MURDERVILLE: JUSTICE, PART 3

STILL UNSOLVED

Illustration by Mike McQuade for The Washington Post

By Hannah Knowles, Wesley Lowery and Mark Berman
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MEMPHIS — Shana Sier mother vanished in July 1999. Bernice Talley has heard many stories about what happened. In one, her mother left for Texas with a lover. In another, she fled because she owed someone some money.

Worst of all was the rumor that Talley's father beat her mother to death and buried her in the backyard. "Don't be stupid," Talley's father said when she asked him about it. But it strained their relationship, and Talley never could quite shake the fear that she'd been walking over her mother's body all these years.

Then, in winter 2019, she saw the drawing on TV. Darrell Little, believed to be the deadliest serial killer in America, had confessed to murdering a woman in Memphis in the mid-1980s. He offered police a hand-painted portrait: dark skin, big brown eyes, a shock of curly hair.

"That's my mama!" Talley exclaimed in calls to her father and aunt.

Darrell Little, left, in a photo in Memphis in the 1980s, and an image released by Texas state troopers in the mid-1990s, more recent, and disappeared in a July 1999 abduction in Tennessee. (Left: Courtesy of Bernice Talley)

Since Little began cooperating with authorities in May 2018, he has confessed to killing more than 70 people, by his count, across nearly half of the United States. Authorities have so far linked Little to 19 cold-case homicide files in 12 states — the pattern of a sadistic, a serial killer, preying on vulnerable women. Many were Black, or Latina, or sex workers, or both.

With Little now dead and its killing health, police across the nation are racing to complete a wave of investigations in reverse. They have the subject. Now they need to find the victims.

The FBI considers Little's confession credible, and has gone to extraordinary lengths to publicize details of the unsolved cases. The agency has circulated Little's 100-plus-page timelines and created a webpage with video snippets of him describing his victims.

Meanwhile, local police are searching dusty files for crimes that match Little's confession — so far with uneven results. Several police agencies say they have found no evidence that Little committed a crime on their turf. Other agencies have developed significant leads, but have struggled to close cases involving victims from the margins of society, nearly scores of cities whose disappointments often failed to trigger extensive investigations or generate thick case files holding with clues.

Bernice Talley, who lost her mother in the late 1990s, holds a photo of her mother, Shana Sier, at her home in Memphis. (Yalonda M. James for The Washington Post)

In Memphis, police quickly had Little in an ankle-locked body pulled from the Mississippi River in July 1999. But the old case file was conspicuously thin, and the campaign to solicit tips from the public rapidly got complicated.

After Little's drawing appeared on the local TV news, several families called, all claiming the woman as their loved one. One man, Anthony Jones, an, remains certain it depicts his mother, even though her body was pulled from the Mississippi in 1996.

"Everybody knew that's my mama's picture," he said in a recent interview. "He drew that picture just perfect."

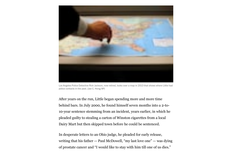
Since then, the investigation has dragged on without obvious progress, hampered in part by the coronavirus pandemic. Talley's family cup they have not heard from the FBI or Memphis police in more than a year.

The wait has been hard on Talley, who was just 3 when her mother disappeared. Now 24 and working as a warehouse "picker" preparing orders for shipping, she questions the commitment of Memphis police to solving her mother's case.

"I would try anything in the world just to have her ... just to have some kind of insight on what happened," Talley said. Her voice cracking during an interview earlier this year.

"I just feel like she should be able to be laid to rest, too."

(Bernice Talley recalls the moment she saw Darrell Little's drawing.)



Lisa Lopez, left, and her mother, Ofelia Dorse, in a photo taken in the 1980s and shared with the police. Dorse disappeared in Texas in 1983. (Courtesy of Lisa Lopez)

"There wasn't any cooperation"

After authorities in Los Angeles marked Darrell Little as a potential serial killer in years, they say they found it difficult to generate wide interest in him.

His name popped up when Mitzi Roberts, a Los Angeles police detective working cold cases, put DNA bits suggesting that two women found strangled in the late 1980s had been killed by the same man. DNA would have link a third victim to Little. An officials built their case, they were stunned by the length of Little's criminal history and troubled to discover that he had been a suspect in a number of unsolved killings nationwide.

"The clerk now makes two stops," Roberts said. "because there were so many opportunities for him to be locked up forever and he wasn't."

Law enforcement in other states began to reexamine old files and DNA evidence. But Los Angeles County prosecutor Beth Silverman, who handled the case, said she got little help from local police in connecting the decades-old homicides. "There wasn't any cooperation," she said.

