

Detectives hope answers to cold cases lie in a deck of cards

By Diane Hefley

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Kay Jones was losing her battle with cancer.

As she lay dying, the grieving mother ached for justice. She needed to know who killed her youngest daughter, Kelly Sarsten, five months earlier.

Her surviving children asked detectives for a favor.

“Please whisper in her ear who you think killed Kelly,” they begged, “so she’ll die knowing you’ll find whoever did this.”

The detectives didn’t have an answer. Jones died in January 2005. Her daughter’s killer remains free.

Now, four years after Sarsten’s remains were discovered in the Pilchuck River behind her Machias house, Snohomish County sheriff’s detectives are turning to a deck of playing cards to help hunt down whoever took her life.

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Sarsten, 37, was a strikingly beautiful blond who’d made a career as an independent truck driver. What happened to her is among the county’s grim collection of unsolved murders: mothers who never returned to their children, men gunned down in their homes and teenagers whose bodies were dumped along country roads.

Sarsten’s photograph and some details of her death are featured in the state’s first deck of cold-case playing cards.

The cards will be handed out to inmates in the Snohomish County Jail, in hopes of soliciting tips about 52 unsolved homicide and missing persons cases dating back to the 1970s.

The playing cards feature photos of the victims and encourage inmates to call a toll-free number to leave tips with the promise of a reward for valuable information. Detectives also plan to hand out the cards in jails in Skagit and King counties and at the state prison complex in Monroe.

"Maybe having a real picture, seeing a real person, they'll realize it wasn't just something some guy was talking about in jail," veteran sheriff's homicide detective Jim Scharf said. "Maybe the person will remind them of their sister or aunt or uncle and they'll want to do the right thing."

A donation from the Stillaguamish Tribe paid for the 5,000 decks featuring Snohomish County cases. The sheriff's office is among a growing number of other police departments across the nation turning to cold case playing cards to help hunt down killers.

Scharf and partner Dave Heitzman are investigating about 65 unsolved homicides and missing person cases.

The idea to use the cards came from a newspaper clipping left on Scharf's desk last summer. The detectives read about Florida police turning up new leads in unsolved cases by giving inmates decks of cold case cards. So far, three Florida cases have been solved using tips from inmates who saw the cards.

For their deck, Snohomish County sheriff's detectives chose 52 men, women and children who were killed or who disappeared under suspicious circumstances over the past four decades. Not all of the cases are being investigated by the sheriff's cold case team. A few cases being handled by police in Everett and Monroe are part of the deck.

Cases were chosen based on the likelihood that someone currently in jail or prison might have information, either by overhearing a confession or maybe even witnessing the crime, Heitzman said.

"As time has gone by, maybe they'll think it's a good time to let us know what they know," he said.

The detectives spoke with all the victims' families before launching the project.

"They all expressed gratitude that their loved one hadn't been forgotten," Scharf said.

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