The Botched Hunt for the Gilgo Beach Killer

For 13 years, police failed to scrutinize the man now accused of the infamous murders. Why did it take so long?

By Robert Kolker
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The beginning of the story was strangely familiar, like the opening scene in a shopworn police procedural: A woman runs screaming down a street in Oak Beach, a secluded gated community on Long Island's South Shore, only to vanish, it seems, into thin air. It was almost dawn on May 1, 2010. Hours earlier, Shannan Gilbert traveled from New Jersey to see a man who had hired her as an escort from a Craigslist ad. By the time the police arrived, she was gone. They talked to the neighbors, the john and her driver and came up with nothing. A few days later, they ordered a flyover of the area and, again, saw no sign of her. Then they essentially threw up their hands. She went into the ocean, they decided, either hysterical or on drugs.

None of this made the news, not at first. A missing sex worker rarely does. Not even when another woman advertising on Craigslist, Megan Waterman, was reported missing a month later.

As spring turned to summer, each of those missing-persons cases grew cold. No one else was brought in for questioning, and no more searches were conducted. But by November, the bramble bordering the beaches on the South Shore was less thick, and so the police ordered a detective with a cadaver-sniffing dog, as part of the dog's regular training exercises, to explore the area near where Gilbert disappeared: up and down the shoulder of Ocean Parkway, the main artery of the South Shore. On Dec. 11, the detective and the dog found something at Gilgo Beach: a skeleton bound in burlap. Two days later, the police found three more — four skeletons in all, secured with burlap and positioned just a tenth of a mile away from one another, in the bramble off the side of a deserted stretch of seaside highway.

The police were shocked. Who were these women? After a series of DNA tests, they learned that two had been missing for years: Maureen Brainard-Barnes, last heard from at Penn Station in 2007, and Melissa Barthelemy, who vanished from the Bronx in 2009. Their families had begged the police to look for them. The third was Waterman, whom, a lead investigator told me recently, they never imagined they would find there. The fourth, Amber Costello, disappeared in September 2010, a few months after Gilbert and Waterman; she was last seen darting out of her house in nearby Babylon, a short drive from Gilgo Beach, to meet a man in his car. All these women fit a certain profile. They were petite and in their 20s and had come to New York to make money as escorts on Craigslist.

the bramble, fire trucks with long ladders extended out and over the beach brush, officers peering down with binoculars from elevated buckets.

The only thing missing was a strong lead. In lieu of results, the police tried to manage expectations. "This," Dormer said plaintively at another news conference, "is not an episode of 'C.S.I.'" The media's tone changed from alarm to confusion. These women used their phones to meet the killer. Certainly something must be traceable. The original "Craigslist killer," Philip Markoff, who left a digital trail after responding to an ad in the erotic services page of Craigslist in Boston, was found in a matter of days. He murdered one woman. How hard could it be to find a killer with four digital trails or more?

As the spring of 2011 wore on, the police seemed aggrieved. At times they subtly blamed the victims. In a meeting meant to calm the public, the chief of detectives said these women went out to meet this killer because they were "willing to get into a car with a stranger" and that it was a "consolation" that the killer was "not selecting citizens at large, he's selecting from a pool." There was a growing feeling, on the part of some police officers, that all this was happening to them — that it seemed almost arbitrary that 10 cold cases (11 including Gilbert) crash-landed in the middle of their jurisdiction. And then, as time wore on, the police updates stopped. To observers, the investigation seemed to stall entirely.

This summer, after 13 years, the police finally made an arrest in the Gilgo Beach murders. Rex Heuermann is a 59-year-old architect and married father of two who commuted to Manhattan from his home in Massapequa Park, a bustling bedroom community in central Long Island. Heuermann had been in plain sight the whole time in any number of ways. According to prosecutors, he had 97 gun permits — an astonishing number, by any standard, that you think would raise a few eyebrows in any cursory search. He patronized escorts, causing some to wonder who else, potentially, he might have harmed. While the families of the victims, who had been waiting for this moment, were overwhelmed by the news of the arrest, they also wondered why it took so long.

Since the case's early days, law-enforcement officers have rarely spoken to the media. When I was reporting "Lost Girls," my 2013 book about the case and victims, the police were largely silent. But after Heuermann's arrest, some have been willing to discuss the investigation with a greater degree of detail and candor. Since July, I've conducted interviews with people close to the Gilgo case during every chapter of its bizarre 13-year timeline. (Several sources asked for anonymity, concerned that public statements by insiders might undercut the case against Heuermann before the trial.)

The story they tell — at times self-serving and at other times soul-searching — demonstrates, inadvertently and otherwise, how institutional rot helped contribute to the delays and paralysis of the investigation. What started out as indifference and apathy soon curdled into obstinance, willful ignorance and corruption. From the moment those women were found at Gilgo Beach, the law-enforcement culture of Suffolk County seemed so preternaturally ill suited to handle this case that a killer was allowed to roam free. Which was all the more galling, given what we know now — that everything the police needed to solve the case, they had almost on Day 1.

