THE UNSOLVED MYSTERIES PODCAST | DEAD IN THE DRIVEWAY

E68 Transcript

RACHEL DEMPSEY: Whenever I think of the night that my mom and I found my dad, I just think of it as very dark. Just all the different lights from all of the response vehicles. It was the chaos and the confusion and fear, and at the very center of it is just this knowledge of a huge loss that we suffered. To me, it feels like we've kind of been stuck in that night for almost 20 years now.

NARRATION:

IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON IN DALLAS, GEORGIA, A QUIET SUBURB 45 MINUTES NORTHWEST OF ATLANTA. 54-YEAR-OLD REGAN WHEELER WAS JUST RETURNING HOME AFTER A VISIT TO HELP HIS ELDERLY MOTHER WITH SOME CHORES ON THE FAMILY FARM. HE PLANNED TO GRAB A QUICK SHOWER THEN HEAD OUT TO WORK THE NIGHT SHIFT AT LOCKHEED MARTIN, WHERE HE WAS A FLIGHTLINE INSPECTOR. BUT WHEN REGAN PULLED INTO THE DRIVEWAY OF HIS HOME, HE ENCOUNTERED A THREAT HE COULDN'T ANTICIPATE OR IMAGINE. HE WAS ATTACKED BY A VOLLEY OF BULLETS — AND LEFT TO DIE.

I'M STEVE FRENCH, AND THIS IS UNSOLVED MYSTERIES: "DEAD IN THE DRIVEWAY."

RACHEL DEMPSEY: It was probably around 7:30. We arrived home and we were pulling into the driveway, and our driveway at that house was very steep, so much so that whenever you were standing at the bottom of it, you couldn't really see the very top of where the garage was. And we were pulling up and the headlights bounced off my dad's truck, and I remember I said, "What's dad doing home?"

NARRATION:

RACHEL WHEELER-DEMPSEY WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER OCTOBER 13th, 2005, AS THE WORST NIGHT OF HER LIFE. IT WAS A COOL, FALL EVENING AROUND 7:30PM WHEN THE FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD RETURNED HOME WITH HER MOTHER, PAULA, AFTER SHOPPING AND DINNER OUT WITH RELATIVES.

RACHEL DEMPSEY: My mom and I were not expecting to see my dad when we got home, because he typically, at that point in his schedule, he still would have been at work. So that was the first thing that set off alarm bells. As we pulled further into the driveway, it leveled off and the headlights went down on the ground, and we saw him lying there. And my mom screamed and she threw the car in park, you know, with the headlights still on. And she ran over and she bent down to touch his face, and then she started screaming, "He's cold." We were just in shock, and I was frozen standing there and my mom was crying, just hysterically. And then, that was when we ran over to our neighbor's house and we were just beating on the door to ask for their phone to call the police.

NARRATION:

54-YEAR-OLD REGAN WHEELER IS DEAD AND RACHEL AND HER MOTHER HAVE NO IDEA HOW LONG HE'S BEEN LYING THERE. THEY DON'T SEE ANY OBVIOUS WOUNDS OR CAUSE OF DEATH AND THERE'S NO SIGN OF A STRUGGLE OR VIOLENCE.

RACHEL DEMPSEY: It was just a blur of a night. The first assumption was that my dad had some kind of heart attack or I think he had had issues with a hernia.

NARRATION:

RACHEL STILL CAN'T ERASE THE IMAGE OF HER MOTHER'S UNBEARABLE GRIEF. REGAN WAS PAULA WHEELER'S FIRST AND ONLY LOVE.

RACHEL DEMPSEY: My mom and my dad actually met in church, and my dad's first opening line to my mom was, "Do y'all have Bible study around here?" So, they really connected kind of on that spiritual level. That was the basis for their entire relationship. I think it was about every Friday night, they would go preach, and my mom would make the refreshments and, you know, my dad would help out with the Bible study. My dad had probably the strongest moral compass of anyone that I've ever known. He was very passionate about preaching the gospel to anyone and everyone that he could. That was the most important thing to him. My dad was a prison chaplain, and he was certified to go into really all types of prisons in Georgia. So, he would do different things like preaching sermons. He would lead Bible studies. He worked with a couple of different prison ministries throughout his time. To him, people in the prison system, they were just kind of thrown away. They were forgotten. No one was really concerned about their spirituality. So, it was just a big passion of his to minister to these people that have kind of been forgotten by the rest of the world.

