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The
Sun
WHEATON

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No closure

16 years after a popular teen was raped and murdered, emotional wounds - and the case itself - remain open

Cover Story: *Exiles* 44-46

Still at a LOSS

The years since Kristy Wesselman was found murdered have done little to ease her mother's pain, the town's memory or investigators' resolve



By Cindy Vines
Special to The Sun

Sixteen years may have worn away some of the raw edge of her terror, but it could never dull the pain for the mother of the murdered child.

Sixteen years may have changed the landscape of the crime scene, but it can never erase the image of the 15-year-old girl found dead in the high grass just a few yards from her neighborhood.

Sixteen years may have softened the memory of vibrant young girl now gone longer than she was here, but it only strengthens the horror of her death, a tragedy that haunts her mother.

And though 16 years may be long enough for the man who brutally raped and stabbed Kristina Wesselman to believe he has gotten away with her murder, it is not enough time to lessen the ferocity and resolve of those determined to find him.

Like more has been done in the last year than in all the time before," said her mother, Sandy Wesselman. "Somebody out there somewhere knows something and we are so close, I can feel it. Finding out what happened... it's a priority, it's the priority. No matter how much time goes by, I will never let go. We have to know who did this. We have to know who it is."

I still have terrible nightmares about what happened to my child. Not as many, but I still do. I still always be brokenhearted. I will never be the same. My other children will never be the same. Kristy's friends will never be the same. It's been 16 years and I wish with me but the loss doesn't go away. That never gets better."

Every murder affects a community, but what happened to Kristy Wesselman on that July day in 1969 changed her family

and friends, the Valley View subdivision where she lived and Glen Ellyn forever.

"It feels like there's been a dark cloud over the Valley ever since," said Jim Kosser, a former neighbor of the 11 Wesselman home, who lived next door to Glen Ellyn. "We don't talk about it as much, but you can't walk by their old house or go by where the field used to be without thinking about her. Until we know what happened, I think everybody still carries some of the fear with them. It feels like things won't ever be completely right until the boys are caught."

Perfectly safe path

It was a typically hot and muggy July afternoon as Kristy and her mother settled in to watch an old movie in an air-conditioned upstairs bedroom in their home on Cypress Drive.

Kristy and her three siblings had been watching the movie when they were interrupted by their father in Kennedy, and Sandy was looking forward to spending some quiet time with her daughter. Usually, Kristy was the type of teenager too busy to sit still, and that afternoon, Sandy was enjoying the rare treat of her company.

But one of them remembered a creeping fear that she had felt on that night. Wesselman took a quick trip to the neighborhood grocery store. Less than three blocks from the Wesselman home, a well-worn path straight to a store and a neighboring McDonald's at the corner of Bentmar Road and Route 63.

"Somebody saw something you used to think about," Sandy Wesselman said. "Everybody used that path. It only led from our neighborhood to the Jewel and McDonald's. It was perfectly safe. I didn't even think about it."

At Jewel, Kristy bought a giant Hershey's

bar with almonds and a 2-liter bottle of Pepsi and Kristy chatted with a friend. Heading for home, she waved to another friend as she stepped onto the path and disappeared into the field, the high grasses closing behind her.

Panic sets in

It would be a few hours before Sandy Wesselman began to feel the first stirrings of worry. Although Kristy wasn't the type not to call, Sandy figured she must have run into some friends at the store and lost track of time.

A pretty high school senior at Glen Ellyn High School, Kristy seemed to know everybody. Sandy was sure she was just being a bit thoughtless, having fun with her friends on a muggy summer night while her mother rested at home.

But when Kristy still wasn't back by her 11 p.m. curfew, Sandy became alarmed. Reaching into a closet, she found Kristy's friends. No one had seen her. With her 15-year-old son, Greg, Sandy drove through the neighborhoods, trying to remember each house she had ever been to with Kristy. Eventually, she ended up at an all-night restaurant on Roosevelt Road, the only place that was still open.

Sandy called the restaurant, Wesselman, and into a friend who saw by Sandy's face that something was very wrong. When Wesselman told him Kristy was missing, he insisted they call the police immediately from the restaurant. At 1:50 a.m., Sandy Wesselman called the Police Page County Sheriff's Office and reported her daughter missing.

