

In the **WAKE** of the



Sonja Larson



Christa Hoyt



Manuel Taboada



Christina Powell



Tracy Paules

RIPPER

Twenty-five years after a series of **grisly murders** rocked the **University of Florida**, South Florida residents who lived through the **nightmare** recall the events that **paralyzed a city** and **forever changed lives**.

By **Nita Do Simon**



August 1990: Stunned students at the University of Florida attend an emotional prayer service honoring the five victims.

Jennie Sherrick had just finished moving into Broward Hall, a six-story, red-brick dorm in the center of campus at the University of Florida, when the phone rang. It should have been one of the most exciting days of her life; Sherrick, 18, only months removed from graduating with the class of 1990 at Deerfield Beach High School, was about to start her freshman year at college.

But the pre-semester buzz that typically filled the late-summer air in Gainesville had been replaced by an ever-growing sense of shock and terror.

The day before Sherrick had made the 305-mile drive from her home in Lighthouse Point, police had discovered the bodies of two UF students, both freshmen. They had been savagely murdered, their mutilated and naked bodies arranged in a demented tableau inside their off-campus apartment.

Sherrick answered the phone. It was her friend from Florida State University calling to make sure she was safe. News of the murders had quickly spread to Tallahassee and beyond, prompting concern from friends and family that, within days, would become full-blown hysteria.

"One of the victims went to Ely and lived in Pompano," the FSU friend said.

Sherrick began thinking. Ely High School? Why did that ring a bell?

"It's Sonja Larson. Do you know her?"

Sherrick's face went white. She had roomed with Larson a few months earlier at UF's freshman "Preview," a mandatory multi-day orientation for entering students and their parents.

Sherrick hung up the phone and slumped to the dorm floor. She pictured Larson's beautiful, angelic face. She recalled how quickly she bonded with the petite brunette, also 18. Sherrick, admittedly shy, didn't know anyone at Preview, but the outgoing Larson introduced her to one of her friends from Pompano Beach.

She remembered that Larson, the youngest in her family, was planning to study science and pre-engineering in the hopes of becoming a teacher.

As they said their goodbyes that May, the two girls promised to reconnect once school started. Sherrick was thinking about that goodbye when the news finally sunk in.

She raced down the hall of her dorm to the communal bathroom and vomited into a toilet. It wouldn't be the last time that the memory of Sonja Larson would have such a profound impact on Jennie Sherrick's life.



Boca resident Jennie Sherrick-Hodges

"You [were] painfully aware of your mortality at every single second [that summer]. You were so scared for your life and your friends' lives. ... It was like living in hell."

Danny Rolling is fingerprinted after conviction on a robbery charge in Ocala. He would later confess to the five murders.

Killer on the Loose

Prior to the summer of 1990, any discussion of campus murders in the state of Florida began and ended with Ted Bundy. As part of his seven-state killing spree between 1974 and 1978, Bundy broke into the Chi Omega sorority house at FSU and murdered two women—Lisa Levy, 20, and Margaret Bowman, 21—before assaulting two others, who both lived. That same night he brutally attacked a fifth FSU student at her apartment; she also survived.

It took seven hours in July 1979 for a jury to convict Bundy of those two murders, along with three counts of attempted first-degree murder. Along with two death sentences for those slayings, he would receive a third for killing a 12-year-old Lake City girl. Before his execution via the electric chair on Jan. 24, 1989, Bundy would confess to 30 murders; most experts believe that total is on the low side.

It had been roughly 18 months since Bundy's remains had been cremated in Gainesville when a 36-year-old transient named Danny Rolling walked into a local Walmart on Archer Road to purchase a tent for his makeshift camp in a nearby wooded area.

It was there, on Aug. 23, 1990, that Rolling spotted Larson and Jacksonville native Christina Powell, only 17. He followed the girls to their



GAINESVILLE SUN / LANDOY

A phone bank was set up at a shopping plaza in Gainesville so that students could call home and assure their family members that they were safe.



TAMPA BAY TIMES



Then-president John Lombardi kept the school open following the murders in order to maintain a sense of normalcy amid the chaos.

Gainesville townhouse community, Williamsburg Village. Larson and Powell carried their purchases into unit 113; it was their first night in the apartment.

