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A suspect brought back

By LARRY WELBORN

The Orange County Register

Part 8:

The re-exhumation of Linda Cumming's remains in July 2004 failed to yield the sought-after DNA. But prosecutors and investigators remained optimistic.

Along the way, they developed other possibilities of proving that Linda had been killed inside Apartment 8 at The Aladdin in Santa Ana.

But to do it, they would have to rely on circumstantial evidence.

During 30 years of reporting, I knew some of the circumstances.

But was there enough to prove Linda had been killed?

Former apartment manager Louis Wiechecki, also known as Louie, was the last person to see Linda alive, on Jan. 23, 1974. He was the one who found her body the next day.

His whereabouts are unaccounted for from 1 to 3 the next morning, when he said he was answering calls at the firehouse so the firefighters could get some sleep.

And five weeks after Linda died, Louie was arrested for killing Marion Camilla Morgan in the same apartment complex. Both women died of strangulation. Later that year, Wiechecki was convicted of voluntary manslaughter for Morgan's death and was sent to prison.

I knew that detectives in 1974 discovered that Louie had a [\\$500 personal check](#) from Linda Cummings. A teller at the Bank of America on 17th Street at the time refused to cash the check, saying the signature was irregular.

If Louie wanted the \$500, all he had to do was bring Linda Cummings to the bank and have her verify her signature, the bank employee said.

Problem was, Linda was dead.

Months later in 1974, when Sandy Wiechecki was interviewed after the

Morgan killing, she told authorities that her husband first said he had forged the check, then changed his story and said Linda loaned him the money.

But were those circumstances enough to sustain a murder prosecution? They weren't in 1974.

I continued to pursue the story for 30 years because I was haunted by Linda's image in her driver's license photo, and because of that teary interview I had with her stepmother in the summer of '74.

Prosecutor Larry Yellin continued to pursue a case because of a different motivation. He promised over Linda's grave in 2004 that he would take this case all the way.

Now, in early 2005, we both became aware of some new circumstances.

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Cold case District Attorney's Office detectives Ed Berakovich and Bob Sayne went back and interviewed - as I had earlier - all of the homicide detectives who were at the scene on Jan. 24, 1974, after Louie reported he had found Linda's body hanging from a rope.

Most, including veteran detective Bill Bruns, had also been at the Aladdin Apartments five weeks later when Wiechecki was arrested on suspicion of having killed Marion Morgan.

In 2004, the now-retired Bruns shared with Berakovich an interesting observation.

That rope that tied the lumpy blue blanket around Morgan's body?

[Brun](#)s said it looked identical to the clothesline that had been knotted around Linda's neck.

Perhaps even more interesting, Bruns said, was that the knot on both ropes had some of the same characteristics. I remember that Sandy told me back in 1998 that her former husband had a favorite knot, a unique knot, a nonslip kind of knot. She said he called it a fireman's knot.

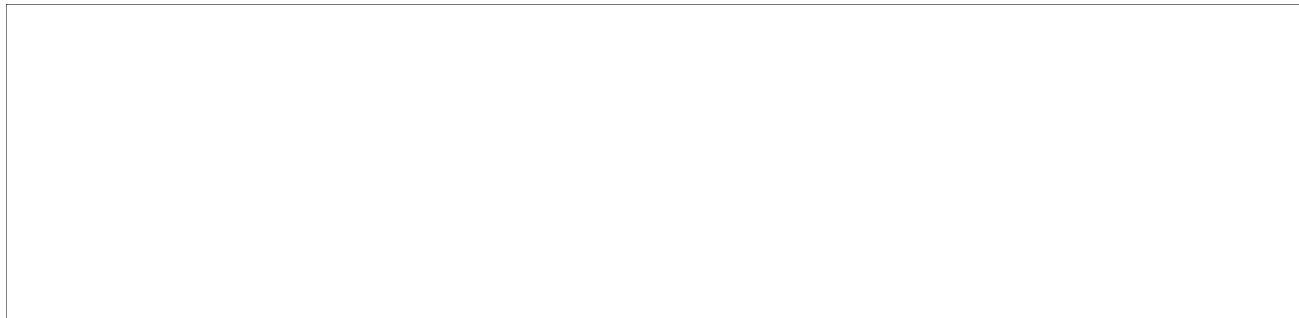
And then there was Dr. Dean Hawley.