There was still no sign of Kristy. Sandy called Kristy's friends again. She then called the sheriff's department, and a search was quickly organized.

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Photo illustration by Tom Klein and Maria L. Malandrakis / Sun staff

Wesselman

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garized.

"I think I knew when I called the police that this probably wasn't going to end well," Wesselman said. "I remember calling the nuns at church and asking them to pray for us because Kristy was missing and we didn't have time to pray. Wasn't that foolish? As if we didn't have time to pray."

"I think I felt in my heart... I don't know if I *knew*, but I don't think I was terribly shocked when (former DuPage Sheriff's Deputy Kevin Buchholz) came back and knocked on the door. He told me, 'We found something.' And then he waited for me to ask. And I already knew," I said. "What did you find? And he told me."

"Nothing has been the same since."

It was Buchholz who found Kristy's partially clothed body in a trampled patch of prairie grass and clover at about 11 that morning. She was curled up on her side in a sleeping position about 40 feet off the path, but just a few feet from the back yards of the subdivision. The crumpled bag with the candy bar and soda was nearby. The Jewel receipt was dated July 21, 1985, 4:41 p.m.

Kristy had been stabbed eight times in the chest. She was found less than 150 steps from the guardrail at the end of Burr Oak Drive that marked the

opening to the path.

Tests would later show Kristy had been raped. Because no defensive wounds were found on her hands, detectives believe she was surprised from behind. She apparently wasn't able to cry for help. A neighborhood family having a backyard barbecue mere feet from where Kristy was found never heard a thing.

Despite a meticulous search of the field and areas nearby, no murder weapon was ever found. Investigators believe Kristy Wesselman was stabbed with a knife with a blade between 3 and 6 inches long.

'Could my child be next?'

With no immediately identified suspect in Kristy Wesselman's murder, the anguish over her death was shadowed by the terror and fear in speculation. Was it a neighbor? A friend? A stranger? Was this a single crime, or the beginning of a pattern?

Kristy was a teenager known to be a good kid. The freshman class president at Glenbard South, she had been elected vice president of her sophomore class for the coming year. Involved in as many activities as she could cram into her schedule, Kristy played on the freshman basketball and volleyball teams. She had never been in any trouble. If trouble had found Kristy Wesselman, that meant it could find anyone.

"There was a real sense of 'Could my child be next?'" Konoer said. "For weeks and months, we all

clamped down on our kids. It was so quiet out there. And the kids just hated it. Most of them, like Kristy, were just starting to get their driver's licenses and wanted to be out and exploring. Most of us parents were too afraid to let them."

An open community meeting at Arbor View School a few days after Kristy's funeral drew a crowd that overflowed into the parking lot. Within weeks, Valley View put together a neighborhood watch program and Milton Township increased funding to provide for more police in the area. The terribly overgrown field where Kristy was murdered in grasses that were nearly 6 feet high was finally cleared clean. It would never again be allowed to go wild. A few years later, the field would be developed into a Wal-Mart, the path scripped for a parking lot and the cut-through from the Valley View subdivision sealed off by a 6-foot-tall fence.

And Sandy Wesselman, nearly destroyed in her grief, had to somehow put it aside. A single mother with three other teenage children, Wesselman also was terrified something more might still happen. Her first instinct was to flee, but she realized her children needed the stability and support systems of the only home they'd ever known and the friends they'd grown up with.

"I think back now and I don't know how we got through it," she said. "It's a testimony that my kids had a lot of good friends and a lot of good teachers. I wouldn't let them go anywhere until I knew exactly where they were going, who they were going with, what phone number they could be reached at, the license plate of the car. I probably drove them crazy, but I was not going to lose another child."

It was the same story all over the subdivision and throughout Glen Ellyn. The murder of Kristy Wesselman changed everyone's view of life in the area.

"The fear just took everybody over," Konoer said. "I think most people are here because they feel it's a safe place for their families. But we didn't think that anymore. The parents were terrified. The kids were

scared. Suddenly, everyone was feeling really vulnerable and no one knew what was going to happen next."

Counselors were made available to the students at Glenbard South, where Kristy had made a significant impact in just one year. A rabid football fan, she had hoped to try out for the cheerleading squad. In the spring, a full-page picture of Kristy rooting for the Raiders would be featured in the school's 1985-86 yearbook.