NARRATION:

REGAN'S DEVOTION TO OTHERS EXTENDED TO ALL ASPECTS OF HIS LIFE. HE WAS A DEDICATED FAMILY MAN, DETERMINED TO PROVIDE FOR RACHEL AND PAULA. AND WHEN HIS <u>OWN</u> FATHER DIED, HE DEDICATED HIMSELF TO CARING FOR HIS MOTHER AS WELL.

RACHEL DEMPSEY: My dad would definitely not even think twice about giving up one of his days off to go and take care of my grandma's farmland. He had an incredible work ethic. My dad worked at Lockheed Martin. He started out as a welder, and from there he progressed up to, I believe, he was an engineer, and then he was a flightline inspector. Aviation was just really one of his passions. You could see his face light up whenever he talked about it.

NARRATION:

GIVEN HIS STRONG WORK ETHIC, REGAN'S DAYS OFTEN HAD A PREDICTABLE RHYTHM AND OCTOBER 13TH WAS NO EXCEPTION.

RACHEL DEMPSEY: My dad's original schedule for that day was to help my grandma with the upkeep of her farmland, and then he was supposed to come home and get ready for work, and then head out to work. He would usually come home and take a shower and get cleaned up before he would head back out to Lockheed. And then, we would arrive home usually around probably four or five o'clock, and then my dad would arrive home later that evening.

NARRATION:

THAT DAY, RACHEL GOT OUT OF SCHOOL AROUND 3:15PM, BUT INSTEAD OF GOING HOME RIGHT AWAY, SHE DID SOME SHOPPING AND WENT OUT TO DINNER WITH HER MOTHER AND COUSIN. SO, IT WASN'T UNTIL AROUND 7:30 THAT THEY RETURNED HOME TO FIND REGAN WEDGED UP AGAINST HIS TRUCK, DEAD. SHORTLY AFTER, THE POLICE ARRIVE.

MIKE HILL: Deputies were initially dispatched to the residence with fire rescue personnel and the initial call dispatched was treated as a rescue operation where a heavy item has fell upon someone.

NARRATION:

LIEUTENANT MIKE HILL HAS BEEN AN OFFICER IN THE PAULDING COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE SINCE 1997 AND HAS WORKED ON REGAN'S CASE FROM DAY ONE.

MIKE HILL: After arrival, our deputies realized this was not a vehicle that had fell upon someone. They learned that Regan had actually been shot. Regan had sustained multiple gunshot wounds about his person. At that point, they determined that this was in fact a crime scene, and so the curtilage around the house and the interior of the residence was cleared for other persons. And at that point, crime scene tape was put up, and a log was started in an effort to contain this crime scene.

NARRATION:

THE MEDICAL EXAMINER PLACES REGAN'S TIME OF DEATH BETWEEN FOUR AND FIVE O'CLOCK — SEVERAL HOURS BEFORE HE WOULD BE DISCOVERED BY HIS WIFE AND DAUGHTER. THE AREA OUTSIDE THE HOME IS SEARCHED FOR BALLISTIC EVIDENCE, PRINTS, AND ANY CLUES THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN LEFT ON PROPERTY. BUT IT'S INSIDE THE HOUSE THAT THEY FIND A POTENTIAL MOTIVE FOR THIS MURDER.

MIKE HILL: Once detectives were notified and deputies learned that this was more than just an accident, they did learn that there was forced entry into the home and the home was in disarray. We did determine early on that it was apparent that Regan had interrupted a burglary at his home. At that time in 2005, Paulding County was growing, so it was a bedroom community. It was very quiet. Violent crime was something that only occurred every other year or so. We did have burglary cases where property was taken. Cameras were not common at that time. So, people would arrive home from their jobs and find forced entry into their homes. There would be valuables such as televisions taken, but something on this level was just unheard of at that point.

