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# Suspected killer eluded cops for 20 years until he applied for a job

By Juan Ortega and Juan Ortega, Sun Sentinel 3/28/2019

Sondra Better's killer left a trail of clues — blood, fingerprints and DNA — and eluded detectives for two decades.

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"Our detectives worked years trying to find the killer in this case," Acting Delray Beach Police Chief Javaro Sims said Wednesday. "We had fingerprints, we had blood, we even had a possible description from a witness. But the person responsible for this heinous case seemed to just disappear."

But two months ago, Delray Beach police got a huge break in the cold case that had frustrated two generations of detectives.

Todd Barket, 51, of Brandon made the mistake of applying for a job with a fire and water cleanup company that required him to undergo a background check and submit his fingerprints, police said.

In January, those prints matched evidence Delray Beach police had submitted to a national database at the time of the August 1998 killing.

Barket was arrested Wednesday and faces a first degree murder charge, the department said during a news conference.

Better, who was 68 when she was killed, didn't need her job selling used furniture and knickknacks in a strip mall consignment shop.

But she wanted to keep busy. And that Monday afternoon, she was at work at the Lu Shay store, which used to be at 3175 S. Federal Highway. The coming Friday was to be her last day, and she and her husband Seymour "Zeke" Better were to travel from their Highland Beach home to New York to renew their vows.

Instead, Better fought against an attacker who repeatedly stabbed her neck, and beat her head. A heavy glass ashtray was shattered around her, and decorative marble balls were by her corpse, an arrest report said.

"She was violently killed by an unknown assailant," Sims said. "She was stabbed, she was bludgeoned, and no one deserves to die in that manner."

Better's body was found on the bloodied floor of the shop. She had defensive wounds on her hands and one of her fingers was nearly severed. One of the decorative marble balls held Barket's prints, police said.

Barket was 29 and lived in Lantana at the time of Better's killing. Since then, police believe, he may have worked in a nursing home and avoided trouble.

"He has had no contact with law enforcement, getting arrested or anything," Capt. John Crane-Baker said. "He had a minimal criminal history, mostly traffic citations. So he flew under the radar, even for 26 years before this occurred. It was quite surprising."

agents from the West Palm Beach office of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and detectives tracked him down, police said. FDLE agents began surveilling Barket and police obtained his DNA.

On Tuesday, the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Crime Lab matched Barket's sample to DNA evidence gathered from the consignment shop, police said.

Detectives don't know whether money was taken from the store, or if robbery was the motive behind the violence.

Delray Beach Police Detective Robert Stevens investigated Better's killing for a decade until he retired. He got to tell Better's surviving adult daughters that there had been an arrest.

"It felt really good," Stevens said. "There were some tears, there was some joy and of course now it's gonna bring some closure to them."

He said one of the couple's daughters kept a file of newspaper stories from across the country that described how DNA helped solve other cold cases.

"She was hoping that one day she would get that call," Stevens said. "And today was the day."

Better's husband, who volunteered at the police department for 15 years, is dead.

"He was a really nice guy," Stevens said. "He was devastated by the loss of his wife. They were just getting ready to redo their vows. That's a tragic way to end a marriage."

Stevens said the couple's children are in shock with the news, but will be involved in the case.

"Hopefully it goes through the courts smoothly and we get a conviction," he said.

Barket faces a charge of first degree murder.

He will be brought from a jail in Hillsboro County to Palm Beach County to face trial.

Sims, the acting police chief, and Crane-Baker thanked the FDLE and sheriff's departments in Palm Beach County and Hillsboro County for their teamwork and assistance in the case.

"It took us 20 years," Sims said. "Twenty years is a long time to want and ask for justice for a loved one."

Crane-Baker said that for victims whose cases remain unsolved, "this just goes to show that police departments don't give up. Even if it's 20 years later, we're still actively working the cases. So that should give hope to every victim out there."

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