

Former police officer to go on trial in Harrisonville slaying - KansasCity.com

kansascity.com

Monday, September 9, 2013

The little red signs, worn by the weather after five years, still stand in Harrisonville yards.

Rich Sugg | The Kansas City Star Jeffrey D. Moreland will go on trial Tuesday in Cass County in the killing of Cara Roberts in 2008. He also faces trial in Jackson County in another killing.

< >

The Star is tracking every Kansas City-area homicide this year, to bring visibility to these crimes and to provide a place for the community to remember the victims.

Be part of the conversation, and browse our database, map and stats.

“Justice for Cara Roberts,” they say.

Tuesday is a day this town has long waited for. At 9 a.m. in a second-story courtroom in the Cass Justice Center, jury selection begins in the murder trial of Jeffrey D. Moreland, a former Grandview police officer accused of killing Roberts, 30, one fall day while her toddler son was at the baby sitter.

Her husband found her body in a full bathtub, the water red with blood.

Investigators got a tip about Moreland from the daughter of another murder victim. Three years after Roberts' death, Paige Hueser looked up at a billboard sketch of a suspect in her mother's murder and realized the man looked like Moreland, her old boyfriend. Police already believed the two murders were connected.

Moreland, 54, is charged in Jackson County with the killing of Hueser's mother. Nina Whitney, 75, had been found dead at the bottom of some stairs, strangled and stabbed 22 times.

On Tuesday, the courtroom of Judge Michael Wagner is expected to fill with Roberts' friends and family, who for years pushed for the case to be solved.

Moreland, who has two young children, will go to trial a single man. His wife filed for divorce in July, and it was finalized Aug. 30. The decree states that no child visitation plan “is possible at this time or in the foreseeable future.”

Roberts was killed in the middle of the day on Nov. 5, 2008, in her home in a quiet neighborhood. She had been shot in the back of the head. Friends and family described her as a sweet, loving wife and mother. More than 1,300 people signed the book at the visitation; the line stretched into a cold, rainy night.

Police were stumped. Leads went nowhere.

Then in May 2011, Paige Hueser was driving in Kansas City when she looked up at a billboard sketch of a man whom a witness had seen walking away from the home of her mother, Whitney, the previous October. Hueser had seen the sketch before. But not from this angle, not on a billboard.

“It hit me like a bolt of lightning,” she soon told detectives.

The man’s chin reminded her of Moreland, whom she had dated years earlier.

By that time, investigators had already linked the Roberts and Whitney murders. Both women were sexually assaulted in their homes; there were no signs of forced entry, and bathtubs in both homes were filled with water. But they didn’t have a suspect.

Detectives contacted Moreland and asked him to provide a DNA sample. He refused.

But then another woman came forward to report that Moreland had raped her after giving her a ride. The woman told police she feared he was going to strangle her, but she talked her way out of his Harrisonville home after the attack, according to court records. She later led officers to his house.

Police got a warrant for a DNA sample, which led to the murder charges. By then, Moreland had fled to Iowa, where he was arrested after trying to commit suicide.

He will be represented by public defender Jeff Martin, who did not return a call.

The Cass County trial is expected to run through Friday.

Last week, a judge was assigned in Jackson County Circuit Court for the first-degree murder case against Moreland in Whitney’s death. No trial date has been set.

In July, Hueser filed a wrongful death suit against Moreland, who once worked as a school resource officer at Grandview High School. In 2007, he ran unsuccessfully for the Harrisonville school board.

To reach Donald Bradley, call 816-234-4182 or send email to dbradley@kcstar.com.