Keeping it together

Afraid of the anger she felt over her daughter's murder, Wesselman struggled to keep her balance. She was determined Kristy's death would not destroy the rest of her family.

"I remember when school started up again, I went and talked to the teachers and asked them to not let my kids use what happened to Kristy as an excuse for anything," she said. "I tried so hard to make our lives as normal as possible, which they were never going to be. I don't know how we made it through those first few years. We stumbled through somehow... but not without our scars. We all have horrible, horrible scars."

The home Wesselman wanted to be a safe ground for her family sometimes allowed them to be targeted by any number of strangers who tormented them with phone calls about Kristy or suspicions about what happened. One man harassed the family so much that Wesselman went to court and had a restraining order issued, directing him to stay away from the family for a year.

"Some of these people would have our private unlisted number before my kids even got to give it out to their friends," Wesselman said. "I learned a lot about what kind of people are out there. I had no idea about a lot of things before this happened. I didn't know anything about gangs or mental illness or homeless people or even how to deal with the police. There's a lot you learn very quickly when this happens."

Periodically, the sheriff's investigators focused on one or another potential suspect. The collection of DNA evidence was just coming into the mainstream and detectives tried to get voluntary blood and hair samples from suspects. Some complied, some did not.

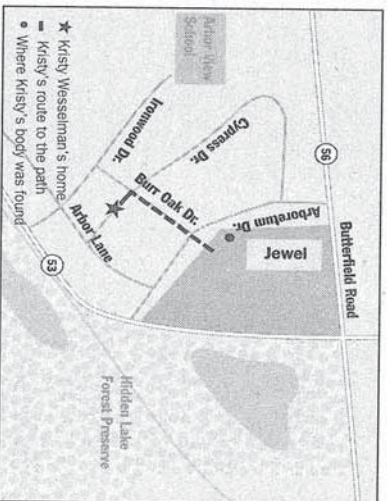
Wesselman's oldest son, Bill,

Courtesy of Sandy Wesselman



Kristy Wesselman, 2, sits with her two older brothers, Bill, left, and Greg in a family Christmas photo from 1972.

Trail of a murder



joined the Navy the year after Kristy's death. A second son, Greg, went off to college the following year, leaving Sandy alone with her youngest daughter, Susan, who was just 13 when Kristy was killed.

About this time, Wesselman ran into one of Kristy's best friends. She told Sandy she was angry with her.

"I asked her why and she said because I had never gotten angry," Wesselman remembered with a sad smile. "How could I ever explain to her that she just never saw it? How could I have let any of the kids see my anger? What they didn't see was how many times I turned my anger over to the people at the sheriff's department, demanding answers and wanting to know what was happening. They are the ones who really saw my anger and my pain."

Detectives followed every lead, but nothing solidified. As the years went by, the investigation slowed. Calls became more infrequent and frustrated detectives were forced to simply reread, re-examine, reinterview. The occasional tips were followed up immediately as detectives chased different theories and possibilities. Even a session with a psychiatrist went nowhere. Still, everyone resisted putting the Wesselman murder in the back of the files.

"There are cases that stick with you, no matter what," said Greg Figiel, a detective with the DuPage County Sheriff's Office who was one of the original investigators on the case. "You don't see too many murdered teen-agers, especially not ones like this. This is one I feel we can get a good outcome on. We're determined."

Case still a focus

When Figiel and Tim Garlisch were tabbed for the newly created Cold Case Unit for the DuPage County Sheriff's Office in February 2000, the unit was assigned 49 cases. But both knew the one they wanted to concentrate on: Kristy Wesselman.

Figiel, who spent more than four days gathering evidence from that overgrown field back in 1985, had a personal connection to the case that he wanted to see through. Garlisch, who at 32 is about the same age as Kristy would have been, admits he identifies emotionally with Kristy and her family.

"How could you not? Kristy was the poster child for the all-American girl. Because of who she was and how it happened, you can't help feeling more emotional about wanting to solve it," Garlisch said. "The in-

July 21, 1985 Kristy Wesselman and her mother, Sandy, are watching television in their home in the Valley View subdivision about 4 p.m. Kristy decides to walk to a nearby Jewel grocery store for a candy bar. At 11 p.m. after Kristy hasn't come home or called, Sandy begins to call her friends. Sandy and her son Greg begin to search.

