

Police Sergeant Had Secret Life as Serial Rapist

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Decorated Cop and Devoted Husband, Jeffrey Pelo, Sentenced to Over 400 Years in Prison; Pelo Will Appeal

It was nothing short of a nightmare -- a man obsessively tracking women, sneaking into their homes, assaulting them, and forcing them to perform a bizarre "cleansing" ritual that washed away any hint of evidence from their bodies.

Bloomington, Ill., Police Detective Clay Wheeler spent two years pursuing the first serial rapist in his town's memory.

"I've seen more brutal things, more violent things, but some of the things that happened and what he would say and tell these girls as he's assaulting them, and I mean, I get chills. It just disgusts me," he said.

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Hot on the rapist's trail, Wheeler and his colleagues soon uncovered clues suggesting the perpetrator was closer to home than they had ever imagined.

Rapist's Victims Awakened by Masked Intruder

The rapist's first victim was then 25-year-old Kristi Mills, who awoke to a masked intruder standing in her doorway in April 2003.

"I was in shock, absolute shock. I looked at the door and saw the light there, and something just didn't seem right. And that's when I saw him," she said. "The next thing I remember is he was on top of me in the bed."

Mills said the intruder told her he was there to burglarize her, and that he didn't want to hurt her, but if she made noise, he would shoot her.

Wearing a ski mask and gloves, he seemed oddly calm and methodical as he bound her with zip ties and duct tape, she said. Then he slipped a pillowcase over her head and sexually assaulted Mills for 45 minutes.

"He seemed very assertive when he talked and not like somebody who's, you know, panicking. He seemed like he knew what he was doing," Mills said.

Still blindfolded, he forced her into the bathroom where she heard water running. "I started to panic and I thought he was going to shoot me in the bathtub," she said. "Just over a month from my 26th birthday, and I was going to die."

Mills was forced to take a long bath and told to wash carefully, while her rapist calmly walked about her apartment cleaning up after himself.

Then he was gone, taking with him all the evidence, including the bed sheets.

She was so upset and scared that when she got out of the bathtub, removed the pillowcase, and ripped the tape from off her eyes, she actually tore out chunks of hair. Though she said she wanted to run and hide, she decided to call 911 and report it.

Rapist Left Next Victim Shaking in Tub

Two years later, the rapist found his fourth victim, 28-year-old restaurant manager Sarah Kalmes-Gliege, who also awoke to someone coming into her room in the middle of the night. She was just six weeks away from her wedding.

"It was gun to my head, knife to my throat," said Kalmes-Gliege.

He made it clear he had been stalking her, and he threatened her loved ones. "He knew everything about me," she said. "What my sister looks like to what car my [finance] drove, my work schedule. He knew where I worked out. Pretty much everything."

The intruder sexually assaulted and attacked Kalmes-Gliege for almost three hours. As with Mills, he was careful. He bound her hands and covered her head with a pillowcase.

"The majority of the assault was spent just humiliating and demeaning and terrorizing me. I mean, it wasn't at all about anything to do with sex. Just devastation is what, how I felt."

Before leaving, as he had with Mills and his other victims, the attacker forced Kalmes-Gliege into the bathroom for a long soak to wash away the evidence.

"All I could think about was, 'I can't have someone call my family, my fiancé, my parents, my siblings and tell them that I have been killed six weeks before I get married,'" she said.

He left her alone, shaking in her tub and waiting hours until sunrise to flee.

Although she considered telling no one, she thought, "If I don't tell the police, this person is going to rape yet another person." So she called the cops.

Even through her trauma, Kalmes-Gliege had memorized details of her attacker, from his gait to the haunting eyes behind his mask.

"He had a very distinct way of walking," she said. "Kind of cumbersome. He had very distinct bright blue eyes. I knew I would be able to pick them out as soon as I saw that person."

Mills also remembered his eyes. "When you're staring into those eyes and that's the only thing you can see and the only thing you can focus on, they stick with you."

Police Hunt for Model Citizen

Detective Wheeler and his partner Matthew Dick realized this was a special kind of rapist; he was a stalker, a man seemingly obsessed with his victims who gathered intimate details about them.

"He's actually engaging in conversation rather than just the quick act of violence," Dick said. The victims described how he would talk almost lovingly to them, as if he was their boyfriend, before getting angry and violent.

And he knew how to cover his tracks. "It was very obvious to us that this was a sophisticated criminal and knew what he was doing," Dick said.

When the police turned to the FBI for help, they were told the rapist might be a seemingly model citizen.

"The one thing they did tell us that I'll never forget is that this would be some guy that everybody works with. They'll say, 'Naw. He couldn't do that. He wouldn't do that,' you know. And it'd be somebody that would be maybe a respected member of the community," Wheeler said.