To understand what went wrong with the Gilgo case, it helps to have a passing familiarity with the dark, contradictory nature of Suffolk County — encompassing some of the most rarefied communities in the world, including the Hamptons and Fire Island, as well as struggling towns like Brentwood, Wyandanch and Central Islip. It's a place full of sophisticated, powerful people, where time and again, law-enforcement has closed ranks and done things their way, often with little oversight.

In the 1970s, to take one notable example, the Suffolk County Police Department's homicide unit was known for an impossibly high confession rate of 97 percent, which almost certainly meant they engaged in coercion. When that statistic made the news, officers in that unit proudly took to wearing T-shirts with the insignia "97%." Prosecutors have, at times, ignored and even enabled those excesses. In 1988, a teenager named Martin Tankleff was driven to confess falsely to the murder of his father; it would take almost 18 years for him to be exonerated and released. And a year later, in 1989, New York's Commission of Investigation issued a report lambasting the Suffolk Police and the district attorney's office and citing evidence of more coerced confessions, plus illegal wiretaps, preferential treatment for people close to public officials and "the practice of sweeping law enforcement misconduct under the rug."

The police often went unchecked because in Suffolk County, their union is a powerful source of campaign contributions with its own super PAC. The union's political clout helps explain why the Suffolk Police Department is one of the nation's largest, with about 2,500 sworn officers, and their salaries are among the highest. A politician who supports the police can earn the union's backing and ensure a swift rise to the top. And for many decades, any district attorney with ambition would not look too closely at police indiscretions and even indulge them or, better still, use them to consolidate political power.

When Thomas Spota first became district attorney in 2002, he was perceived as a white knight, largely expected to clean house after an era of corruption. But Spota, it became clear later, found ways to install his own allies in police leadership positions, which, in turn, would secure the union's support. When the Gilgo case emerged eight years into Spota's tenure, he was actively reshaping the Police Department — even as the body count around Gilgo Beach rose, the media took up residence on the South Shore and investigators struggled to handle an unprecedented case involving at least one serial killer.

The Suffolk detectives had more than enough to deal with in those first few months. Ten possible victims meant 10 different sets of evidence — not just bodies, but also physical evidence and phone records. The police knew the killer targeted women who posted ads on Craigslist. They knew he used camouflaged burlap straps to bind them, the kind a hunter uses. They knew he used hard-to-trace burner phones to contact each woman, a different phone for each victim: 16 calls or texts to Maureen Brainard-Barnes before she vanished in 2009, and four before Melissa Barthelemy disappeared. At the time, the burner phones made him seem clever — a loyal watcher of certain police procedurals, perhaps.

But the killer made mistakes, too. Police knew he used tape to wrap the victims and found at least a few hairs. With the right technology, furnished by the F.B.I. or an outside lab with expertise, they might be able to extract DNA and find a match, provided they had a suspect's DNA to compare it with. They also recovered a belt on the scene with initials, either "HM" or "WH."

The police started to understand where this killer might operate — where he lived and maybe where he worked. They learned how in the summer of 2009, the killer made taunting phone calls from Midtown Manhattan to Melissa Barthelemy's younger sister, using Melissa's phone. Brainard-Barnes's phone also connected to a cell tower in Midtown Manhattan, near the Queensboro Bridge — the bridge a person might take if they were heading to Long Island — before she vanished in 2007. Waterman's phone last registered at a cell tower in central Long Island, near Massapequa Park. So did Barthelemy's. Here was a pattern: a killer who potentially commuted between central Long Island and Midtown Manhattan.

These were densely populated areas, where it might seem impossible that he could ever be traced. And yet during the first year of the Gilgo case, in 2011, the F.B.I. started to provide help on that front: technology that might track those burner phones by seeing if their numbers appeared in the records of certain cell towers on Long Island. Cell-tower data is voluminous, a haystack full of needles: Think of all the signals from all the phones that ping at various cell towers every second. But if any of the killer's burner phones pinged at the same towers, they would have a sense of where, perhaps, he spent most of his time.

If this seemed promising, Suffolk's investigation for most of 2011 was essentially at a standstill, in part because the district attorney, Spota, was stepping up his efforts to orchestrate a soft takeover of the police. He went public with his fury at the existing police leadership in May after senior officials suggested that a single killer might be responsible for all the murders. Spota "was so incensed by the one-killer theory," a former senior police officer told me recently, because he believed it encouraged panic. "That heightens the alarm to everyone that we have an active killer — that it could happen again."

Days later, Spota held a news conference of his own. He made sure Richard Dormer, the police commissioner, was standing there as he spoke — a public defenestration. "Dormer has no idea what Spota is going to say," the former senior officer recalled. "And Spota runs the whole show. He's got the clipboards up, and he shows where all the bodies are laid out. It's very telling." Spota announced that there could be as many as three killers at work on Long Island — that the South Shore might have been a dumping ground. "It is clear that the area in and around Gilgo Beach has been used to discard human remains for some period of time," Spota declared. "As distasteful and disturbing as that is, there is no evidence that all of these remains are the work of a single killer."