For years, Little had followed a routine. A drifter and shoplifter, he pulled into town, stole merchandise, rented a motel room and picked up a woman to kill — often a sex worker, someone with a drug addiction or a vulnerable adult.he hanging out at the local bar.

But he was hard from to one - by Reputation only. Los Angeles shoplifting patrol, Ovelia Dorse, died of a brain aneurysm. Without her accomplice, Little began getting nabbed more often for petty offenses. Meanwhile, advances in policing technology alerted authorities to outstanding warrants and prior convictions in other jurisdictions, prompting harsher charges and longer sentences.

Darrell Little, left, in a photo taken in the 1980s, and an image released by Texas state troopers in the mid-1990s, more recent, and disappeared in a July 1999 abduction in Tennessee. (Left: Courtesy of Lisa Lopez; Courtesy of Lisa Lopez; Courtesy of Lisa Lopez;

Jessica Cross, Brandon Lee, Kevin Lee, Ed Lee and Jim Williams, Feb. 14, 2020. (Kevin Cross, Brandon Williams, Lee Williams, Jim Williams)

Police efforts

More than 30 of Little's confessions have not been definitively matched to a case, however. It's unclear how hard some police agencies have worked to identify his victims.

In Phoenix, police said they continue to look for matches but would provide no additional information. In Mesa, Ariz., police said they had found "no evidence" to support Little's assertion that he killed a 14-year-old Black woman there in the late 1980s or early '90s. And in Las Vegas, Nevada, officials said they had looked through unsolved homicide cases and found nothing to corroborate Little's claim to have killed a Black woman there.

Elsewhere, police say they have tackled the task with gusto. Looking through cold cases, they said, is often not enough.

In Savannah, Ga., for instance, police scoured every unsolved homicide from 1970 to 1990. After Little reported their only good match, Sgt. Robert Santoro, then a supervisor for the city's overworked homicide unit, recruited staff from a state criminal justice council to help dig through thousands of death certificates in a tiny break room at the local coroner's office.

Within days, a colleague texted him about Frances Campbell, a 23-year-old Black woman whose body was found on a pile of trash in 1989. Late last year, Little was indicted based on a confession that included details matching the circumstances of Campbell's death.

Samuel Little was interrogated out of his home in Sacramento, Calif., in 2012 by Kevin Cross, then a detective with the Sacramento Police Department. (Courtesy of Kevin Cross)

Failing to exhume all leads would have been "a squandered opportunity," said Santoro, who has since moved to another police department. "We have a guy who's saying: 'Look, this is what happened. I did it.' And, really, to a point that's highly credible in my mind."

"If we don't do everything in our power to figure this out, that's doing a disservice to the victim," he said. "It's there. We just have to find it."

In Los Angeles, police have 17 cold confessions under investigation, most not yet tied to a specific victim. He also confessed to the three killings for which he was convicted in 2014. Roberts, the Los Angeles detective who first linked to those killings, said police have "very strong" evidence that Little committed more crimes, but are not yet able to say with confidence. "This is him, this is who."

The task is complicated, she said, because as many as half a dozen serial killers using similar methods were operating in Los Angeles in the 1980s. The city "was like a killing field," she said. "It was like an open hunting zone elsewhere." Last year, she and other investigators took Little on a ride along to see if he could identify the locations of his crimes.

In Fort Myers, Fla., police detective Matt Langton learn that the woman Little claims to have killed may never have come to the attention of authorities.

"Is it possible we never found the body?" she said. "It's something to think that we may never resolve this."

Closure for the victims' families is not the only thing at stake. In Florida, at least two men have served time for murders now linked to Little.

The 1977 Miami killing of Dorothy Gibson, a Black 17-year-old, was initially pinned on Jerry Frank Townsend, a Black 27-year-old with the mental capacity of an 8-year-old. Accused of six murders and a rape, Townsend pleaded guilty to avoid the electric chair. Townsend spent 23 years in prison before the cases against him fell apart. He was released in 2001. Last month, Miami authorities identified Little as Gibson's killer.

Little is also a convincing match for the rape murder of Willie Mae Brito, a Black woman, near Tallahassee, according to a member of law enforcement who has worked on the case but who was not authorized to discuss it publicly. Eddie Dorell Harris, a Black, homeless man, pleaded no contest to manslaughter in the case and was released after multiple exonerations in a mental hospital, according to his attorney and court documents.

Florida state police have reopened the murder investigation, and Assistant State Attorney Eddie Evans confirmed that Little's statements prompted the reexamination.