After pulling on a ski mask and a pair of gloves, Rolling broke into the back stairwell and entered the townhouse, where the two girls were fast asleep, Powell on the downstairs couch and Larson in her upstairs bedroom. Rolling went first to Larson's room, where the young girl had fallen asleep amid boxes of unpacked clothes and household

items. He duct-taped her mouth, stifling her screams, and repeatedly tore at her flesh with the 4-inch blade of his KA-BAR hunting knife. When she was later found, dental records had to be used to confirm her identity. Rolling then walked down the stairs and into Powell's room; he forced her to perform oral sex on him and then raped her before stabbing her in the back five times with the same knife.

On Aug. 26, amid concern from the parents of Powell and Larson after not hearing from their daughters, authorities found the girls' dead bodies. Early the next morning, yet another horrifying discovery was made inside an apartment on Southwest 24th Avenue. Nineteen-year-old Christa Hoyt, a student at Santa Fe Community College, had been similarly butchered but with a ghastly post-murder twist.

Rolling, having spotted Hoyt through her window the day before toweeling off after a shower, broke into her empty apartment through a rear sliding-glass door and hid behind a bookshelf. When Hoyt returned home, Rolling ambushed her. He covered her mouth and bound her wrists together with duct tape before cutting off her clothes with his KA-BAR knife. He then sexually assaulted Hoyt before stabbing her to death.

Rolling wasn't finished. He decapitated Hoyt and butterflied her

The killer set mirrors around the body to magnify the visual effect of the carnage.

remains from the chest to the pelvis. He then placed the naked, headless body in a seated position, and set the severed head on a bookshelf, arranging it as if the head was looking at the body. Before leaving the scene, Rolling set mirrors around the body to magnify the visual effect of the carnage.

A city already crippled with fear was rocked yet again the following day, Aug. 28, when the bodies of Tracy Paules and her roommate Manuel Taboada, both 23 and both from Hialeah, were found slain inside their Gatorwood Apartment unit.

Rolling first found the sleeping Taboada, a 6-foot-2, 200-pound former high school football player, in his bedroom. After an intense struggle, Rolling finally subdued Taboada by stabbing him more than 30 times. He then set his sights on Paules, sexually assaulting and then killing her.

In the span of some 48 hours, five college students (four of them from UF), all 23 or younger, had been murdered and mutilated inside their off-campus apartments.

Though Rolling would be arrested in early September for armed robbery of a Winn-Dixie in Ocala, it would be another 14 months before authorities charged him with the killings. In the meantime, a UF freshman battling mental illness, Ed Humphrey, would be targeted as a suspect after being arrested in late August following an altercation with his grandmother in Brevard County. The scar-faced teen who collected knives would

Zabinsky's boyfriend installed an early warning system: a string across her doorway with a brass bell. "We believed anything, even that ... bell, could have saved us."

spend 14 months in prison, but it turned out he was guilty of little more than not taking his medications.

Even with Humphrey behind bars, the normally serene, idyllic college town filled with ranch-style homes and moss-covered live oak trees was on edge. The killings had stopped, but was the killer still on the loose?

As far as residents and students were concerned, he was. The sale of deadbolt locks skyrocketed. So did Mace, baseball bats and anything that could be used as a weapon.

Playing It Safe

Days after the bodies of Larson and Powell were discovered, the University of Florida opened its doors for the start of fall semester. At the time, the college served more than 33,000 degree-seeking students. Then-president John Lombardi, who had arrived in Gainesville only a few weeks ahead of the summer semester to begin his tenure, remembers the shock that terrorized the campus. As Lombardi says today from his Arizona office, where he is the director of the Center for Measuring University Performance, he and the university administrators were in uncharted waters.

"We had lots of conversations about shutting down the school temporarily," he says, "but we are an institution. So it was our responsibility to keep it open. We were going to operate it as close to normal as possible."

Students were given a weeklong grace period, during which attendance was optional, with no penalty for missed classes. Some students, fearful that the man later nicknamed the "Gainesville Ripper" would strike again, left the university and never returned.

For those who stayed behind, campus life would never be the same.

