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DNA leads to arrest in Grim Sleeper killings

LAPD task force traces evidence from a slice of pizza to Lonnie David Franklin Jr., 57, whom neighbors call 'a very good man.'

By Maura Dolan, Joel Rubin and Mitchell Landsberg, Los Angeles Times

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For well over two decades, the killer had eluded police. His victims, most of them prostitutes in South Los Angeles, had lived on the margins of society, and their deaths left few useful clues aside from the DNA of the man who had sexually assaulted them in the moments before their deaths.

A sweep of state prisons in 2008 failed to come up with the killer or anyone related to him. Then, last Wednesday, startling news came to the LAPD: A second "familial search" of prisons had come up with a convict whose DNA indicated that he was a close relative of the serial killer suspected of killing at least 10 women.

Working through the Fourth of July weekend, LAPD detectives drew up a family tree of the prisoner, then began analyzing all the men on it. Were they the right age? Did they live near the murder scenes? Was there anything in their background to explain why the serial killer had apparently stopped killing for 13 years, then resumed in 2003?

From that painstaking process, according to LAPD officials who requested anonymity, the prisoner's father emerged as a likely suspect. An undercover team was sent to follow him; they retrieved a discarded slice of pizza to analyze his DNA. On Tuesday, they confirmed that it matched the DNA of the suspect in the killings.

On Wednesday, police went to the South L.A. home of Lonnie David Franklin Jr., 57, and arrested him without incident, authorities said.

Franklin is charged with 10 counts of murder in the deaths of Debra Jackson, 29, Henrietta Wright, 35, Barbara Ware, 23, Bernita Sparks, age unknown, Mary Lowe, 26, Lachrica Jefferson, 22, Alicia Alexander, 18, Princess Berthomieux, 15, Valerie McCorvey, 35, and Janecia Peters, 25. He is also charged with one count of attempted murder, apparently stemming from the assault on the only victim who is known to have survived.

The killer was dubbed the "Grim Sleeper" by the L.A. Weekly.

As word of the arrest spread across South Los Angeles, neighbors and relatives of the victims began to gather near Franklin's home, and a contradictory picture of the suspect emerged.

Franklin was a garage attendant at the LAPD's 77th Street Division station in the early 1980s, according to city and police sources. He worked as a garbage collector for the Los Angeles Department of Sanitation during the years that the first eight killings occurred, beginning with the death of Jackson on Aug. 10, 1985, and ending with the death of Alexander on Sept. 11, 1988.

Franklin has at least four prior convictions, two for felony possession of stolen property in 1993 and 2003, one for misdemeanor battery in 1997, and one for misdemeanor assault in 1999, according to court records. He was sentenced to a year in jail for the first stolen property charge and 270 days for the second one.

On a tidy street of single-family homes in South Los Angeles where Franklin lived for decades, residents described him as a kind and compassionate neighbor who volunteered in the community, helped elderly residents of the block and fixed their cars for free.

"A very good man. His daughter just graduated from college, I believe," said Eric Robinson, 47. "He's a good mechanic, worked out of his garage. I've been here since 1976 — that's how long I've known him. I'm not pretty shocked, I'm all the way shocked."

Dante Combs, 27, said he visited Franklin last week to ask him to install a timing belt on his car.

"You needed your car fixed, he'd do it dirt cheap. He'd help you out however he could, cut your grass, put up your Christmas lights," Combs said as he stood behind the yellow crime tape that sealed off Franklin's block. "He helped all the elderly on the block."

In the afternoon, families of Grim Sleeper victims began arriving on the block. Many of the killings occurred not far from Franklin's home, and the family members said they needed to come to his home to bear witness.

"She was found on Western and 92nd, in a dumpster," Diane McQueen, 55, said as she stood behind the crime tape, clutching a funeral program for her niece Peters, the last victim attributed to the serial killer. "It hit my family real hard. I had lost hope this day would come. I feel a lot of joy it did at last."

"I wanted to see what his house looked like, what his neighborhood looked like, the place where he grew up," Donnell Alexander, 47, brother of victim Alicia "Monique" Alexander. "It was curiosity. What I found was that it wasn't far from where I grew up. His neighbors looked like the people I see every day. They weren't aliens. And he wasn't hiding in the community."

In announcing the arrests, Dist. Atty. Steve Cooley praised the LAPD and the California Department of Justice, which carried out the DNA "familial search" after Atty. Gen. Jerry Brown approved the use of the relatively new tool.

Only California and Colorado have formal policies that permit the use of software to look for DNA profiles of possible relatives of a suspect.

After years of futility, the LAPD stepped up its investigation of the serial killing case in 2007 when Police Chief Charlie Beck's predecessor, William J. Bratton, formed a task force to work exclusively on the case.

With so many years having passed since the killer first struck and the police only belatedly linking the long string of victims to a single killer, the team of detectives was left at a severe disadvantage. Investigators pored over old case files in search of important clues that might have been overlooked. They tried to re-create the seedy, violent world of South Los Angeles in the 1980s that the early victims and killer had inhabited.

One after another, leads that at first seemed to hold promise dissolved frustratingly into dead ends. But with public pressure mounting, the detectives tried whatever approaches they could, however seemingly farfetched.

They asked undercover vice officers to collect DNA samples from middle-aged African Americans arrested for soliciting prostitutes, hoping to identify a suspect.

The entire department was put on notice that members of the task force were to be summoned to homicide scenes that resembled the work of the serial killer in any way.

Most tantalizing was a 911 phone call an LAPD operator received in 1987. The caller said he had seen a man dump Ware's body out of the back of a van into an alley and gave the vehicle's license plate before hanging up. On the night of the call, the van was traced back to a now-defunct church in the area, but detectives at the time failed to pursue the lead aggressively, much to the dismay of Det. Dennis Kilcoyne, who headed the task force.

Kilcoyne and his team tried, 20 years later, to breathe life back into the investigation of the van. Detectives tracked down about 10 men associated with the church and took DNA samples to test against the suspected killers.

A visit to the retired deacon at his home outside of Macon, Ga., turned up nothing, as did a visit to a Florida prison.

The hunt epitomized the agonizing slog the detectives faced day in and day out.

"We never gave up on this investigation, not for one minute," Beck said in a statement issued by his office. "Our detectives worked relentlessly, following up on every lead they received. Their hard work has resulted in today's apprehension of this vicious killer. I am hopeful that the hard work of these men and women will bring some closure to the families who tragically lost loved ones during the last 23 years."