NARRATION:

POLICE DUST THE HOUSE FOR FINGERPRINTS AND LIFT SEVERAL IMPRESSIONS. UNFORTUNATELY, NONE OF THE PRINTS CAN BE TRACED TO KNOWN CRIMINALS. THERE'S ALSO NO SIGN OF FOOTPRINTS OR HAIR EVIDENCE. INVESTIGATORS WORK WITH REGAN'S FAMILY TO DETERMINE WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN STOLEN FROM THE HOUSE, BUT THEY HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THE INTRUDERS COULD HAVE BEEN AFTER.

RACHEL DEMPSEY: Upon first glance, it looked like someone was just ransacking everything, trying to find something to take that they could sell. They went through our cabinets in our kitchen, and I remember my dad's blood pressure medicine was all over the floor. They went through and dumped

out all of our clothing drawers. Everything was just in disarray. Because the house was ransacked, to me, it seems like a panicked and rushed situation on behalf of the burglar or whoever was in the house. It doesn't appear to me like they were specifically seeking something out. Otherwise, I'm not sure why they would have just trashed the entire house.

NARRATION:

AS THE INVESTIGATION CONTINUES, NEWS OF REGAN'S MURDER REACHES OTHER MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY.

MATTHEW BROOKS: I was actually home when I got the phone call, and I remember holding back the tears, my wife embracing me and telling me how very sorry she was, and we both started crying. I packed a bag and got on the road and drove to Georgia to see my family.

NARRATION:

MATTHEW BROOKS IS REGAN'S SON FROM A PREVIOUS MARRIAGE. HE'S OVER A DECADE OLDER THAN RACHEL AND, AT THE TIME OF HIS FATHER'S DEATH, WAS WORKING FOR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AS AN AIR MARSHAL. MATTHEW IS NOW A SPECIAL AGENT FOR HOMELAND SECURITY AND THIS ROLE GIVES HIM A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE INVESTIGATION INTO HIS FATHER'S MURDER. AS A RESULT, HE'S BECOME THE MIDDLEMAN BETWEEN HIS FAMILY AND INVESTIGATORS.

MATTHEW BROOKS: I immediately went and met with my family and various law enforcement entities, which would have been the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, along with Paulding County Sheriff's Department. The next day was filled with grieving with the family members, trying to make sense of what happened. There was just all of these things that were going on with friends and family and the police and the news media. It was a whirlwind the next few days, just trying to get it all under control. The house needs to be secure. Is my stepmom well enough to stay here? Who's going to be staying with her? Is Rachel in school at the time? What's going to transpire? The involvement with law enforcement, who needs to talk to us? What questions can we answer for them? There was also interviews that were done with the local news station. So, the next few days after that were actually kind of a blur.

NARRATION:

AS MATTHEW GRAPPLES WITH THE FALLOUT FROM HIS FATHER'S DEATH, HE ALSO FINDS HIMSELF ANALYZING THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE CASE, HOPING TO FIND ANSWERS TO WHAT HAPPENED AND WHY.

MATTHEW BROOKS: From my recollection of the subdivision, there was one way in, one way out. You come in one main road, and then there are side streets that go off to the left and right that end in culde-sacs. There was quite a few overgrown trees that were up the incline of the driveway on the left and righthand side of the house that kind of blocked the house, and then the front door would have been up a set of steps on the righthand side. The back of the house, which would have been, you know, very secluded, because it opened up just to the wood line, is where they entered. So, it makes sense that he would have seen a vehicle parked in the driveway, but not necessarily seen any obstruction or breaking into the front door. The truck that he was driving was parked on the lefthand

side of the driveway leading up to the garage. I've always wondered if he was parked in that certain area because he was trying to park around another vehicle that was in the driveway. I don't know if, when he was shot, if it was somebody that came out of the front of the house and engaged him, or if it was somebody that came out of the back of the house and ran around and got behind him somehow and engaged him. I also remember seeing where there was a bullet hole in the garage door, as well as it looked like there had been ricochets off of the truck into the garage.

NARRATION:

ONE QUESTION CONTINUES TO BAFFLE MATTHEW AND THE REST OF REGAN'S FAMILY. WHAT WAS A BURGLAR LOOKING FOR IN THE HOUSE? INVESTIGATORS SOON MAKE A DISTURBING DISCOVERY THAT COULD SOLVE THAT ASPECT OF THE MYSTERY.