Between daily morning meetings, which briefed university officials and student body president Mike Browne on recent police findings, and afternoon public forums, Lombardi and the administrators focused on giving

the students a sense of safety amid the chaos. Campus lights were turned on at all hours of the night, field lights were rarely dimmed, extra campus police roamed the university, students were encouraged to walk in pairs or groups no matter the hour of the day, and counselors were at the ready to discuss the psychological effects of the murders.

As this was long before cellphones were common, the lines of students waiting to use payphones sometimes snaked along the perimeter of buildings. Some students had a system: They would call from either a payphone or landline to let parents or friends know they were leaving point A. When they arrived at point B, they'd call from another payphone or landline to let loved ones know they arrived safely.

At Broward Hall, Jennie Sherrick joined her dorm mates at organized mass sleepovers inside the communal lounges. The sleepovers made her feel safer at night, but the innocence she felt that summer during orientation was lost forever.

"You [were] painfully aware of your mortality at every single second [that summer]," says Sherrick (now Sherrick-Hodges) from her Boca Raton home, where she lives with her husband and three children. "You were so scared for your life and your friends' lives. You would go to sleep, and the next day you would wonder if it was going to be you or one of your friends. It was traumatizing.

"It was like living in hell."

Consumed by Fear

Stacey Zabinsky was in her second year of law school when the murders occurred. Always active, Zabinsky regularly woke up at 5 a.m. for solo runs through campus before the Florida heat crept in and before congestion would crowd her route on remote Radio Road. The mornings were still dark and the air quiet enough for her to focus on a brisk run before classes started. She was renting an off-campus garage apartment on the north side of University Avenue with fellow law student, Christi Hopkins.

The convenience of living within walking distance to the law school superseded any fears associated with living in a wooded area. The two would walk at night from law school to their apartment—sometimes alone, sometimes together—after the evening meetings held by their group at the UF Trial Team to prepare for competitions.

That all changed in August 1990.

Zabinsky and Hopkins—both petite, brunette and living off campus—fit the description of the female victims. With the monster still on the loose, they knew their lives were in danger.

Zabinsky woke up every morning and rushed to Wilbert's—the nearby, all-encompassing mini-grocery store and bookstore that all the



Boca lawyer Stacey Zabinsky-Mullins

EDUARDO SCHNEIDER

law students frequented to get their morning coffee—in order to find out the latest details on the murders. Police officers, who stopped at Wilbert's for their morning brew, often discussed the case within earshot of store owner Steve Langston.

"We would go in there for our morning coffee, and Steve would tell us all about the things he heard," Zabinsky says. "He told us about Christa's body being positioned before it was in the news."

With each gruesome detail unveiled, Zabinsky and Hopkins

Officials remove one of the dead bodies at Gatorwood Apartments, site of the final two murders.



TAMPA BAY TIMES

TIMELINE: The Gainesville Murders

May 1990: Danny Rolling leaves Shreveport, La., after he nearly killed his father by shooting him in the face.

Aug. 18-23, 1990: Rolling checks into the University Inn in Gainesville under the name "Michael Kennedy."

Aug. 23, 1990: Rolling creates a makeshift campsite in a wooded area just off the University of Florida campus.

Aug. 26, 1990: The bodies of UF students Sonja Larson of Pompano Beach and Christina Powell of Jacksonville are discovered.

Aug. 27, 1990: The body of Santa Fe Community College student Christa Hoyt, a Gainesville resident, is discovered.

Aug. 28, 1990: The bodies of UF students Manny Taboada and Tracy Paules, both from Hialeah, are discovered.

Aug. 30, 1990: UF student Ed Humphrey is arrested in Indialantic, some 100 miles from Gainesville, after an altercation with his

grandmother. Authorities target him as the prime suspect in the murders. Bail is set at \$1 million on the assault case. Humphrey, who has a history

of manic depression, is never charged, but he does spend 14 months in prison.

Sept. 7, 1990: Rolling is arrested for armed robbery of a Winn-Dixie market in Ocala.

November 1991: Authorities charge Rolling with the murders while he is in jail in Marion County for the armed robbery.

February 1994: Rolling pleads guilty to the five murders, three counts of sexual battery and three counts of armed burglary.

March 24, 1994: A jury finds Rolling guilty; he receives his sentence: death, five times over.

