

COLD CASE KANSAS

Cold case stirs controversy in Hutch: Childhood friend, uncle, and writer seek justice for Kelly Lynn Albright

By PAUL FECTEAU

Amid a whirl of autumn leaves and cold sunshine, two twelve-year-old girls walk home from school on the streets of Hutchinson, Kansas. The taller of the two wears a sleeveless, plaid dress and cradles a stack of books in her arms. She has short, brown hair, high cheek bones, and sharp blue eyes. Her name is Kelly, and she is usually so shy and soft spoken that her voice is just a whisper, but when she talks to her friend Rona after school, her voice rings.

Their chatter focuses on Central Junior High. Despite the bond she shares with Rona, Kelly keeps her home life private. She did once tell Rona that she wanted to go live with her father in Virginia. Kelly did not say why, but Rona can imagine. Kelly has to share a bedroom with her 14-year-old brother and 5-year-old sister in the family's little house at 1111 East 10th Street. Kelly doesn't have that many clothes, and the ones she has don't always fit well on her lanky frame--Rona's big sister Bonnie calls her "Kell-bones" because she is so thin. Rona does like Kelly's mother Roberta, whom everyone calls Bert, but her stepfather scares Rona--she once saw him with a bloody bandage on his head from a fight.

Rona, nevertheless, loved to spend the night at Kelly's house. The girls would do each other's hair and nails while listening to the Jackson 5. A few weeks ago, however, Rona's mother had come to pick her up and found the doors unlocked and the girls there alone. The family never locked the

doors. After that, Rona was no longer allowed to stay overnight at Kelly's. It didn't matter that much. They continued to be in each other's company almost constantly.

When they part, Rona, heading south to her home on 4th Street, says, "See you tomorrow."

Kelly smiles, revealing a chipped front tooth.



Kelly Lynn Albright, highlighted at top in this close-up from her class photo, and Rona Smith, also highlighted, met at McCandless Elementary School.

After a minute or two, Rona looks back. Kelly, a block away down the leaf-strewn sidewalk, is slowly making her way home through the bright but chilly September afternoon.

Rona Smith still cherishes her memories of walking home from school with Kelly Lynn Albright, usually accompanied by Bonnie and Bonnie's best friend Carla Goertzen. Rona had met Kelly in the fifth grade at McCandless Elementary School and by the time they began junior high in the fall of 1970, they had become best friends. Rona has tried to forget how that friendship was to be cut short that awful September.

On Friday, September 18, 1970, Rona got startling news at the breakfast table. Her mother told her that Kelly's mother and stepfather had come

by early that morning. They said that Kelly was missing.

At school that day, Rona looked for Kelly, peering into her classroom each hour only to see an empty desk. She used a phone available to students to call Kelly's house and was told there was no news. The process repeated on Monday, but the phone call ended differently.



Don Wilson placed this memorial placard down the road from the field where the body of Kelly Lynn Albright was discovered.

A friend of Kelly's mother answered and told Rona that Kelly had been found. Rona elatedly asked, "Where is she?"

"She's dead. They found her in a field. She had been raped and stabbed to death."

Rona blacked out.

She found herself crying in the principal's office an hour later. She does not know what she did in the intervening time.

After the funeral, Roberta offered Kelly's clothes--the plaid dress, the white knit top with a navy ring which Kelly had worn in their class photo--to Rona. Rona could not take them. For a long time, she couldn't bear to look at anything that reminded her of the friend she had lost.

As the years passed, the pain of that September lessened only slightly. In part, it was replaced by rage--rage at the man she was told had killed Kelly. His name was Glenn Davis. That was all she knew about him.

Though Smith had never met him, Davis was a friend of Kelly's stepfather

and had occasionally visited Kelly's home. Davis was seen washing his car at 2 a.m. on the night of Kelly's disappearance. In a 2005 interview with *The Hutchinson News*, Kelly's stepfather stated that information about Davis's behavior had been immediately reported. According to that same article, however, Reno County Sheriff's detectives did not receive it until "nearly twenty years later." Davis then became the prime suspect. He went to prison in 1995 for two Sedgwick County convictions for indecent liberties with a child. Detectives made arrangements to talk to him, but on March 24, 1997, he died of heart failure in the Lansing Correctional Facility, having never been informed of the interview that was to have taken place two days later.

Rona Smith was in her twenties, her time devoted to singing in a country band in Wichita, when she first learned that Davis may not have been guilty of Kelly's murder or at least not solely responsible. She was shocked to discover that some members of the family suspected Kelly's stepfather.