Among the police and the media, those watching the case were baffled. Isn't an open disagreement between the police commissioner and the district attorney a gift to any future defense lawyer handling the case at trial? But insiders understood that this wasn't so much about solving this case as it was about Spota's larger ambitions. They knew that Dormer was an appointee of Steve Levy, the county executive and Spota's political foe, and that Spota was going after them both. Publicly, he excoriated Dormer, while privately, he had Levy investigated for campaign-finance improprieties. In March, two months before this news conference, Spota pressured Levy to drop his bid for re-election in return for not being prosecuted. Dormer was out as commissioner before the end of the year.

Thomas Spota, the Suffolk County district attorney, following his arraignment in 2017. John Paraskevas/Getty Images

James Burke, the former Suffolk County police chief, in F.B.I. custody in 2015. Steve Pfost/Getty Images

The public would never learn exactly what Levy supposedly did — a classic Suffolk County back-room deal. And his successor, Steve Bellone, was happy to sign off on a new chief of the Police Department, who happened to be a longtime protégé of Spota's — and who, to the eternal detriment of the Gilgo investigation, would go on to become widely known as the most corrupt police official in modern Suffolk history.

Shortly after the bodies were identified by DNA in early 2011, the police visited the home of Amber Costello, the most recent victim, in a rented house in Babylon. All summer before her disappearance in September, she shared the home with her boyfriend, Bjorn Brodsky, and a friend, Dave Schaller. The place was a drug pit, well known to neighbors, who had been watching cars coming and going for months. All three housemates spent most of their days doing heroin, with Costello's sister popping by for visits. The money for the heroin came from Costello's escort work, starting at $250 a call.

Schaller at the time said that during Costello's last night at the house, she was on the phone with a potential client and arrived at an unusually high fee: $1,500 for the whole night. She asked to meet him outside the house. Schaller walked Costello out the door, but he didn't see Costello's client. He wrote in a 2012 Facebook post that he was too high to remember him. But the police had access to Costello's phone records, and they saw that the same man she was talking with had also been texting her the night before. They even saw a text message suggesting he had met with her in person that first night: The client seemed mad that something had gone wrong, and he wanted to see her again.

The police learned that on the first night, the client wanted to hire Costello, but as soon as he paid, Schaller jumped out of the shadows and chased him away. This was a scam Schaller and Brodsky pulled whenever they could that summer — accosting Costello's clients and taking their money before she had to follow through with the job. But this time, the client seemed to want another chance.

Police started looking for anyone who could remember seeing the client on that first night. They found a witness who saw a large, white male, 6-foot-4 or taller — resembling an "ogre" — in his mid-40s, with "dark bushy hair" and big glasses. The witness also spotted the car this man drove: a green Chevrolet Avalanche with a distinctive rear door, like a truck's. At that moment, with the description of a man and a make, model and color of a car, the police were closer to targeting a suspect than they had ever been.

And then the lead withered away. The initial database search for the car went nowhere. A source close to the Gilgo investigators told me that the detectives were using a program known as Lawman — a product of 1990s database technology, accessing millions of New York State's paper D.M.V. records. When it first became available, the Lawman search seemed like a godsend. Pretty much everything that sat in the D.M.V. archives was instantly searchable. But over the years, as databases age, their data becomes harder to navigate. New cars like Avalanches, which are a blend of a truck and a car, could be misfiled by the D.M.V. — and what gets mangled by the D.M.V. can disappear entirely in the Lawman searches. In retrospect, the source told me, the car must have been miscategorized.

The stretch of Gilgo Beach where the authorities discovered Amber Costello's body. Cait Oppermann for The New York Times

It's hard to imagine that the police would not at least have tried to continue pursuing eyewitness information about the last man to see Costello alive. But that did not happen. Just like that, the police seemed to stop talking about the "ogre" and the Avalanche — not with their superiors in the department and not with an outside agency like the State Police or the F.B.I. A senior police official with close knowledge of the investigation's first year told me that he had no recollection of the Avalanche tip. The chief of detectives at the time, Dominick Varrone, has also said he heard nothing about it. For a decade, the lead sat at the bottom of a growing case file, with no sign that it might ever be discovered again.

Around the same time, the department was adrift, waiting for Spota's handpicked police chief to arrive. James Burke was a former Suffolk narcotics detective whose alliance with Spota spanned decades, almost like a blood tie. In a 1979 case that brought him recognition as a young prosecutor, Spota secured the convictions of two teenage defendants for the murder of a 13-year-old boy named John Pius. A key witness was Burke, who at the time was just 14. A decade later, participants in the case claimed that witnesses had been coached to lie on the stand. Spota was never charged with, and has denied, any wrongdoing. And his bond with Burke never wavered — even years later, when Burke ran into trouble.

