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Former Lawman Recalls Murder Case as Supreme Court Ponders Sentencing Technicality



Rita Dukes Smith, SurfKY News Director



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WESTERN KENTUCKY (12/15/13) — The sentencing of a Muhlenberg man, who pled guilty to the 1997 capital murder of a Muhlenberg County teenager, is being reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court. After 17 years, opening up the case to the nation's highest court also opens old wounds for those who believe the death penalty sentence was a matter of justice being served.

Greenville Mayor Ed DeArmond was operations LT for the Kentucky State Police Post 2 at the time of the murder of 16-year-old Muhlenberg South High School student Sarah Hansen. The veteran police officer and military veteran said the murder case will forever haunt his memory not only because of its heinous nature but also because the victim and her family were his friends.

"I got a call that night that a body was found," DeArmond told SurfKY. "(The scene) was just a few minutes from my home so I went there. Eddie Perry was there keeping people out, and I asked what the situation was. He told me that they had found the body of Sarah Hansen. I knew her and her family."

Hansen's body was found at Luzerne Lake in Greenville on the night of Jan. 25, 1997 after her family had alerted police that she didn't return home from renting a video at the nearby Minit Mart in Greenville.

The scene and the victim's vehicle provided physical evidence including DNA.

"We started taking interviews, following any leads we could and gathering evidence," said DeArmond. "We knew we were searching for a certain brand of (men's) shoe based on a piece of evidence we found at the scene."

A massive manhunt began through a joint investigation by KSP, Greenville Police and the Muhlenberg County Sheriff's Office from command headquarters set up at the Greenville Police Department, said DeArmond.

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Investigators searched dumpsters near the crime scene for garments or shoes that the murderer might have been wearing and questioned several possible suspects. Among those was Robert Keith Woodall, then 22.

“Woodall had an attorney and would not answer questions,” DeArmond said. “I was in the other room with prosecutors at the time of his questioning and noticed his shoes matched the ones we were looking for. I caught him in the hallway and asked if I could look at his shoes. They were indeed identical to the ones we were looking for. I confiscated his shoes.”

DeArmond said investigators began to focus on Woodall, who had been released from prison six months earlier for sexual crimes. Due to his incarceration, Woodall's fingerprints were already on file. KSP lab technicians were brought in with Detective Lt. Mark Mayes in charge of forensics, said DeArmond.

After fingerprints from the van proved to be Woodall's, DeArmond asked then prosecutor David Jernigan for an arrest warrant. Sheriff Jerry Mayhugh and Detective Mike Drake took Woodall for blood analysis to gather more DNA evidence, said DeArmond.

“Once I got the warrants, I read him his rights and briefed the news media,” DeArmond told SurfKY. “I called a midnight press conference rather than waiting until the next morning.”

Due to pretrial publicity, a change of venue was sought and granted for Woodall's trial, which was held in Caldwell County with Judge Bill Cunningham presiding.

Woodall pleaded guilty to kidnapping, rape and murder and was sentenced to death. In Kentucky, the death penalty can only be imposed in capital cases. Murder in addition to either kidnapping or rape constitutes a capital murder.

Over the years, Woodall's attorneys have made numerous appeals.

A U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a decision by U.S. District Judge Thomas B. Russell in 2009 in which Russell concluded that the judge in the 1998 sentencing should have instructed jurors to disregard the fact that Woodall didn't testify during the trial.

DeArmond believes good judgement will prevail.

Perhaps, the old wounds from a horrible crime will not be opened any farther, he said.

“I don't recall a murder, in all my years in law enforcement, that caused so much pain to just about everyone in the county,” said DeArmond. “I have friends in the Woodall

family, too. Everyone was so deeply hurt by this unfortunate incident.”


After the murder, state Rep. Brent Yonts sponsored the Sarah Hanson Act, which was passed into law. The law requires sex offenders to serve their entire sentences and not be granted early release.

The U.S. Supreme Court Justices heard comments from prosecutors and defense attorneys Tuesday. They now must reach a decision to either dispose of Woodall's latest appeal or to instruct jurors to not consider Woodall's silence when recommending a sentence.

A ruling is not expected until at least June.

Rita Dukes Smith
SurfKY News Director
With Contribution by Paul McRee
SurfKY News Reporter


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