

The Justice Files: A pistol's past

 abc4.com/news/the-justice-files-a-pistols-past

By Marcos Ortiz

July 30,
2019



DIRECTV subscribers! Don't go another day without access to ABC4 Utah. Take action and call 800-288-2020 to bring back your favorite station.

LEARN MORE

SALT LAKE CITY (ABC4 Utah) – It's been over three decades since the bodies of three young women were found in Salt Lake and Davis county.

Back then, police claimed the murders of Christine Gallegos, Lisa Strong, and Carla Maxwell were connected.

The link? The same gun was used in all three murders. In 1996, Forrest Whittle was convicted of Strong's murder. He was sentenced to five years to life in prison. To date, Whittle remains locked up.

Despite Whittle's conviction Leah Gallegos never understood why police never linked him to her daughter's murder.

Back then, she remembered her daughter leaving their West Valley home late at night.

"I tried to talk her from not going out," said Gallegos. "I didn't feel good about Chris (daughter) leaving that night."

But she did. May 15, 1985, was the last time Leah Gallegos saw her daughter.

"She was shot and stabbed, so that indicates two individuals involved," said Jason Jensen, a private investigator hired by the Gallegos family. "The fatal injury was the gunshot which entered through her neck and out underneath her ear."

Back in 1985, Leah Gallegos didn't know that back. She went to work and then heard the news of a young woman brutally murdered near the old Derks Field baseball field in Salt Lake City.

After hearing the news and the description of the victim, Leah Gallegos knew it was her daughter. She left work and headed to the Salt Lake City Police Department.

"They put the file on the table with the pictures and asked 'Is that your daughter?'" she recalled. "That's how I found out it was my daughter."

One of the pictures was of Christine, her head bloodied by the bullet which entered through her skull.

"It was more than horrifying," she said holding back tears. "I didn't expect to see that."

Her 12-year-old son was home in West Valley when he heard a knock at the door.

"A news reporter showed up at our home in West Valley wanting to speak to my mom," said Steve Duran. "And I said 'no, she's not here. (I asked) Was that my sister they found? And he said, he backed up a little bit and he said 'I'll have to let your mom talk to you about that.'"

The 12-year-old knew something had happened to his sister.

"At that point, I knew and life has never been the same," Duran said.

From that moment on, Leah Gallegos took it upon herself to investigate. She claimed police wouldn't help.

"She was my daughter," she said. "They had no knowledge. They felt that she was a party girl. She was 18."

Steve Duran said he rarely saw his mother.

"She was gone all night looking for leads in the case," he recalled. (She was)investigating the case on her own."

On April 27, 1986, there was another murder at a convenience store in Layton. The 20-year-old woman was shot multiple times and police determined robbery was the motive.

The store clerk was later identified as Carla Maxwell. But her investigation went nowhere. In May, things changed.

There was a shooting on a Salt Lake City street near 800 East and Bryan Street. A 25-year old woman was shot late at night.

Police said Lisa Strong was wearing headphones as she headed home. The gunfire woke up the neighborhood.

Tina Shroyer lived across the street from where Strong was gunned down.

"I heard the shot and I woke up," she told ABC4. "I ran out to go see what was going on to see if my kids were alright."

The shooter vanished into the night. But she got a glimpse of the man and thought she recognized him.

It was after the shooting that police in Salt Lake City and Layton determined there was a link between the murders of Strong and Maxwell.

Eventually, police linked Gallegos' murder to that of Maxwell and Strong.

Ballistics from bullets found at the scene showed it was the same gun. Police said a .38 caliber handgun was the murder weapon.

Leah Gallegos claimed it was the first and only news she ever got from Salt Lake City police.

"They just didn't want to do it (investigate) and I don't know why," said Gallegos. "They had their theory and that was the end of it."

But the murder investigation turned cold. There were no persons of interest, let alone any suspects. Frustration sets in and the families of the victims turn to an attorney for help.

"They seemed heartbroken, frustrated and they felt like justice hadn't been done," said Ross "Rocky" Anderson. "They were getting blown off by (then) Chief Ruben Ortega."

In the second part of this series, "A Pistol's Past," ABC4 looks into the arrest and the politics being played within the Salt Lake City police department.

Note: Salt Lake City police department was emailed multiple questions about the murders, the investigation, and new theories but they have yet to respond to ABC4's request.

Copyright 2019 Nexstar Broadcasting, Inc. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.