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Marney Rich Keenan

Oakland County child killer victims' families meet



Last week, three of the families involved in the infamous Oakland County child killings of 1976-77 met face-to-face for the first time.

In a warmly lit Birmingham living room, one father who lost his son looked into the eyes of another father who lost his daughter and recognized a part of himself -- the mutually exclusive, profound pain of a murdered child and the inability to have prevented it.

Surely the meeting between Barry King, father of Timmy King, and Tom Ascroft, stepfather of Kristine Mihelich, brought the nightmare all back. Thankfully, apprehension gave way to relief.

Upon first greeting, Cathy Broad, 50, of Naperville, Ill., and Erica McAvoy, 36, of Williamston embraced. Both are surviving sisters: Broad to Timmy King, killed when he was 11, and McAvoy to Kristine Mihelich, murdered at age 10. When Chris King, Timmy King's older brother, walked in the door with Mike Stebbins, older brother of 12-year-old Mark Stebbins, everyone stood in line with open arms.



From left, Cathy Broad is Timmy King's sister; Erica McAvoy is Kristine Mihelich's sister; and Tom Ascroft is Kristine Mihelich's stepfather. (Ricardo Thomas / The Detroit News)

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Efforts made to contact Jill Robinson's family, the fourth victim, were unsuccessful.

The families said they decided to meet to compare notes on recent developments in the three-decades-long, unsolved serial-murder investigation and agree on a strategy moving forward.

While they were grateful for meeting, the families said they are fighting an uphill battle with the Michigan State Police Task Force. They accuse the agency of attempting to pit families against each other by telling each different stories. They complain the agency is sitting on evidence that could solve the crimes. They are worried about missing evidence and records disappearing. And they believe Michigan State Police is refusing to make public the evidence because it would reveal police incompetence or a cover-up.

"I feel like I've been violated and deceived," said Tom Ascroft, 61, of Laingsburg. "My theory has always been that the police knew who committed the crimes and have just been pretending to investigate all along.

"They know the truth, and they are withholding it due to influence by important and wealthy individuals who



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believe that the law does not apply to them."

Says Mike Stebbins, 49, of Ferndale: "It's become obvious to me that if the police admit this is the guy that did it, then they have to admit they blew it long ago, when at least one of our kids could have been saved."

Two weeks ago in The Detroit News, the Kings said they believed they knew who killed Timmy: a

suspected Bloomfield Hills pedophile whom police questioned three weeks before Timmy's murder. At that time, the police were refusing to meet with them.

Specifically, they said the evidence pointed to Chris Busch, the youngest son of a wealthy GM executive who lived in the Bloomfield Village neighborhood of Bloomfield Township from 1970 to 1979. Busch was on the police's radar at least three times during the period the murders were being committed and in the year that followed.

Yet, police never zeroed in on him. For 30 years, the name never surfaced. Now, the families say they think they know why. "Money and power can make a lot of problems go away," Chris King says.

The day after The Detroit News story ran, law enforcement held a meeting with the Kings to "mend some communication gaps." That backfired, the families say. "Nobody got a straight answer," says Chris King. "It was insulting."

In response, Detective First Lieutenant Darryl Hill with the Michigan State Police 2nd district headquarters said all the information that could be provided was given to the King and Mihelich families in that meeting. Hill also added: "Anything associated with this investigation cannot and will not be released until the Oakland County Prosecutor has had a chance to review the investigation. We can't base any investigation on gut feelings. We have to have hard evidence."

Last Wednesday night, conversation was nonstop for 3 1/2 hours. These aggrieved families spoke of two deceased mothers, Ruth Stebbins in 1998 and Marion King in 2004, both of whom went to their graves never knowing the truth about their sons.

They talked openly about their sorrow and their memories of driving alone at night searching for their missing children.

They say they now look upon those in charge of delivering justice with grave mistrust.

And they have their own evidence. Barry King said he talked recently with a now-retired Southfield forensics specialist who worked on Mark Stebbins' case. The specialist says three hairs recovered from Mark Stebbins' body turned over to the state police have been lost.

Erica McAvoy described a meeting with MSP Task Force Detective Garry Gray on Oct. 19. In that meeting with her mother, Debbie Jarvis, present, Gray showed them the Chris Busch suicide file. Busch shot himself on Nov. 20, 1978.

"I'm still in disbelief," McAvoy said. "Based on the evidence I saw that day, Christopher Busch deserved a second look by the Task Force in 1978 and now. Not to mention, his circle of friends at the time."

When she saw bloody ligatures in a photo of the suicide scene, McAvoy excitedly asked about DNA testing.

But she says Detective Gray told her, "That's where it gets tricky. Livonia had those and they've lost them." A couple days later, McAvoy says she received a phone call from Livonia Deputy Police Chief Curtis Caid who said they never had the ligatures.

Barry King said he recently tracked down and ordered court files on Busch in the archive department of the Genesee County Court Clerk's office. But on the day that he was scheduled to pick them up, he called ahead and was told the files could not be found.

Chris King said, "There is probably no more heinous crime than this. I don't know what people mean when they say closure, but I do know what justice is and that's finding the guys that did this and closing the case so it is not such an open wound. So that every anniversary isn't just a nagging sore."

Cathy Broad was matter-of-fact: "The truth matters. We owe those four kids the truth."

Not to mention, the parents. Because after 32 years, Barry King, 79, still has nightmares. "What bothers me the most is that he kept Tim for six days. Every time I dream of Tim, I can't sleep the rest of the night."

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