Ted Bundy's photograph, left, compared with Samuel Little's mug shot from Kansas and Texas in the trial of Little's disappearance. (Ken Ballard for The Washington Post)

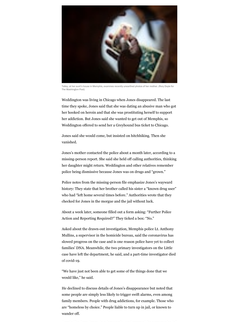
Multiple matches

In Memphis, the investigation into Little's confession moved rapidly at first.

Little said he had picked up a Black woman in a hotel parking lot, strangled her in his car, threw her in the trunk and dumped her in the Mississippi River to rathy. Investigators have found that Little's claim can be off by as much as a decade, so they put more stock in his memory for crucial details.

Across the river in Arkansas, Crittenden County Sheriff's Lt. Darrell Powell realized he had a match: a woman pulled from a log on July 28, 1990. She was wearing exactly what Little described — blue jeans and a maroon shirt with a ruffled collar, according to a national database of unidentified people, then found on the body: condoms, a vial of pepper and bullets.

The remains were too decomposed to allow for fingerprinting, police said. The Arkansas State Crime Laboratory could not even say with confidence that the woman had been murdered. The case file on the body was paper-thin when Powell retrieved it in 2018.



Sonia Bradgham, whose sisters or girlfriend photos sent for genealogists, Hazel Bridgham, right, and Ida Mae Bridgham, middle, in Tex., circa 1950. (Courtesy of Sonia Bradgham)

Nowadays, he said, the file on a death like that would be an inch thick.

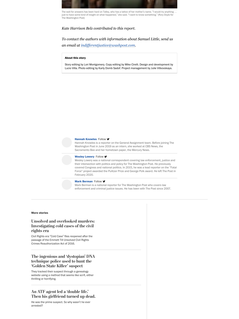
"I'm not saying that they did anything wrong," Powell added. "I'm just saying" — he pressed — "that was my case file."

When the local TV news broadcast Little's painting, multiple families called about their dead or missing relatives, propelling the investigation and raising questions about how thoroughly local law enforcement looked for leads in rape.

Authorities said it is highly unlikely that Anthony Jones's mother, Priscilla Bentley, is a match. Bentley, who was pulled from the river in 1968, had been stabbed, an autopsy found. Little has said he strangled his victims.

But police confirmed that multiple people remain under consideration, including Valley's mother, Zona Jones.

Jones vanished on July 13, 1990, according to a missing person report filed by family — a little more than two weeks before police discovered the woman in the maroon blouse.



Valley, at the age of 3 (lower) in Memphis, seemingly carefree amid the chaos of her mother. (Ron Dejesus for The Washington Post)

Wooldridge was living in Chicago when Jones disappeared. The last time they spoke, Jones said that she was dating an abusive man who got her hooked on heroin and that she was prostituting herself to support her addiction. But Jones said she wanted to get out of Memphis, so Wooldridge offered to send her a Greyhound bus ticket to Chicago.

Jones said she would come, but instead on Mobbillang. Then she vanished.

Jones's mother contacted the police about a month later, according to a missing person report. She said she held off calling authorities, thinking her daughter might return. Wooldridge and other relatives remember police being dismissive because Jones was on drugs and "grown."

Police notes from the missing person file emphasize Jones's surprised history. They note that her brother called her sister a "known drug user" who had "left home several times before." Authorities wrote that they checked for Jones in the morgue and the jail without luck.

About a week later, someone filled out a form asking "Further Police Action and Reporting Required?" They ticked a box: "No."

Asked about the dozen cold investigation, Memphis police Lt. Anthony Mullins, a supervisor in the homicide bureau, said the coronavirus has slowed progress on the case and is one reason police have yet to collect familial DNA. Meanwhile, the two primary investigators on the Little case have left the department, he said, and a part-time investigator died of covid-19.

"We have just not been able to get some of the things done that we would like," he said.

He declined to discuss details of Jones's disappearance but noted that some people are simply less likely to trigger swift photos, even among family members. People with drug addictions, for example. Those who are "hesitant by choice." People liable to turn up in jail, or known to wander off.

People like Zona Jones, in other words. And many of the women who fell prey to Samuel Little.

The road by Jonesboro Drive-In Theater, left, near a bend in Valley of the Vistula in Lamar, Tn. Police are looking for information about the woman who was found in a ditch in 1990 and identified by Samuel Little. (Ron Dejesus for The Washington Post)

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