MIKE HILL: Once the scene was processed by detectives and agents of the GBI, it was determined that multiple firearms were missing from the residence. We certainly cannot rule out the fact that the person or persons responsible for Regan's murder weren't aware of him owning firearms.

NARRATION:

AN IMMEDIATE QUESTION FOR INVESTIGATORS IS WHETHER THE INTRUDER KNEW REGAN OWNED GUNS. AND IF THEY DID, HOW DID THEY OBTAIN THAT INFORMATION?

RACHEL DEMPSEY: My dad had guns, but he was not very involved in gun culture. They were not a major part of his life or his recreational activities. So, he did have a gun safe, and that's where he kept his firearms. I don't know of anyone that would be aware of the guns that my dad had. He might have mentioned it to family, but he wouldn't go out and advertise how many firearms that he had.

NARRATION:

REGAN'S SON MATTHEW, HOWEVER, BELIEVES THE INFORMATION ABOUT HIS FATHER'S GUNS COULD HAVE SLIPPED OUT IN VARIOUS CONVERSATIONS HIS FATHER MIGHT HAVE HAD — PERHAPS WITH THE PRISONERS HE MINISTERED TO AS A CHAPLAIN.

MATTHEW BROOKS: That could have been a discussion that he had with whoever was involved in it, or that could have been relayed from somebody that he had a conversation with to another co-conspirator, that "So-and-so told me there were guns inside the house."

NARRATION:

THE FACT THAT REGAN'S MEDICATION WAS FOUND OPEN SUGGESTS THE BURGLARY COULD HAVE BEEN DRUG RELATED. AT THE TIME, LIEUTENANT HILL WAS WORKING ON THE NARCOTICS DRUG TASK FORCE, SO THIS WAS AN ANGLE HE KNEW A LOT ABOUT.

MIKE HILL: Based upon being in the drug task force, and essentially through the means of informants and cooperating witnesses in drug cases, our ears are essentially to the ground at all times regarding criminal elements and activities. Based upon the fact that many thefts, many burglaries, home invasions, things of that sort, many of these crimes, the common denominator is either a drug addiction or drug sales, knocking out competition, things of that sort. So, it would be common for a

narcotics agent at that time to get information on a burglary or a theft. That neighborhood that Regan resided in was very quiet. At that time, I was not aware of anything in that area. But, whoever burglarized that residence, we cannot rule out at this point that they were not fueling a drug habit.

NARRATION:

WHAT SHOCKS FAMILY AND INVESTIGATORS IS THAT THE ATTACK OCCURRED IN BROAD DAYLIGHT. DID THE BURGLAR EXPECT THE HOUSE TO BE EMPTY FOR SOME TIME? AND IF SO, DOES THAT SUGGEST THE BURGLAR WAS CASING THE HOUSE, WAITING FOR THE RIGHT TIME TO BREAK IN?

RACHEL DEMPSEY: My dad would keep his truck parked on the outside of the garage, and then our Nissan sedan that my mom and I would take to school was also parked on the outside. So, if someone was watching the house, they would know our schedule.

MATTHEW BROOKS: People breaking into houses in the middle of the day happens all the time. Criminals are, specifically if there's no cars in the driveway, are under the assumption that the kids are not there, and also, the parents are at work. So, it's a safer time to break into a residence instead of potentially breaking in in the middle of the night. And it is Georgia, everybody has a gun. So, it's dangerous for the criminals to try to break into a residence in the middle of the night. So, it makes perfect sense to me that it was a potentially targeted event.

NARRATION:

WITH THE MURDER HAPPENING IN BROAD DAYLIGHT AND OUTSIDE THE WHEELER HOME, IT'S SURPRISING THAT NO ONE HEARD THE ATTACK AND CALLED 911.

MATTHEW BROOKS: I would like to think that if I ever heard gunshots ring out in the small subdivision, that I would immediately turn around and call local law enforcement. Why that happened in broad daylight, gunshots ringing out in a subdivision, and nobody called the police? I don't know the answer to that. If somebody had just heard it and reported it, could he have been saved?

