

# Memories of student murders fade for some, not all

Today's students are too young to remember slayings, yet lessons from that terrible time remain.



Aaron Daye/Staff photographer

Alan Nicotra, left, and Core Portnoy hold a plaque on the Southwest 34th Street wall dedicated to the victims of Danny Rolling.

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Published: Sunday, August 22, 2010 at 6:01 a.m.

Last Modified: Saturday, August 21, 2010 at 11:02 p.m.

Twenty years after the murders of five Gainesville college students, memories of the tragedy have faded, and some people worry that a sense of complacency has set in among students.

This week's anniversary of the killings will be marked by a memorial event Thursday at the University of Florida. But most current UF students are too young to remember the brutal slayings, and the execution of Danny Rolling for the crimes in 2006 has further moved the case out of the public consciousness.

"The sadness here is our students don't know anything about this," UF President Bernie Machen said. "I'm not sure whether the best thing is to resurrect it or just to move forward and keep focusing on 'Be safe and have a healthy lifestyle.' "

It was on a day like today, the Sunday before the start of UF's fall semester, that the first victims were found in August 1990. Gainesville attorney Rod Smith remembered it being an optimistic time - John Lombardi had just started as UF president and Steve Spurrier as head football coach - before the murders brought it crashing down. "It would be hard to replicate today how out of hand it got for a few days," he said.

Five victims would be found dead in their Gainesville apartments over the course of three days: Sonja Larson, 18, of Deerfield Beach; Christina Powell, 17, of Jacksonville; Christa Hoyt, 18, of Archer; Manuel Taboada, 23, of Carol City; and Tracy Paules, 23, of Miami. All but Hoyt were UF students; Hoyt attended Santa Fe Community College (now known as Santa Fe College).

Gainesville was gripped in fear by the idea that a serial killer was on the loose and breaking into students' apartments. Classes were canceled. Thousands of students fled Gainesville for their parents' homes. People living alone slept at friends' places. Gun sales jumped. Nine months passed before Rolling, a drifter and career criminal from Louisiana, was publicly named as a suspect.

Smith was the state attorney who prosecuted Rolling, leading to a death sentence in 1994. Smith, who went on to serve as state senator and is now a candidate for lieutenant governor, said he's struck by the fact that so much time has passed that Rolling's victims would now be adults with families.

"Their children should be at the University of Florida now," Smith said. "They should be watching graduations. Their parents should be celebrating grandchildren that they'll never see."

Alachua County Sheriff Sadie Darnell was the spokeswoman for the Gainesville Police Department during the investigation into the murders. She said she hopes the community continues to remember the victims and their families - and that Gainesville continues to use the ordeal 20 years ago as a lesson about public safety.

"It's important to remember not only their loss but that we're all vulnerable, and we need to look out for one another," she said.

The murders had a lasting impact on the victims' families. Christa Hoyt's stepmother, Dianna, said she believes the trauma contributed to her husband Gary's death in 2000 from a rare brain disorder. She said he didn't expect to live to see the execution of his daughter's killer. Dianna Hoyt did witness the execution, which she said hasn't provided closure.

"I think the only thing it's done is given me more peace of mind," she said.

Hoyt speaks several times each year to UF journalism classes on the importance of maintaining sensitivity with crime victims. Increasingly she's speaking to students who weren't even born at the time of the murders.

"They have no idea of the terrors that we faced. ... They've never lived through anything like that," she said.

Students do maintain a connection through a memorial to the victims painted soon after the murders on the Southwest 34th Street wall. Members of UF's Interfraternity Council repaint the memorial when it gets covered with graffiti, and a few days ago installed a plaque on the sidewalk in front of the memorial, which names all five victims and has hearts painted around the word "REMEMBER."

Council President Sean Smith said the plaque is meant to be a more permanent reminder of the tragedy that discourages students from defacing the memorial.

"That's our main goal: to have it at a point that it's general knowledge that you don't paint over this portion of the wall," he said.

There are also five palms planted in the median near the wall in memory of the students, as well as five trees on campus near Library East. UF is marking the anniversary Thursday, the 20th anniversary of the day the first victims were found, by tying white ribbons on the trees and tolling the carillon bells of Century Tower five times. A moment of silence will follow.

While Rolling broke into the victims' apartments to commit the murders, UF officials hope the case can be used as a lesson that students can prevent other types of violent crimes. Machen said he wants to emphasize that students must make good choices such as not jogging late at night or not putting themselves in a compromising position by drinking excessively. "I think that's the relevant thing today," he said. "Sure, it could happen again, but I think people today need to take more responsibility for their own well being than they do."

UF Police Department spokesman Jeff Holcomb, a captain who's been with the department since 1988, said the murders didn't directly lead to many changes in campus security. But he said practices have since been adopted that emphasize the importance of students taking steps to ensure their safety, such as the rape aggression defense program and shuttle escort service at nights.

"Our focus has shifted a lot to a shared responsibility with students," he said.

The murders happened in off-campus apartments in close proximity to Archer Road. Richard Ashbrook, who was a student at the time of the murders and today is president of the North Central Florida Apartment Association, said apartments are generally safer today than at the time of the killings. "It's like anything - the newer buildings are built better," he said.

Apartment owners also have become more sophisticated in educating their tenants, he said. The messages include never leaving doors unlocked and using more than one method to lock sliding glass doors, which is one of the ways Rolling entered the apartments of his victims.

"One of the things that we have to remember first is that safety is the responsibility of the individual," Ashbrook said.

Some of the case's most lasting legacies involve the families of the victims. Darnell said the case was part of a sea change in the criminal justice system. Victim advocacy is now seen as an integral part of the duties of law enforcement, she said.

"Truly that's what our purpose is - to serve those who have been victimized," he said.

An offshoot is a precedent set by the case involving crime photos. The media sought access to photos that showed the dismemberment of some of the victims. Circuit Judge Stan Morris ruled that the media and public could review the photos at the courthouse but could not duplicate the photos.

The case continues to be a reference point as the media seek access to autopsy photos and footage such as a video of a SeaWorld trainer's death by a killer whale this year. Morris, who retired from the bench earlier this year, said he believes his decision was a reasonable compromise.

"I was firmly convinced that the public has a right to know," he said. "I was trying to figure out a way to allow that access and to protect the families' sensitivities. I think I did that."

Morris had the opportunity to attend Rolling's execution but decided against it. While some were frustrated that it took 16 years to execute someone who had admitted his guilt, Morris said he believed it showed that the system works. "My attitude is that if you're going to have a death penalty, then you have to do it right," he said.

Spencer Mann, a spokesman for the Sheriff's Office at the time of the killings, attended the execution and said it was "anticlimactic" compared with the violence experienced by the victims. He said he also was disappointed that Rolling sang a gospel hymn rather than offer apologies before being executed by lethal injection.

Mann, who is now an investigator and spokesman for the State Attorney's Office, said the attention to the killings gets a little less with each passing year. But while he said students might not know about the events of August 1990, they forever will be remembered in the wider community.

"I think the impact is greater on the permanent Gainesville residents than the students, because it was part of the fabric of our history," he said.