As a police officer, Burke lost track of his firearm more than once. And in 1993, an internal affairs investigation accused him of patronizing and smoking crack with a sex worker. Spota, who was in private practice at the time, offered to represent Burke. Burke eventually was punished with the loss of 15 vacation days. Once Spota became district attorney in 2002, he

gave Burke a senior role overseeing a group of detectives in his office. It was clear back then to Spota's staff that one day, when Spota had the chance, he would put Burke in charge of the Police Department.

With Burke arriving as chief in 2012, Spota managed to do what even in Suffolk County once seemed impossible — consolidate political power between the police and the district attorney's office. There was nothing to hold back the impulse to close ranks and remove all outside scrutiny. "It was: 'Hey, we run our own shop. Stay out,'" Bellone, the county executive during much of Spota's tenure, told me.

When, in early 2012, staff members from the F.B.I.'s celebrated Behavioral Analysis Unit arrived in New York from Quantico, Va., to help with the case at the invitation of the previous leaders of the Police Department, Spota had them turn around and fly back home, declaring their work unnecessary.

The loss of the F.B.I.'s help was a severe blow to the Gilgo investigation, impeding any meaningful progress in the case. Before being shut out, the F.B.I. handed the police a raft of cell-tower information that they had collected over the past several months. Their analysis traced the signals from the killer's burner phones to two regions on a map — geographic "boxes," they called them — one in central Long Island (including Massapequa Park), and one in Midtown Manhattan. As a next step, the F.B.I. was willing to help search cell-tower data in central Long Island for other cellphone numbers that registered with those towers at the same time as the killer's burner phones. In theory, whoever used those burner phones also carried a regular phone that pinged the same towers at the same time. That number, unlike the burners, would be traceable.

Spota abandoned this entire approach. He refused to petition the courts to search any more cell-tower data on Long Island. Spota's staff members, who would have had to request the warrants for that data, waved off the idea as a fishing expedition. "They didn't understand it, and they didn't want to litigate something that they didn't understand," the source close to the Gilgo investigators told me. In truth, cell-tower data was hardly novel; in 2004 it helped disprove the alibi of the accused California wife-killer Scott Peterson. A different district attorney might have seen where the data led.

There were other ways for Spota to rationalize not squandering time and resources on cell-tower data. Just because the killer made some calls from central Long Island didn't mean he had to be living there. Clearly the killer was good at avoiding detection. He seemed too smart to continue living a few miles from where the bodies were found. By now, he had to be a ghost. The problem with that argument was that every lead they had, upon examination, could be written off as a long shot. A police source who was part of the early investigation told me that they had been pulling hunting licenses in the area because the burlap found on the bodies suggested the killer was a hunter. They appeared to drop that strategy, but Rex Heuermann, it turns out, was an enthusiastic hunter. "I find it hard to believe his name isn't somewhere," the source told me.

Despite that initial interest in hunting licenses, the team hadn't concentrated on gun permits. "The victims weren't shot," the source close to the Gilgo investigators told me. This was technically true — the bodies had no signs of gun trauma, causing many to speculate that they were strangled. But a different set of investigators, one that closely partnered with other agencies like the F.B.I. or the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, might have looked at gun permits and noticed the man in Massapequa Park with 97.

In the four years that Burke ran the Police Department, from 2012 to 2015, the "Gilgo room" at Suffolk Police Headquarters became a place for part-time work, with little urgency dictated from above. Under Burke, the police were in what would later be characterized by federal prosecutors as a complete ethical free-fall: His staff served drinks in his office every night. He ordered officers to spy on his girlfriend, her exes and her son and follow his perceived adversaries, including Steve Bellone, the county executive. He turned the police force into his own empire, punishing anyone he deemed disloyal and then celebrating with friends after their demotion.

Instead of prioritizing the search for an at-large serial killer, Spota, too, seemed more interested in investigating his rivals, including Bellone, who recalled being approached more than once by Spota's staff, apparently just to let him know they were watching. "D.A. is the most powerful office that we have," Bellone told me. "If you're willing to target people and go after people — that is an awesome power. You don't even have to indict somebody to ruin their life. Just starting to investigate someone can cause people to lose jobs."

For about a year, things went smoothly for Spota and Burke, until Burke spoiled everything with an unchecked explosion of violence inside a Suffolk Police precinct house. In December 2012, a witness in a drug case who also happened to be pilfering from police vehicles grabbed a duffel bag from Burke's car that contained pornography, sex toys, cigars, a gun belt and ammunition. (Federal prosecutors would later call this duffel Burke's "party bag.") When Burke found out, he attacked the witness in full view of several other detectives, some of whom took part in the beating, and even bragged about it later. Federal agents started investigating Burke in April, and Burke spent the next year or so pressuring witnesses to take part in a cover-up.

