

# After 27 years, girl's cold case becomes a homicide



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*The night before she was to leave, her friends had a going-away party for her. A friend picked her up to bring her back to the house when she wanted to stop at the convenience store. The friend went in to make her purchase, as she had already removed her shoes. He was inside only minutes (there were no other customers), and when he returned, she was gone. Her purse, shoes and money were all still in the car. She never returned to the house to get money, ticket or other belongings. Foul play is suspected in her disappearance.*

-- The Doe Network

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As a teenager in Brookline in the 1970s, Jean Marie Stewart was a wild child -- drinking, skipping classes at Brashear High School and dating an older boy.

"She was out of control," recalled her father, Robert E. Stewart. "I think I was pretty broken down, to be honest with you."

Jean Marie Stewart, age 11, left, and age 16.

In the summer of 1978 when Jean was 15, Mr. Stewart agreed to what he viewed as a last-ditch plan. He signed paperwork to allow her to move in with her boyfriend's family in Miami Lakes, Fla. Jean's mother, Mr. Stewart's ex-

wife, Jean Hahalyak, said she argued with her daughter for taking up with a boyfriend several years older but could not dissuade her from leaving.

Jean visited home twice the next year. On March 25, 1980, the eve of what would have been another trip home -- this time to celebrate her 17th birthday - she vanished.

That night, Jean attended a going-away party. She drove home with her boyfriend. They stopped at a convenience store. He went inside; when he returned, Jean was gone, never to be heard from again.

"She didn't want to be here," Mr. Stewart, 75, of Mt. Lebanon said this week. "She wanted to be there with him, all the way until her death."

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***Date of Death or Discovery:*** 1981-04-20. ***Estimated Age of Decedent:*** 11-20. ***Presumed Race:*** White. ***Gender:*** Female. ***Location Found:*** In a remote field at 6001 W. 28th Ave., in Hialeah. ***Scars, Surgeries and Other Dental and Medical Information:*** Complete and partial root canal. Decedent had an overbite.

-- Florida Unidentified Decedents Database

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Mr. Stewart and Mrs. Hahalyak telephoned police departments in Florida. All said they had not seen Jean and that, as an apparent runaway, there was only so much they could do.

Mr. Stewart also contacted Therese Rocco, then a Pittsburgh police captain who oversaw the bureau's missing persons squad.

As part of her investigation, Ms. Rocco sent Jean's dental records to Miami Lakes, nearby Hialeah and other places in the nation that spring. Nothing came of her efforts.

About 13 months after Jean disappeared, human remains were discovered in a remote field in Hialeah, a city of about 250,000 adjacent to Miami Lakes. They went to the local medical examiner's office and became Case No. 1981-01253.

They would go unidentified for 26 years.

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In Miami Lakes, another type of investigation began, one much more informal, by Luran Halleck, a Brookline native.

It was her mother who took in Jean. It was her brother, David Nolle, who was identified by Mr. Stewart and Mrs. Hahalyak as Jean's boyfriend, though Ms. Halleck believed they were only friends.

Ms. Halleck, 54, an artist who lives in South Carolina, said she was fond of Jean, whom she recalled as a headstrong, beautiful girl with modeling aspirations.

"She was a typical 16-year-old. The grass is always greener. Somebody else's rules were always better. She loved her family dearly," Ms. Halleck said. "They loved their daughter and wanted her happy. Jean was just the typical troubled teen in that sense, even with us. We had difficulties getting her to school. She'd walk in the front door and walk out the back door."

On the night of the party, Ms. Halleck said her brother chauffeured Jean in their stepfather's new Cadillac. On the way home, they stopped about a block from their house to buy cigarettes. Jean, who often didn't wear shoes, could not go in because she was barefoot.

"He walked in and walked out, and she was gone," Ms. Halleck said.

Mr. Stewart said he heard a slightly different story from Mr. Nolle's mother, that Jean and Mr. Nolle had argued and she ran out of the car when he stopped to buy cigarettes.

By then, the relationship between the two had soured, Mr. Stewart said. During a phone call the day she disappeared, Mr. Stewart said Mr. Nolle made it clear he wanted Jean to move back to Pittsburgh for good.

Ms. Halleck said her brother called the family immediately, and she and her siblings -- seven of them in all -- scoured the area to no avail.

"I was all over the place trying to find her. There was no Internet. I was calling medical centers, calling hospitals, calling juvenile detention centers. I mean I covered everything within 100 miles religiously," Ms. Halleck said.

A man who answered the telephone at Mr. Nolle's home yesterday said he was not available and hung up.

Ms. Halleck eventually became involved with volunteer groups that search for missing persons by trolling for information and passing it along to investigators. In March 2006, she started Porchlight for the Missing and Unidentified, a Web site dedicated to Jean's memory.