July 22, 1985 At 1:50 a.m., Sandy first reports Kristy missing to the DuPage County Sheriff's Office. At 8 a.m., with still no trace of Kristy, Sandy calls back the sheriff's department, and a search begins. At 11 a.m., Deputy Kevin Burchholz finds Kristy's body about 40 yards off the path through the field.

July 26, 1985 While investigators search for potential suspects, Million Township offers a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the apprehension and conviction of the murderer.

July 27, 1985 Nearly 1,000 people mourn Kristy's death in services at St. James the Apostle Catholic Church. With the family's permission, sheriff's investigators conduct random interviews with mourners at the visitation. Kristy is laid to rest at

St. Michael's Cemetery in Wheaton.

July 30, 1985 An open community meeting takes place at Arbor View Elementary School to discuss the Wesselman investigation and to calm worried residents. Hundreds pack the tiny auditorium and line up around the school.

Fall 1985 Valley View residents develop neighborhood watch program.

August 1989 A Glendale Heights man is found guilty of harassing the Wesselman family with phone calls and letters. He is ordered to avoid all contact with the family for one year.

February 2000 DuPage County Sheriff John Zambra forms a two-person Cold Case Unit to investigate unsolved murders. Kristy's is a priority.

July 2000 Using advanced DNA techniques, the DuPage County crime lab develops a near-conclusive genetic profile of the killer. The profile is strong enough to be catalogued in the national database.

July 2001 Almost 50 potential suspects have been eliminated using genetic profiling. Detectives continue to collect DNA samples from anyone associated with the case file.

acted on the community from this one crime was so huge. People still call us about it, just wanting to know if it was ever solved. It'll be a great day when we can say, 'Yes.'"

Figiel and Garlisch have spent more than 1,000 hours on the Wesselman murder. They've traveled all over the area and as far as Kansas City, Mo., following up on leads and tips. They're going back through every detail and interview in the case files, trying to collect voluntary DNA

samples from every person mentioned in connection with the case.

Of the Cold Case Unit's 49 unsolved murders in DuPage County, the two detectives have identified six they strongly believe are solvable.

All six, including Kristy's murder, are on the sheriff's office's Web site (www.co.dupage.il.us/sheriff/). The site is set up to accept e-mail tips, and the department's phone number is listed.

'You just get through it'

Sandy Wesselman is a tiny woman who stands tall, steeled by unimaginable sorrow and an inner strength she has relied on every day for the past 16 years. She doesn't know who is responsible for taking away the child she was not done mothering. But she is - and always has been - determined that Kristy's murderer will take away nothing more.

Wesselman chose to focus on her family, and she proudly points out that her three other children are happy and functioning adults. Her oldest son, Bill, now 34, is married and lives in another state with his wife and 9-year-old daughter. Greg, now 32, has a job in another state. And this year, Wesselman is devoted to making sure the November wedding of youngest daughter Susan, 29, is perfect.

The Wesselmans don't dwell on the loss of Kristy. Sandy said they still don't discuss her murder. Instead, they celebrate their memories of the vivacious and irrepressible girl who loved sports and planned to be a psychiatrist and someday live in New York City.

"It doesn't matter how you survive it, you just get through it," Wesselman said quietly. "I always told my other children that we have to come out on the other side and give something back to society, no matter how small."

"I think all of our priorities changed in subtle ways. We all became a bit more reckless in terms of trying things we might have not done before. I even went hot-air ballooning with Greg once. Life is short, and you don't know how much time you have. That was brought home to all of us."

Not long after her youngest child graduated from high school, Wesselman finally was able to leave the neighborhood. She moved not far away, and though she said the change has helped ease some of her pain, she still is drawn to the area where Kristy died.

The Jewel is now a banquet hall, and neighbors who lived through Kristy's murder say the Wal-Mart helps them forget what happened in that field.

"I guess I understand that, but it's also why I wished it had stayed the way it was," Wesselman said. "It should still be an empty field."

Many of Kristy's old friends still keep in touch. But in April, one of her best friends, Kelly Hogan, was killed in a car crash in Bolingbrook.