MIKE HILL: A canvass was done of the area in an effort to locate witnesses that might have seen anything that may aid in the investigation. They were knocking on doors and they were speaking to other agencies trying to find any common denominators, if you will, that may link this homicide to any other crimes. There have been leads that come in from time to time in this case, and we are still working to sort through those leads. Because the case is still an active investigation, we can't go into the detail of those leads, and that is so that we can preserve the integrity of the investigation.

NARRATION:

FOLLOWING REGAN'S DEATH, A RUMOR SPREADS THAT A BLUE SUV WAS DRIVING THROUGH THE NEIGHBORHOOD AROUND THE TIME OF THE MURDER. IT WAS A VEHICLE NO ONE HAD SEEN BEFORE, SO IT ATTRACTED ATTENTION. BUT THE SIGHTING OF THE BLUE SUV DOESN'T GENERATE ANY DEFINITIVE LEADS, SO POLICE TURN TO ANOTHER CRITICAL INVESTIGATIVE TOOL — A VICTIMOLOGY ON REGAN WHEELER. COULD REGAN HAVE BEEN IN CONTACT WITH SOMEONE OR BEEN INVOLVED IN SOMETHING, THAT MIGHT EXPLAIN WHY HE BECAME A TARGET FOR MURDER?

MATTHEW BROOKS: We never saw or heard of any interactions that, even to this day, raised any red flags for us. Even though he was in a union and, as we all know, that can become contentious at times, depending on who you're with and what position you hold, there was nothing in his lifestyle that I saw. Not too flashy, didn't seem to owe too much money, didn't deal with anybody that was sketchy at work, that I was aware of. No infidelity. So, there's nothing that we questioned that made us think that there was a possible motive that had anything to do with his work or his lifestyle.

MIKE HILL: Our victimology on Regan essentially led us to believe that no enemies were determined at that time. We've looked at his family, his close associates. There was nothing nefarious that we could determine about Regan. In essence, he is a true innocent victim from the victimology standpoint.

RACHEL DEMPSEY: I don't know of a single enemy that my dad had. I don't know of anyone that ever spoke ill of him. In the days and weeks and months following his funeral, the only things that we would hear were, "Your dad changed my life forever. Your dad helped me straighten out my life." Just all these very positive things that I wish he could have heard while he was still alive.

NARRATION:

NO ONE EMERGES AS A POTENTIAL SUSPECT, BUT ONE AREA OF REGAN'S LIFE <u>DOES</u> DRAW THE INTEREST OF INVESTIGATORS — HIS WORK AS A PRISON CHAPLAIN. POLICE BEGIN TO INTERVIEW INMATES AND PRISON WORKERS WHO MAY HAVE INTERACTED WITH REGAN. BUT THAT'S HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE, AND CHASING DOWN EVERY CONTACT IS AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK. YET, REGAN'S CONNECTIONS WITHIN THE PRISON SYSTEM LEAD MATTHEW TO BELIEVE HIS FATHER'S MURDER WAS FAR FROM RANDOM.

MATTHEW BROOKS: I believe it has something to do with him potentially being targeted because of the position that he held as a prison chaplain. With his work as being a prison chaplain, I was aware that he did go above and beyond, which if you think about it, is something fantastic to do as a human being, but also extremely dangerous, depending upon the person that you're dealing with at the time, because not everybody that you're dealing with always has the best of intentions.

NARRATION:

MATTHEW'S YEARS WORKING IN LAW ENFORCEMENT AFTER HIS FATHER'S MURDER HAVE MADE HIM AN EXPERT IN HOW VIOLENT CRIMES OCCUR, AND HE WISHES HE COULD HAVE SHARED THAT KNOWLEDGE WITH HIS FATHER.

MATTHEW BROOKS: He never expressed to me that he thought there was a reason to be concerned. I honestly believe that he probably never thought there was any danger in it. Now looking at it at, from an investigative standpoint, I definitely wish that I knew then what I know now, and I could have expressed my concerns to him as far as being safe. You know, don't disclose anything about your family, don't disclose about where you live, don't dress nice when you go in to talk to these people. Because that's things that I see in my line of work that I realize can lead to people being targeted for violence, being targeted for robberies. That has always sat in my mind as a possibility, that maybe he was targeted by someone that he spoke to. Maybe someone that he spoke to

communicated that information to someone else. Looking at the circumstances, that makes more sense to me than it being a random attack.