He had help from Spota's staff, who used wiretaps and car-tracking devices to monitor police detectives he distrusted, searching for blackmail material. Instead of filing subpoenas for more cell-tower data in the Gilgo case, Spota's staff were wiretapping a police detective they suspected of leaking information about a gang case to Newsday, the Long Island newspaper. The tapes included calls between the detective and F.B.I. agents — as well as the federal prosecutors involved in the investigation into Burke.

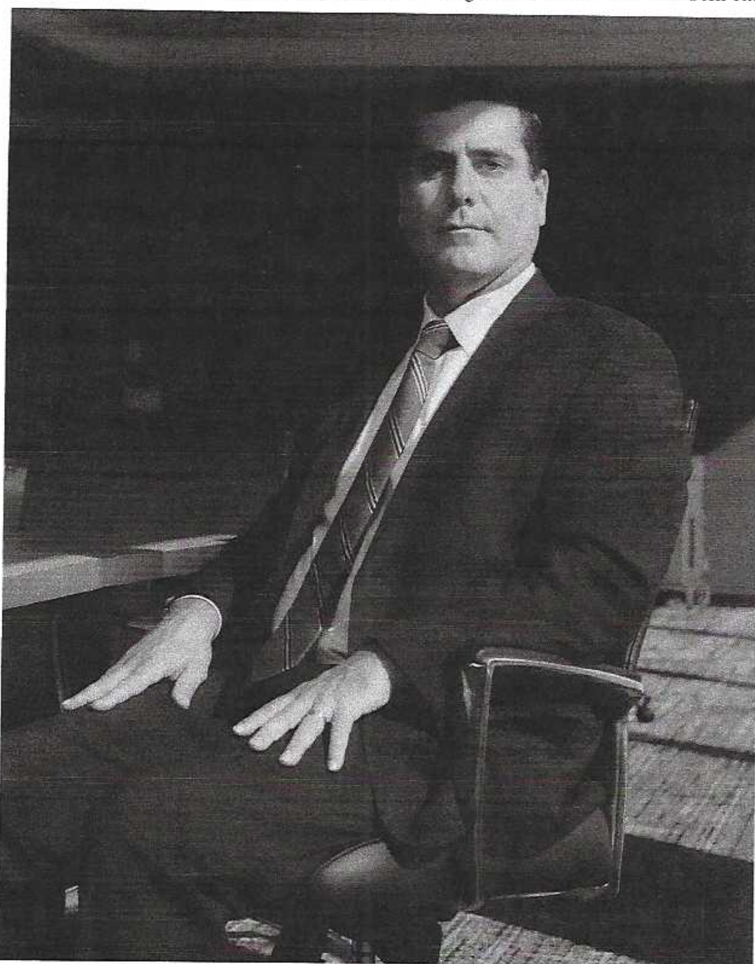
By law, Spota needed to notify Loretta Lynch, then the U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of New York, when federal agents appeared on police wiretaps. When he did, one source told The Times in 2016, federal officials immediately saw how far afield those wiretaps went — and how, perhaps, the whole point may have been to learn how close the F.B.I. might be to taking down Burke. "The problem for them," Bellone told me, "was that they didn't know that President Obama was going to nominate Loretta Lynch to be the attorney general of the United States." Once that happened, the federal investigation into Burke expanded into an inquiry of all of Suffolk County law enforcement.

Lynch's office issued "immunity orders," or a requirement to testify, to witnesses in the department who had seen Burke in action. Burke was indicted and pleaded guilty in 2016 to conspiring to obstruct justice and violating the civil rights of the witness he had beaten. He served a sentence of 46 months. Back home on Long Island, he still receives a pension. (In a bleak but strangely resonant moment, Burke was arrested this August for soliciting sex in a public park. He has pleaded not guilty, and the case is still proceeding.)

Spota resigned in 2017, the day after he was indicted on charges of conspiracy, obstruction of justice, witness tampering and other crimes. Bellone, finally free of Spota's surveillance and intimidation, said during a news conference that Spota and Burke had been running a "criminal enterprise." In December 2019, Spota was convicted in federal court and later sentenced to five years. He's still in prison.

Spota and Burke were gone, but the bunker mentality remained. No one collided with that culture more directly than Tim Sini, who became police commissioner in 2015, just after Burke's indictment. Sini, a senior prosecutor in Manhattan under the U.S. attorney, Preet Bharara, was hired to clean up the mess Burke left behind. The problem was that those very credentials made Sini suspect to many in the department, never mind that he was commissioner of a police force without ever having been a police officer himself. Sini sensed pushback from the start. "There's this culture of, you know, This is our town and we do it our way," he told me.

Sini wanted to modernize the Gilgo investigation. He brought the F.B.I. back in, asking for help with the cellphone piece of the case. He invested in new equipment, including the Gladiator Autonomous Receiver, or GAR. A burner phone's signal from a tower suggests a huge geographical area, but the GAR can make that area smaller. "So essentially, what that did was reduce your number of persons of interest," he said. But these efforts were met with resistance from the detectives handling Gilgo.