"I just couldn't let her go. I felt like somebody needed to be her voice," Ms. Halleck said. "It started me on a lifelong quest."

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*"Jean's parents have given DNA and we are awaiting the results of several different possible matches. The waiting seems to get harder, not easier ... sigh. Still searching for you, Jean. No matter what ..."*

-- Posting Aug. 22, 2005 by Lauran Halleck on [websleuths.com](http://websleuths.com)

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Dinorah Perry, a Broward County real estate agent, has a second job. She runs Missing Children International Ministries, a group she founded in 2004 to help raise awareness about Florida's missing children. One of the cases she initially reviewed was Jean's.

"Jean Marie's background really took my attention because it said a girl on her way to Pennsylvania, and I said to myself, 'That girl never made it out of Miami Lakes let alone Pennsylvania,'" Ms. Perry, 45, said.

"I knew in my heart that no one was working on Jean's case so I just started yelling at every detective I could find that would listen to me."

The case was reopened by the Miami-Dade Police Department. Lead investigator Detective Brigitte Robert credited Ms. Perry for her doggedness.

"Because you know what? If that didn't happen, this possible match might have just gone into the case files," Detective Robert said.

In late 2006, as part of a routine look at cold cases, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement asked Miami-Dade police to track down Jean's parents and obtain DNA samples. Detective Robert did so. In December, she was assigned the case.

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*"Jean Marie Stewart has been Identified ..."*

*-- Posting Dec. 5, 2007 by Ellen Leach on Porchlight.*

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Ellen Leach, 49, of Gulfport, Miss., works as a night stocker at a store. Her second job -- this one unpaid -- is to find missing people. She worked first with the Doe Network, then with Porchlight. She has known Ms. Halleck for several years and was familiar with the story of Jean, that she disappeared from Miami Lakes and had an overbite.

On Nov. 10, a posting on the Doe Network about unidentified remains drew her attention.

There was more information on the Florida Unidentified Decedents Database, a Web site with information from the state's medical examiners' offices. That information was put online in April.

"It mentioned the overbite and that's what caught my eye," Ms. Leach said.

She checked the mileage between Miami Lakes and Hialeah and saw the communities were within a few miles of each other. She faxed Miami-Dade police. Detective Robert picked up a phone.

"She called me 45 minutes within faxing of it there. She was excited about the possible match and was gonna get it checked into," Ms. Leach said.

Detective Robert contacted the Miami-Dade County Medical Examiner Department and provided Jean's dental records. Police had them on file, but Detective Robert could not say when they first obtained them.

On Nov. 28, a positive match was made.

"I was elated," Detective Robert said.

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*"Thank you all for looking for Jean Marie all these years. At least we know she is at peace and she can come home now. She was apparently found just about five miles from home, and just a year later. She is much loved and greatly missed. A long journey is now over, and I am brokenhearted."*

*-- Posting Dec. 5, 2007, by Lauran Halleck on [websleuths.com](http://websleuths.com).*

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Jean's case is being investigated as a homicide, according to the medical examiner's office.

Mrs. Hahalyak, 75, of Greenfield, said she's been told her daughter might have been shot, but she knows little more than she did decades ago.

"I just figured something bad had to have happened to her, that her remains were in the ocean or something," she said.

One of her current husband Eddie's late brothers was a Pittsburgh police detective and another was an Allegheny County police officer, and as the years passed she drew comfort from their assurance: "Police keep working. They never give up on anything."

"I've cried and prayed every day she's been missing. She would have been a nice sister for my other kids."

Detective Robert and Sgt. Ralph Nazario, who oversees the Hialeah police homicide squad, would not discuss the investigation, except that Sgt. Nazario said two detectives have been assigned to investigate. He would not say if they have identified a suspect or comment on past aspects of the case.

Mr. Stewart said he was glad to be rid "of the great pressure of just not knowing" what had happened to his daughter. "We want to see them get the culprit no matter who it is."

Who killed Jean Marie Stewart? That is the biggest question of the case.

But there is another major question. If police in Florida had Jean's dental records, if the remains of a young woman with an overbite were discovered only a few miles from where Jean disappeared a year later, why did it take more than a quarter-century for a volunteer advocate to put two and two together?

"It should have been solved in 1981," said Ms. Rocco, who went on to become assistant chief of the Pittsburgh police and retired in 1994.

"That was the question we had," Detective Robert said. "What happened? And we don't have an answer."

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*Correction/Clarification: (Published Nov. 19, 2007) This story as originally published Dec. 18, 2007 about the unsolved 27-year-old homicide of gave the wrong first name for the lead investigator, Hialeah, Fla., police Sgt. Ralph Nazario.*

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