RACHEL DEMPSEY: Local law enforcement and the GBI have gone down, honestly, every rabbit hole that you could even imagine. They've talked to basically anyone that ever had any contact with my dad in regards to work, in regards to his prison ministry, and they've been very diligent about no tip is too small. My personal opinion is that my dad did so much good for so many people in his prison ministry work. He would even have prison guards approach him some weeks and say, "Hey, so-and-so inmate, they don't have just jailhouse religion, they have really changed." So I, my personal opinion is that it was not related to his prison ministry work. I've never had any suspicion that it was targeted. Everything, to me, has appeared more to be of a random attack. But that's not to say that there aren't things that we don't know about.

NARRATION:

YEARS PASS WITHOUT ANY NEW DEVELOPMENTS – WHICH LEAVES LIEUTENANT MIKE HILL AND REGAN'S FAMILY TO WONDER WHAT COULD BE LEFT TO PURSUE IN THE CASE.

BUT THEY HAVEN'T GIVEN UP.

MIKE HILL: I would give anything to see this case solved. That would actually be the pinnacle of my career. When you look at someone who is just trying to care for his family, and is trying to aid others in his spare time, it resonates with you as an investigator that your main role in this job is to try to find out who did this to this man. So, in this case, to our knowledge, the person who is responsible for this is still out there today. So, it's very, very important to us as investigators and GBI agents that we can find this person and bring them to justice. I believe that someone out there has a key, if you will, and they could potentially unlock this case. They could potentially do what's right for this victim.

RACHEL DEMPSEY: I changed in a few ways that night. I really lost a sense of safety and security that I think I had taken for granted, that I feel like a lot of people take for granted. Anytime I tell anyone I love goodbye, there's that flash of thinking that this might be the last time that I see them. My mom was completely shattered. It was really difficult to watch her go through that. She didn't get to grow older with my dad. She missed out on so many stages of life with him. She missed out on being able to coparent me with him. She just really... she lost her first love. And that's been a grief that I don't know if she's ever really recovered from. If I could say anything to my dad, I would just tell him that I love him so much, and I miss him every day, and I hope that he would be proud of me, and that he would understand that a lot of things that I do are in his memory and even in our brief time together, I learned a lot of lessons from him.

MATTHEW BROOKS: One of the main things that was running through my mind was the fact that, why hadn't I called him in the last several days? Why hadn't I emailed him back? So, of course that ate at me, and it still eats at me 17 years later. He was really good about trying to stay in touch. We were getting ready to start a family. And I had a home that I had just recently purchased that year, along with a very demanding job, I had all of these things that were taking up a lot of my time and attention... but, looking back at it now, I just wish I had made more time. He never got to meet my children. Ironically, the same week that my father was murdered, my wife called me and told me that she was

pregnant with our oldest son. So that was some of the best news that I ever received on one of the worst weeks I ever had. The family needs closure. Paula deserves closure. Rachel deserves closure. The investigators that have worked tirelessly over 17 years. Everybody deserves closure to know what happened, because there's a certain amount of healing that you can do over time, and realize that it will be solved, hopefully, at some point in the future, but hasn't happened yet. But there's still this open chest wound that you just can't close until you know what happened.

NARRATION:

CRIMESTOPPERS AND THE FBI HAVE OFFERED \$30,000 AS A REWARD TO ANYONE WHO CAN LEAD POLICE TO REGAN WHEELER'S KILLER. IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION ABOUT THE MURDER OF REGAN WHEELER, PLEASE SUBMIT A TIP ON THE PAULDING COUNTY SHERIFF'S TIP LINE (770) 443-3047 OR AT UNSOLVED.COM.

NEXT, ON UNSOLVED MYSTERIES:

TRENT STEELE: She left the house under her own power to go meet somebody she'd been corresponding with online. What happened when she got to where she was going to meet this person is the mystery.

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Unsolved Mysteries is a production of Cosgrove Meurer Productions and Cadence 13, an Audacy company.

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Thanks for listening to Episode 68 of Unsolved Mysteries