Tim Sini, the former police commissioner. Cait Oppermann for The New York Times

That disagreement came to a head in 2018, when Sini was elected as the district attorney and started pushing the police to find two specific suspects in those geographic areas, one of them a former police officer. A source with knowledge of the investigation told me that Sini was treated as if he had somehow broken protocol and failed to understand that the Police Department decided who did and didn't receive subpoenas.

Both of Sini's suggested targets were ruled out as suspects; the source close to the Gilgo investigators told me that they felt that Sini, an outsider using Suffolk County as a step on his political ladder to higher office, was more interested in looking busy than getting results. "We made them look foolish" by knocking out their potential suspects, the source said.

Some police were also upset that Sini was diving into Suffolk County's history of botched murder cases. As soon as he became district attorney, he opened the county's first conviction-integrity unit, an office that reviewed past cases in which police malfeasance led to gross injustices. In 2019, that unit successfully exposed wrongdoing in a legendary case from Suffolk's past: the beating and confession of Keith Bush, who was convicted in 1977 and spent 33 years in prison for a murder he didn't commit. The Bush case now stands as the longest wrongful incarceration in New York State history. But the past is never past in Suffolk County. At least one senior Gilgo detective knew some of the players in the case personally — officers discredited by the exoneration. Sini said that he may not have appreciated at the time that reopening the Bush case "was a declaration of war on the establishment."

The conflict between the police and Sini seemed to have a direct effect on the Gilgo case. Sini's office kept narrowing the data that police needed to investigate, and the police kept not doing anything with that data. By the summer of 2021, the source with knowledge of the investigation told me, the geographic areas had been reduced to the smallest yet on Long Island and

in Midtown Manhattan. This source suggested that fewer than 1,000 men lived in the Long Island area. All that was left was to see which of them worked in that tiny sliver of Manhattan. "It was eminently doable," the source said. "But it just didn't happen."

Sini's team reached out to neighboring Nassau County, where Massapequa Park is, to help create a list of homes within the geographic area. Nassau isolated several hundred houses — including on First Avenue, where Heuermann and his family lived. They provided short dossiers of each home. Heuermann, the source told me, was on that list. Again, the police seemed to do nothing.

The stretch of Gilgo Beach where the authorities discovered Megan Waterman's body. Cait Oppermann for The New York Times

The F.B.I. was as frustrated with the police as Sini was and threatened to leave the investigation. Police leadership responded by pulling a longtime lead detective off the Gilgo case. It was taking time, but in certain ways, the law-enforcement culture was changing. Sini had some help from the police commissioner who succeeded him, Geraldine Hart, another outsider, who spent more than 20 years with the F.B.I. Inspired by the breakthrough in the Golden State Killer case in California, Hart commissioned an outside lab that could use genetic genealogy — matching DNA evidence to genetic material collected by private companies, like 23andMe — to successfully identify a victim found during the Gilgo Beach search in 2011 as Valerie Mack. She disappeared in 2000 and, like the other four women, worked as an escort.

Hart also made public an intriguing piece of evidence that the police had not disclosed: the leather belt with imprinted initials. Hart said the police believed the killer had handled the belt. (Police are still trying to extract DNA from a hair that was found near the belt buckle.) There's always a risk when revealing sensitive information about a case — it could tip their hand to the killer, for example. But enough time had passed. The case was now convincingly alive again.

It took until 2022 for the Gilgo case to get what it needed all along — an interagency task force with full-time investigators sharing information, resources and ideas. There's a certain poetry in the fact that the Suffolk district attorney who helped make it happen, Ray Tierney, had been pressured out of Spota's office in 2008. Then a junior prosecutor, Tierney ran into trouble when he started questioning some corner-cutting in Spota's political-corruption unit. Quite abruptly, Tierney was transferred to rackets, throwing his future into jeopardy. "They took my car, they took the phone," Tierney told me recently. "I certainly got the message. I said, 'My career in the D.A.'s office is effectively over.' I was way outside the circle of trust."

Tierney left that office, but he never stopped working as a prosecutor — first in the U.S. attorney's office on Long Island and then under Eric Gonzalez, the Brooklyn district attorney. In both jobs, Tierney mounted cases against violent gangs that relied heavily on cell-tower data. Like Sini, Tierney understood that when witnesses aren't helpful, the data is essential. During the 13 years that he was outside Suffolk's closed universe, he heard plenty about the troubles in the Burke era, and he never stopped watching to see if there was a break in the Gilgo case. In 2021, when he ran for Suffolk County district attorney, Tierney made cracking the Gilgo case part of his platform.

While campaigning, Tierney met with some of the Gilgo victims' family members face to face, watching their expressions harden as they talked about the decade of frustration. At that moment, Tierney found himself trying not to make promises he was not sure he could keep. "I didn't know if it would be possible to solve," he told me. After all this time, it still seemed like a needle in a haystack. Even if the killer was from Long Island and commuted to New York, did that really narrow things down? "I grew up in Commack," Tierney told me. "Everybody who lived in Commack, you either owned your own business or you were a cop or fireman — or your dad or your mom or both of them got on the train, went into the city and came home. How many other people do that?"