The police had no prime suspect, until he stalked then 29-year-old Jonelle Galuska. She said she knew she was being watched, so when she was awoken one night by her startled dog, she immediately called the police.

At 1 a.m., Bloomington police officer Dave Zeamer arrived to find a man standing against the house, and in the glare of his flashlight, saw a man turn and walk away.

"I yell, 'Police. Stop, police!'" Zeamer said.

To his shock, he knew the man who turned around. It was one of his own ... fellow Bloomington police officer Jeff Pelo, his former supervisor.

Pelo was a 17-year veteran of the Bloomington police, a former policeman of the year and married father of three.

"You got that relief of, 'Oh, it's Pelo.' But then you are like, 'Wait a minute, it's Pelo. What's he doing out here?'" Zeamer said.

Once a trusted cop, now Pelo was a suspected serial rapist. "As soon as I heard that Jeff Pelo was stopped outside that house, that connection had been drawn in my mind," said Dick.

Mounting Evidence Points to Police Sergeant

Mounting evidence revealed how Pelo may have used his police training and access to commit the crimes and cover his tracks.

Detectives found that Pelo's police computer had been used to run license plate searches on three of the victims. Pelo claimed that someone else must have been using his computer terminal.

"Victims described how [the rapist] would pull some of the items around from his belt. You know, the gloves that they described were consistent with what police officers or security officers commonly wear," Wheeler remembered. It made sense that the rapist might be a cop, he said.

During a tense interrogation, Pelo denied "prowling" around Galuska's home and said he was only looking at the nearby lake. He was house-hunting, he said, rubbing his head and eyebrows nervously.

Then, a search of Pelo's home turned up a jacket and a ski mask made of fibers that matched the kind found on the duct tape used to bind Mills.

"Fiber evidence was what I think was the most important," Dick said. "About the only actual physical evidence to tie Jeff Pelo to these crimes."

The victims were brought in to see if they could identify him, first through a voice line-up. "The third victim, when she heard his voice, she literally curled up into the fetal position and pulled herself into the wall of the interview room," Dick said.

"If you spend two hours listening to that person threatening, degrade you, it doesn't take very much to recognize it," said Kalmes-Gliege.

Three victims also picked Pelo out of a photo line-up, even though the rapist had worn a mask during the attacks. But it was those clear blue eyes both Kalmes-Gliege and Mills said they remembered so vividly.

Believing Pelo was the rapist, Dick and Wheeler said he had betrayed the badge they held dear.

"To go to the victims and have to tell them that "This was one of my own that did this to you," Dick said. "It was pretty devastating."

Family Stands By Pelo

Pelo's family -- his wife of 20 years, Rickie, and their three kids -- stood by him. Rickie Pelo said the police jumped to conclusions.

"He was in the wrong place at the wrong time," she said. "He's explained to me. He's never given me any reason not to believe him. So I do believe him."

Pelo's home life was exemplary, according to his family. He seemed to be a devoted family man who volunteered at his kids' schools. He coached his daughter's softball team and was present at all sporting events.

Rickie Pelo describes her husband as being her kids' biggest fan. "In fact, my oldest daughter's friends would always joke around. They knew when her dad was in the audience because they could hear him," she said.

At Pelo's trial in May 2008, the most damaging testimony came from his victims.

"The women that were his victims, the women that survived his attacks, were all women that were willing to stand up," Mills said. "We took control back. And I think that's what really led to his downfall."

After six weeks the jury returned a damning verdict: guilty on 35 counts of rape, kidnapping and stalking. He was sentenced to 440 years, one of the longest sentences in Illinois history. Pelo is currently appealing, asking a judge to overturn his conviction.

"I just felt it was important to have him be accountable to me, to my family, to the public for the things that he did. I have no doubt that the person sitting in jail right now, Mr. Pelo, is who is responsible for every single one of these attacks," said Kalmes-Gliege.

But Pelo's family says the jury got it wrong. "I don't think he did it," Rickie Pelo said.

"There wasn't DNA that said it was him. There wasn't any hard proof to say it was him, so I just don't understand how so many people have come to the conclusion that he's a bad person," said daughter Shayla Pelo.

Rickie said she tries to shut out the present, fondly remembering the Jeff Pelo that she knew, the man she fell in love with when she was just 18.

"He had such a great sense of humor," she said. "Such a loving, caring heart. Actually, the first thing that I fell in love with are his eyes. His eyes were just beautiful, and I could just lose myself in them."

They're the same eyes that will stare at four walls in a small cell for the rest of his life, the eyes his victims say they cannot forget.

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