



Parking Lot Saliva Brings Murder Arrest

By: Caren Burmeister

Authorities were able to make an arrest in the 1998 fatal stabbing of a Duval County waitress by scraping the suspect's saliva off a parking lot after watching him spit, according to records obtained recently.

DNA test on Robert Erick Denney's saliva matched similar tests on hair and blood at the victim's apartment in Jacksonville Beach.

The spit was collected last summer outside where Denney, 19, worked in Easton, Md., and he was arrested Nov. 28.

Denney had been a neighbor of Corey Parker, whose body was found Nov. 26, 1998, in her apartment after she didn't show up for work at Ragtime Tavern in Atlantic Beach. She had been stabbed 84 times, the state attorney's case file shows.

The suspect's brother, Patrick Denney, is serving a life sentence in prison for stabbing an El Paso, Texas, woman at least 100 times in 1990.

Late last year, police in Jacksonville Beach and El Paso were sharing information about another similar stabbing that occurred in El Paso on May 29, 1999, while Robert Denney was living there with his parents. A woman who lived nearby was stabbed 107 times, but El Paso authorities recently said Denney is not a suspect in that case.

Denney, scheduled to go to trial in Duval County on a first-degree murder charge in July, suspected police were watching him last year, according to interviews and records in the case file, and was meticulous about keeping cigarette butts and other traces of possible evidence from them.

While doing surveillance on July 26, detectives watched Denney spit on the ground as he paced and smoked cigarettes outside his employer's back porch. Sgt. Billy Carlyle of the Jacksonville Beach Police Department noted where the spit fell. When Denney left work, he scraped up the spit and took it

to the FBI lab in Washington.

Police asked for a saliva sample from Denney earlier that day at the Easton Police Department, but he refused. In addition, Denney never drank from a bottle of water given to him, kept a cigarette butt after smoking with an officer and refused to seal an envelope.

"This is the third time you have tried to get me to put my lips on something, the water, the cigarette and now seal these envelopes," Denney told the detectives.

Denney's boss, John Garufi, told officers that Denney "became very paranoid" at work and saved his cigarette butts in a garbage bag and took them home every night. "One time, Garufi's son threw Denney's garbage bag into the trash outside the shop. Denney flew into a rage and dug through the trash bin until he found the bag.

Interviews with Parker's friends and neighbors show that she probably never knew Denney, who had moved into a nearby apartment about a month before the 25-year-old woman was killed. However, Denney's apartment overlooked her bedroom, kitchen and back door.

Denney was interviewed, along with other neighbors, after Parker's body was found. But he didn't become a suspect until former coworkers at Barbecue Ltd. in Jacksonville Beach called police about their suspicions in June. By then, Denney had moved to Maryland where he was working for J&B Computer Sales and Services.

Denney, the youngest of five children, grew up in El Paso and dropped out of school in the ninth grade. At first, Denney struck Barbecue Ltd. co-worker Kelly Susnowitz as "a lost soul, a young kid and hard worker who was just trying to make it in the world."

Denney's roommate, Ron Webber, who also worked at the restaurant, said he let Denney move in with him

"because he felt sorry for the kid."

Their opinions of him changed in January 1999. Susnowitz said Denney called her crying and hysterical. She drove him to work and he told her and the other employees that his child had been killed in a car accident in Texas and he couldn't afford to go home for the funeral. He showed them a baby photograph in his wallet. Within two days, coworkers raised enough money to pay for Denney's airfare to Texas.

Susnowitz called Denney's sister in Atlantic Beach about sending flowers. The sister was puzzled: "What baby? Robert doesn't have a baby."

"I was so furious at him," Susnowitz said. "A lot of good-hearted people raised \$200 or more."

Dane Hough, who also worked at the restaurant, said Denney was sobbing, shaking and sweating when he told the story.

"We were completely and utterly amazed," Hough said about the lie.

His father, Michael Denney of El Paso, said yesterday his son had struggled with drugs and alcohol problems from time to time but was not a violent person.

"My son has absolutely nothing to do with this murder," Denney said in a telephone interview. "He is not capable of it. Even at the worst of times he was never violent."

He also questions the saliva's suitability for DNA testing and how detectives managed to scrape it off what he called a rain-soaked pavement.

Denney's attorney, Assistant Public Defender Patrick McGuinness, declined to discuss the case. ■

(Caren Burmeister is a staff writer for the Florida Times – Union where this article appeared on the Metro Jacksonville.com web site dated March 22, 2001.)