Soon after Tierney won the election, Rodney Harrison became the new police commissioner. He had spent 12 years in investigations for the N.Y.P.D. and worked a number of gang cases with Tierney. Harrison told Tierney that he wanted a task force, this time not just with the F.B.I. but with everyone: Nassau County police officers, State Police officers and the local sheriff's office all in a room, working daily and talking constantly. Tierney had been saying the same thing on the campaign trail. It seemed strange to each of them that nothing quite like this had happened before.

Ray Tierney, the current Suffolk County district attorney. Cait Oppermann for The New York Times

In his first days as commissioner, Harrison visited the site on Ocean Parkway, met with the detectives and held a news conference saying he liked his chances. Privately, though, Harrison was shocked to see that, after 10 years, the mountains of witness statements, interview transcripts and investigation notes had never been digitized. All the work Suffolk detectives had done on the case was unsearchable — accessible only to a few detectives who were relying on their own limited memories of the case. "We had to collect everything and send it down to Quantico," Harrison told me. "So that was big."

They didn't even know what they had. The task force was announced on Feb. 15, 2022. On March 14, they learned about the Chevy Avalanche.

It was simply a matter of which search tool they used. In the early days of the investigation, the D.M.V. record search used by Suffolk detectives to find the Avalanche came up short. But in 2022, a member of the new task force from the State Police used a service called TLOxp — a private, subscription-based database that accesses more records in more places, all around the country. (The database was available in 2011, when the police first learned about the Avalanche.) This search had none of the filing issues of the previous search. A car turned up right away: an Avalanche owned by Heuermann at the time the bodies were first found. Since then, the ownership had transferred to Heuermann's brother, Craig, in South Carolina. "The State Police were the game changers," Harrison told me. They had never been part of the investigation. "Once we brought them to the table, they made the difference."

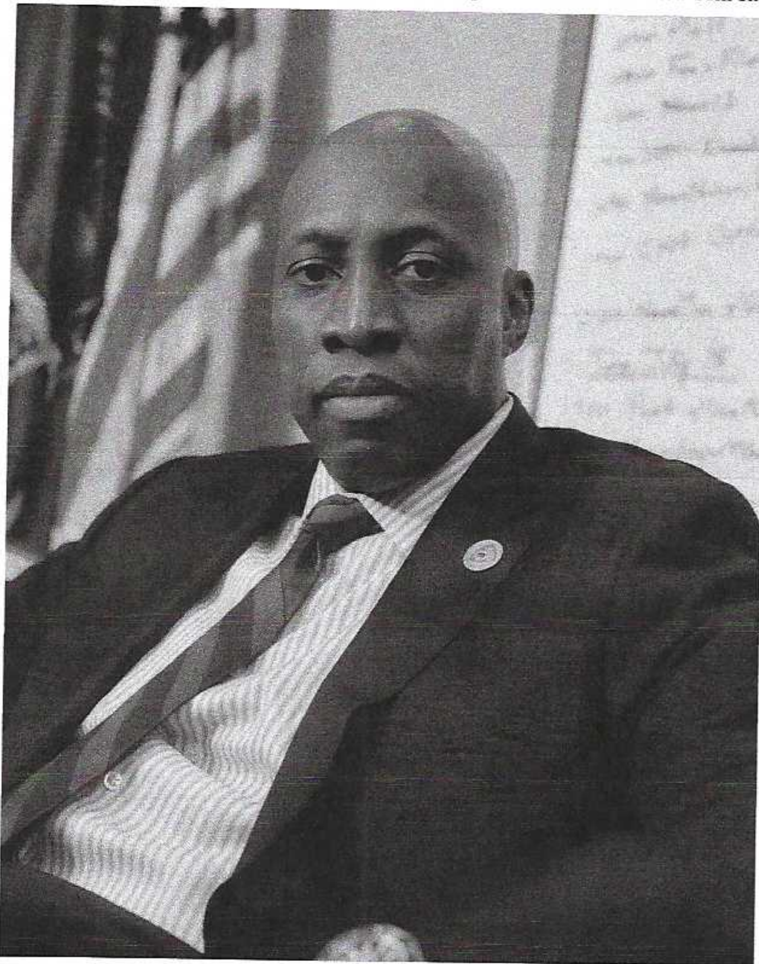
As soon as they saw a car record linked to Rex Heuermann — a man the size of an ogre, living and working in the exact geographic area that the data had been suggesting and resuggesting for 10 years — the team locked in on him as a potential suspect. There was even an archived Google map photo from November 2011, showing a Chevy Avalanche parked outside Heuermann's house in Massapequa Park.