Oct. 25, 2006: Rolling is executed by lethal injection at Florida State Prison.

took matters into their own hands to ensure their safety. Zabinsky's boyfriend installed an impromptu alarm system outside of her bedroom door—a thin string that ran across her doorway from which a small brass bell hung. From her Boca Raton law office, Stacey Zabinsky-Mullins looks back and laughs at their early warning system.

"We were naive back then," she says. "We believed anything, even that a silly bell tied on a string could have saved us."

Shortly after the murders, the two roommates drove to their respective South Florida homes for the Labor Day break. When they returned from the long weekend, Hopkins had in her possession a different kind of security. She had taken a concealed weapons course in Miami and now owned a Glock handgun.

"We felt vulnerable at the apartment, all alone," says Christi Hopkins-Sherouse, who practices law in Miami. "It's what I did to feel safe. Somebody was stalking students, and you just had that fear inside you that you were going to be next."

She sold the Glock immediately after graduation.

Mind Games

As the killer remained on the loose that fall, Jennie Sherrick-Hodges was so shaken over losing her friend Sonja that she struggled to concentrate in class. Soon, she started having nightmares that kept her up at night. She'd fall asleep in class or wouldn't even attend. It was too much to handle. She ended up dropping a course toward the end of the semester.

Her mother, Janeice, remembers how grief-stricken her daughter was over the murders. During Christmas break, Sherrick-Hodges returned to her family's Lighthouse Point home a different person. She was withdrawn, almost inconsolable. Her parents did everything they could to lighten their daughter's mood. They took her shopping for new clothes just in case she wanted to rush a sorority that spring. They took her out to dinner. Nothing worked.

"She would just burst out crying," Janeice says. "Jennie's a very sweet, empathetic person. It very well could have been Jennie who roomed with Sonja that fall. You felt guilty. I wonder if Jennie felt guilty."

By the time she graduated with her bachelor's degree in philosophy, Sherrick-Hodges was starting to put the past behind her. That is until she moved back to Gainesville in 1998 to pursue her master's degree in German studies. Suddenly, the memories came flooding back. Even after a suspect was convicted, Sherrick-Hodges couldn't sleep at night while living alone in an off-campus apartment.

For years, she kept pepper spray underneath her pillow. Her mom says that she once found a sharp knife underneath her daughter's pillow. The murders all occurred at night so Sherrick-Hodges reasoned that if she fell asleep in the dark, what might happen to her? For the two years that she attended grad school, she arranged her schedule to study and work on papers throughout the evening—and then fall asleep as the sun was coming up.

Today, Sherrick-Hodges pays homage to her UF history like many alums. She cheers for the Gators on fall Saturdays; she even bought a huge Gators rug for her boys' rooms. However, she still asks her husband to check and re-check behind any shower curtains and closed closet doors before entering. When it comes to the safety of her three children, she says those turbulent times as an undergrad student make her more vigilant, more aware of her surroundings.

"When I tell my kids not to open the door for strangers, that timeframe is the first thing that comes to my mind," Sherrick-Hodges says.



IN SPURRIER WE TRUST

The return of a football legend helps UF heal.

This was the head coaching hire for which University of Florida football fans had been waiting. The return of the school's (to that point) only Heisman Trophy winner, back in Gainesville to lead a Gators team that had been plagued throughout the late 1980s by scandals off the field and mediocrity on it.

But whatever excitement was building around Steve Spurrier and his pass-oriented offense quickly dissipated in the wake of the student murders. Certainly nothing in Spurrier's coaching past, mostly recently at Duke University (1987-89), had prepared him for the events that unfolded in August 1990.

He remembers doing whatever it took to keep the team focused on the season. "I believe you don't let a sick individual like that affect your life," says Spurrier, currently the head coach at South Carolina. "We refused to let it affect us. It was my job to keep these kids prepared for the football season."

Not that Spurrier didn't make concessions. While the team was holding two-a-day practices, he allowed players to check in on

their girlfriends or close friends in between workouts.

"The only thing different that we did was allow our players to sleep outside of our facilities," Spurrier says. "If they had girlfriends or friends [that were] girls, we'd let them stay with them overnight to make them feel safer."

Ultimately, Spurrier's return to his alma mater gave the university—and all of Gainesville—its first opportunity to exhale since the murders.

