

Investigators spent 18 months closing net on Gladstone murder suspect Lynn Benton

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Benton in jail booking mug (left) and on the job in 2010

Immediately after Deborah Higbee Benton was found shot and beaten to death her Gladstone beauty shop, investigators focused on her husband, Gladstone Police Sgt. Lynn Benton.

On Wednesday morning, nearly 18 months after the crime, U.S. marshals quietly took Benton into custody. He was arrested without incident after he arrived for work as a Greyhound bus driver at Portland's Union Station bus depot. Benton, 50, will be arraigned Thursday afternoon in Clackamas County Circuit Court on charges

of aggravated murder and conspiracy to commit aggravated murder.

More

Continuing coverage of the death of Deborah Higbee Benton in Gladstone.

Circumstantial evidence, discrepancies in Benton's story and the couple's deteriorating relationship all seemed to link the veteran cop -- and one-time homicide investigator -- to the vicious killing.

Ultimately, the case against Benton relies heavily on one witness, Benton's close friend and alleged co-conspirator, Susan Ellen Campbell.

Shortly after the slaying on May 28, 2011, a neighbor called police and reported that Campbell had talked about killing Higbee Benton.

Some of the story came out at a December hearing where prosecutors and investigators laid out the case against Campbell and put Benton at the crime scene.



Susan Campbell

From cop to alleged killer

Lynn Edward Benton began his law-enforcement career as a female jail deputy and ended it as a man disgraced by lies, misconduct and suspicion.

1980: Graduates from Richland High School in Washington state.

1984: Earns an associate's degree from Chemeketa Community College, focusing on health professions

1987: Begins law enforcement career as a Multnomah County corrections deputy

1988: Joins Gladstone Police Department as a police officer, then works briefly for the Beaverton Police Department.

1990: Returns to Gladstone and is promoted twice over the next five years, to detective and sergeant, an important supervisory position in a police department without lieutenants or captains

1993: Marries Jose M. Zonis of Brazil, an arrangement later described as a fraudulent action taken solely so the man could qualify for U.S. citizenship.

1995: Earns a bachelor's degree in business administration and communications from Concordia College.

1996: Divorced from Zonis.

2001: Registers a domestic partnership with beautician Marla Montgomery of Portland.

2009: Domestic partnership with Montgomery terminated; about this time Benton undergoes gender-reassignment surgery and legally becomes a man.

2010: Changes name from Lynne Irene Benton to Lynn Edward Benton and marries Gladstone beautician Deborah Lee Higbee Benton.

April 2011: Benton moves out of the couple's home.

May 28, 2011: Higbee Benton found dead in her Gladstone beauty salon; autopsy shows she was shot, beaten and strangled, suffering a gunshot wound, a dozen broken ribs, a lacerated liver and a fractured thorax

June 3: Susan E. Campbell arrested, charged with aggravated murder for "participating" in a plot to kill Higbee Benton.

June 4: Police raid home of Karen Benton, where Lynn Benton was living with his sister, seizing bags of material and impounding a vehicle

Dec. 15: Benton implicated in wife's death

Dec. 21: Benton fired for unrelated but potentially criminal misconduct, including the possession and viewing of pornography on a police-issued laptop computer.

Nov. 2, 2012: Warrant issued for Benton's arrest.

Nov. 7: Federal marshals arrest Benton in Portland.

In a telephone conversation recorded by police right after the killing, Campbell discussed plans to cover up the crime and said that Benton wanted his wife dead. Campbell's son told investigators he overheard Benton offering Campbell \$2,000 to commit the killing, the detective said. Benton was also a close friend of Campbell, who once provided in-home care to Benton's mother.

For more than a year, Campbell proved to be an unwilling witness -- and one who carried some

baggage. She had drug and alcohol problems and was mentally, physically and emotionally fragile. But something recently shifted. Campbell apparently worked out a deal with prosecutors last month and testified before a grand jury. An arrest warrant was issued for Benton last week.

Campbell, 54, is expected to enter a guilty plea Friday morning, according to the Clackamas County court schedule. Campbell likely would not be sentenced until she testifies in the Benton trial and the case against Benton is resolved.

"She is cooperating," said Daniel Woram, Campbell's attorney.

Chief Deputy District Attorney Greg Horner would not provide details about the plea agreement.

"It seems like a circumstantial case, rather than a direct evidence case," said Benton's attorney, Patrick Birmingham.

At a December release hearing for Campbell, prosecutors detailed how they believe the crime unfolded, disclosing evidence and presenting testimony that implicated Benton but stopped short of saying he took part in the killing.

Early in the investigation, Benton and Campbell were placed under police surveillance. They were photographed meeting June 1 in a restaurant parking lot near Clackamas Town Center, investigators testified. Benton and Campbell kept in regular cell phone contact before and after Higbee Benton's death, investigators said, but the record of calls and text messages on the day of the killing was erased from their cellphones.

In interviews after his wife's death, Benton admitted physically abusing Higbee Benton, once pressing his forearm to her throat and pinning her against the wall, said Oregon City Detective Brad Edwards, the lead investigator.

On the day of the killing, prosecutors said, Campbell went to the beauty salon and shot Higbee Benton with a .25 caliber handgun. When Higbee Benton, 54, didn't die, Campbell called Benton, they said.

Benton remained on the Gladstone payroll for several months after the homicide, collecting \$6,357 a month, but was fired late last year.

Gladstone City Administrator Pete Boyce terminated Benton over unrelated criminal misconduct allegations, including a fraudulent marriage in 1993. Benton, then a female, married a Brazilian man so he could qualify for U.S. citizenship. Investigators also found pornography on Benton's police-issued laptop computer.

After leaving the police force, Benton, who had presented himself professionally as a woman, changed his appearance to male and began to grow a beard. He went to trucking school and in September obtained a commercial drivers license.

The public disclosures were painful in law enforcement circles, especially in Gladstone. Benton worked for the Gladstone Police Department for 24 years and maintained a relatively high profile, serving for the past six years as the department's public information officer. Duties included working with news reporters and serving as the department's public face at community events.

Locally, police took a personal interest in the Benton case, said Oregon City police spokesman Lt. Jim Band. "Anytime someone wears the uniform, cops are paying attention," Band said. "We all want to make sure the truth gets out."

-- Steve Mayes