Kelly's murder remained too difficult

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for her to think about, but she didn't seem to have a choice. It continued to come up in chance encounters with old acquaintances, several of whom had information that Smith thought the authorities ought to have. Drawing upon her grief instead of hiding it, she contacted the Reno County Sheriff's Department and the Kansas Bureau of Investigation and shared what she had learned. In 2002, she went to the media. KSN Television devoted a segment on their nightly news to Kelly's unsolved murder. The report noted the suspicions regarding Kelly's stepfather but stated that the police had cleared him.

After thirty-eight years, the case remains cold, but Rona Smith has not quit. And she is not alone.

Wichita language arts teacher and playwright Sara Jenlink is at work on a book about Kelly's murder. Jenlink met Smith in Wichita in 1999, and they grew close, starting a prayer group together. In the context of a discussion of faith and hope, Smith talked about how losing Kelly impacted her life. Jenlink was so moved by the story that she wrote a novel based on it. Jenlink plans to publish the manuscript, titled *Killing Angels*. In the novel, the killer gets caught. Such has not been the fate of Kelly's killer, and that has made Jenlink

ultimately settling in Florida, but talk of her brutal slaying has always haunted him. Three years ago, he decided to devote his time to researching her murder. He has since amassed enough documents to fill two filing cabinets and spoken to nearly everyone involved with the murder.

After comparing notes, Wilson and Smith feel they have at least a fundamental understanding of the basic facts of the case.

News articles report that Kelly vanished from her house between 10:30 p.m., September 17, and 12:15 a.m., September 18, 1970. There were no signs of struggle. She was sleeping in the room she shared with her brother and sister, neither of whom heard anything. Wilson indicates that accounts of the whereabouts of Kelly's mother and stepfather that night have varied. In the 2005 *Hutchinson News* article, Kelly's stepfather states that he and Roberta were playing cards at his father's home a few miles away. The next day was Glenn Davis's birthday, and some accounts have him out celebrating on the night Kelly disappeared.

On Monday, September 21, farmer Calvin Troyer arrived to disc a field near



Wichita playwright Sara Jenlink, at work on a book about the murder of Kelly Lynn Albright, confers with Rona Smith on their research trip to Hutchinson over the Thanksgiving holiday.

Detectives from the Sheriff's Department responded to the scene which Wilson reconstructs as follows. Tire tracks indicated that a vehicle had driven down the lane and stopped. From there, barefoot prints followed by those with size 11 shoes led into the sorghum to a spot where Kelly's red pajamas were discovered. The shoe prints, moving in long strides, led back to the vehicle which then drove erratically, knocking down sorghum, as it returned to the main road. The barefoot prints led out of the field to the north and up the lane to where Kelly was found. Sometime later, another vehicle had driven down the lane toward the body and then backed out.

An autopsy revealed that Kelly had been sexually assaulted and then stabbed eighteen times with a five-inch long knife. Kelly's killer or killers had evidently believed her dead in the sorghum field, but she had gotten up, despite her stab wounds, and walked toward the light of a construction site to the north. She made it a short way up the lane before her lungs collapsed. She died clutching a white pillowcase.

After the murder, Rona could not look at Kelly's picture without crying. Now she talks openly about the horrific details of her friend's killing. She does not do so with ease, occasionally still tearing up, but she feels the best antidote to her grief and anger would be justice.

"When I pray about Kelly," Rona says, "I am praying for one thing--the truth."

Captain Steve Lutz of the Reno County Sheriff's Department confirms that Kelly's murder is still considered an open case. Anyone who has information can phone Lutz at 620-694-2735 or the Kansas Bureau of Investigation at 1-800-KS-CRIME.

To contact Paul Fecteau or to suggest a cold case for this column, e-mail him at paul@coldcasekansas.com.



Jenlink and Smith visit Kelly's grave at the Mennonite Church Cemetery in Yoder, Kansas.

unable to let the story go, leading to her decision to write a nonfiction account. Jenlink spent Thanksgiving weekend in Hutchinson with Smith doing research for the book.

The two women have now joined forces with a family member. Donald Wilson was Kelly's paternal uncle. He never got to meet her, having joined the Air Force before she was born and

the corner of Avenue G and Kent Road, about ten miles away from Kelly's home. He noticed that some of the nearby sorghum, between six and eight feet tall, had been knocked down. He entered an access road that the local kids called Lovers' Lane and came upon Kelly's naked body face down in the sandy dirt.

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