For much of 2022, the task force used cell-tower data furnished by the F.B.I. and refined by Sini to match Heuermann's movements to the movements of the victims and the killer. Tierney's office filed about 300 subpoenas and search warrants. Sure enough, wherever Heuermann's personal cellphone went, the burner phones attributed to the killer seemed to follow. None of this explained how a married father of two in a densely populated neighborhood might operate unnoticed. But then they used more conventional Web searches to piece together Heuermann's life and the life of his family. When Megan Waterman disappeared, Heuermann's wife, Asa Ellerup, was away, in the middle of a four-day trip to Maryland. When Amber Costello vanished, Ellerup was spending a week away from home in New Jersey.

And in the summer of 2009, two days before Melissa Barthelemy disappeared, Heuermann's wife left the United States on a trip to Iceland. She was not in town when Barthelemy vanished nor was she in town a few days later when Barthelemy's sister, Amanda, started getting harassing calls from a man using Melissa's phone. Heuermann did appear to be in town then, but he left for Iceland several days later, and for the length of his time out of the country, Amanda received no calls from her sister's phone. Those calls resumed the day after Heuermann came home.

Scouring Heuermann's email, the police found accounts for burner phones. None were the ones connected to the women's disappearances. But with one of those burners, they found something significant: an email account he used to conduct Google searches. The content of these searches was everything the police had hoped and dreaded it to be. He was interested in violent porn. He was interested in child porn. He wanted to know what this new Gilgo task force was up to. And from other record searches, they learned he was using Tinder and contacting escorts. And he had guns. Lots and lots of guns.

With this new insight into Heuermann, Harrison knew the clock was ticking. Who's to say if he'd already hurt other people or was about to? From there, Harrison said his thoughts turned even darker. All those gun permits — 97 of them. How would someone with that many guns react if he knew he was being investigated? What would a person like that do if someone tried to arrest him? "Honestly, I was nervous," Harrison told me. "What's his mind-set? Is he somebody unstable that can do a mass shooting incident or something like that? You know, your mind starts racing all over."



Rodney Harrison, the current Suffolk County police commissioner. Cait Oppermann for The New York Times

They needed DNA to confirm everything else they had found, including the hairs on the tape used to bind the bodies. Tailing Heuermann, they picked their sample from a pizza box he tossed into a garbage can on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan — one more indelible image to make this case notorious, like the burlap and the bramble. The hair follicles from the tape contained trace genetic samples requiring a special process called mitochondrial analysis. The F.B.I. matched Heuermann's DNA to one hair. Two other hairs matched Heuermann's wife, whose DNA the police found on two bottles left outside their home. The theory is that Heuermann used a roll of tape that had been lying around the house.

On Thursday, July 15, a group of officers approached Heuermann as he was walking along Fifth Avenue, near his office. As one stopped him, the others formed a circle, tightening around him. There was not a hint of violence — an arrest so smooth that pedestrians kept on walking past them.

After all this time, the police had a win. They built their case, found a plausible suspect and apprehended him without bloodshed. Tierney and Harrison held a news conference with the victims' families squarely behind them — another change from the old days, when the families were told to keep their distance. But this is Suffolk County, and so that same day, Steve Bellone, whose term as county executive ends this year and whose legacy will be forever entangled with the Burke-Spota era, held his own news conference. The governor, Kathy Hochul, made her remarks separately, too, during an unrelated media event at Jones Beach. They weren't invited to Tierney and Harrison's news conference, Tierney said later, because "this wasn't about politics."

Heuermann has been charged in the murders of three of the four women — Waterman, Barthelemy and Costello — and remains a prime suspect in the murder of Brainard-Barnes. He has pleaded not guilty. There are six more sets of remains with no suspects attached — not counting Shannan Gilbert, whose body was found at the end of 2011 and whose death police

continue to maintain was unrelated, a cruel coincidental tragedy that set this case in motion. While Joel Rifkin, a prolific Long Island serial killer of an earlier era, confessed right away to 17 murders, Heuermann is maintaining his innocence, and for the time being his silence.

The stretch of Gilgo Beach where the authorities discovered the body of Maureen Brainard-Barnes. Cait Oppermann for The New York Times

During the 13 years this case went without an arrest, what chance would there be that the killer never tried something else like it? Would someone like him just stop at four? Tierney has seen all the suspect's Web searches and has his own assessment of the man. "I would say that the interest and the obsession never left," he said.

Tierney has announced he will try the case against Heuermann personally — a district attorney going into court to argue before a jury the most notorious serial-killer trial in a generation. All eyes will be on Suffolk County again. What happens next is a chance to make up, at least partly, for the years when this case was in such disarray — and Suffolk County's law-enforcement culture seemed all too willing to forget it ever happened.

Robert Kolker is a contributing writer for the magazine based in Brooklyn. In 2020, his book "Hidden Valley Road" became a selection of Oprah's Book Club and a New York Times best seller. **Cait Oppermann** is a photographer and director in New York whose work focuses on the visual nuances of environments. In this issue, she captured images of Long Island's Gilgo Beach, the burial site for an infamous series of murders and a place that she knows well.