More than 75,000 fans filled Ben Hill Griffin Stadium on Sept. 8 for the first game of the Spurrier era, only 13 days after police discovered the first two bodies. On the team's opening drive against Oklahoma State, quarterback Shane Matthews completed three straight 17-plus-yard passes. The crowd roared. The stadium shook. The Gators won 50-7, lifting the spirits of not just those in the stadium but the entire city.

The Gators, ineligible that year due to NCAA probation, would end the season with the Southeastern Conference's best record and finish 9-2 overall. One year later, UF won its first SEC title in school history.

"When I tell my kids not to open the door for strangers," Sherrick-Hodges says, "[1990] comes to my mind."

Case Closed

Rolling would be arrested on Sept. 7, 1990 for an unrelated armed robbery of the Winn-Dixie store in Ocala. While serving his sentence, he confessed to his cellmate that he committed the student murders in Gainesville; his cellmate reported the admission to the prison warden.

Rolling said he was following the instructions of a demon named "Ynnad" ("Danny" spelled backward). Authorities began investigating Rolling, eventually linking his DNA to that found at an abandoned campsite just off campus. Police found a screwdriver believed to have been used to break into the apartments, a pubic hair matched to Hoyt and taped audio diaries of Rolling that alluded to the killings. Reports emerged that hours before the first murders, Rolling had watched the horror film "Exorcist III," during which a woman's body is mutilated.

Finally, in November 1991, he was officially charged with all five murders.

Mary Shedden, a UF journalism school senior and student reporter for New York City's *Newsday* and for the *Orlando Sentinel* when the murders occurred, eventually landed a job at the *Gainesville Sun*. She covered the investigation and the trial of Rolling, growing close to each of the victim's family members along the way. After attending countless hearings and trials, they all reached the same conclusion: That the sick killer simply wanted the attention. He wanted his name and his deranged actions to live on long after his death.

The victims' families made it their mission to ensure that just the opposite happened, vowing to never even utter his name. "George Paules [Tracy's father] would refer to him as 'gutter spit,'" Shedden says.

Shedden remembers seeing Rolling in person for the first time at a prison courtroom in 1991. He was handcuffed and wearing a drab green prison T-shirt with dark pants. His brown hair was in a sort of buzz cut, he had bushy eyebrows, and his face was leaden as the judge spoke.

"I remember kind of trying to grasp how non-threatening and how pathetic he looked," says Shedden, who is now a health reporter for NPR affiliate WUSE. "He didn't fit that mode of Ted Bundy, who had those steely eyes and was that mastermind."

Fifteen years later, on Oct. 25, 2006, Rolling was executed by lethal injection at Florida State Prison in Raiford—the same place where, nearly 17 years earlier, Ted Bundy had been electrocuted.



One night in September 1990, close to midnight, Adam Tritt stopped his scooter at the famed 34th Street Wall, where graffiti artists contribute weekly, sometimes daily, murals with messages ranging from frat mantras to "Will you marry me?" to "Go Gators."

Tritt, who wasn't even a student at UF, carried buckets of black, white and red paint. A friend eventually joined him, bringing brushes, rollers and paint trays. The two

painted into the wee hours. Against a fresh coat of black as the backdrop, the two wrote the names of the five student victims in thick white paint. They drew hearts around the names and colored them in with red paint.

And then one word, one mandate, was strewn diagonally on the mural: *Remember*.

While other tributes on the 1,120-foot-long wall have come and gone, this impromptu memorial remains an unspoken protected space among university students. Stacey Zabinsky-Mullins, the law student who so intently followed the case in 1990, ran past it last fall while visiting her daughter, who was in her freshman year at UF. Running along the west side of 34th Street, Mullins crossed the street to the east side, where the wall stands, to pay her respects.

"I never met the [victims],” Shedden says. “But I will never forget their faces.”



For others, the memory of a late summer filled with fear and death is not about what was lost but what endures.

"In the end, it was about Sonja, Christina, Christa, Manny and Tracy," Shedden says. "I never met them, but I can say their names and I will never forget their faces. And that's stronger than any name of any killer that took their lives." ❧

The tribute to the victims remains a sacred spot on the 34th Street Wall.