived last Saturday at remote Fish Head Beach in Sonoma County about 60 miles north of San Francisco, and apparently were camping overnight.

"We're sure they really enjoyed the sunset that evening," Chris Cutshall said.

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