He is a renowned pathologist from Indiana University. His expertise is strangulation and asphyxiation, and he has been called as an expert witness in dozens of cases.

When Hawley was in Orange County to testify in another case in January 2005, Yellin cornered him and asked about Linda Cummings.

After studying the old autopsy reports, Hawley concluded that Linda did not die from hanging. It was more likely, [Hawley said, that she died by pressure being applied by someone's hands.](#)

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And although detectives in 2004 could not find a rape kit from the first exhumation in 1974, cold case investigative supervisor Helen Moreno's contact, Mike Reidling, did find photos of that autopsy.

Hawley took a thorough look at those photos. He concentrated on those clearly visible ligature marks around her neck. Those marks – striations caused when blood pooled around the rope as Linda hung in Apartment 8 – were made postmortem, according to Hawley.

After death.

That means, Hawley believes, that Linda Cummings was already dead when someone tied her in the middle of the rope, between the closet rod and the door hinge across the room.

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Are these circumstances enough to prosecute Louis Stanley Wiechecki for murder?

Yellin thinks so. And so do his bosses. After reviewing the investigative files, Yellin was given the green light to seek an arrest warrant for Wiechecki.

On Nov. 17, Berakovich and Santa Ana homicide investigator Dean Fulcher knocked on the door of the Henderson, Nev., home owned by David Stanley, who is also known as Louis Wiechecki.

After a 45-minute talk, Berakovich and Fulcher left. And then the Henderson police SWAT team stormed in and arrested Stanley on a no-bail arrest warrant from Orange County. He faces murder charges in the death of Linda Cummings on Jan. 24, 1974.

I was there when Wiechecki/Stanley was marched out of his home in white plastic handcuffs. He later declined to be interviewed.

While Orange County authorities searched his home near the golf community of The Revere at Anthem, I took my reporter's notebook and canvassed his neighbors.

They love him.

They said he did not drink and was trying to quit a smoking habit that began when he was 8. They said he helped organize a Neighborhood Watch and volunteered at a local hospice to provide company to terminally ill patients.

They said he and his second wife, Sue, were the kind and caring catalysts of a close-knit group of seniors who were attracted to Henderson by warm weather and inexpensive housing.

Next-door neighbor Mary McCullough said Lou - as he was called in Henderson - was attuned to the needs of others.

She recalled when another man was rude to her. Lou, she said, told her

that it did not matter what the man thought – he knew she was a terrific person.

"I saw kindness in him," McCullough said.

But what most neighbors wanted to talk about was how Lou treated his wife.

Sue and Lou, the neighbors said, were as close as any couple they had ever known. They gave bridge lessons to the newcomers on the block. And invited couples over for Thanksgiving dinner. They had the entire block over for a party when Lou turned 60 in 2004. There was even an Elvis impersonator.

"He could give many a husband lessons in how to be a husband," neighbor Caryl Schoonover said.

Did neighbors believe that Stanley could be capable of murder?

Not a chance, they said. Not the Lou they knew.

And then I got the opportunity to interview Sue Stanley, the former Mensa club member who met and got married to Lou when he was serving a manslaughter sentence at San Quentin prison.

She was breathing heavily and too shaken up to sit down when she invited me into her house a short time after her husband was arrested. She said the SWAT team had ordered both to the floor with automatic weapons pointed at their heads.

It was a complete surprise, she said.

Her husband is "the most wonderful man I've ever met," she said, who always "treats me like a princess."

Sue told me that her husband spoke of Linda Cummings only once in 29 years, and that was to say only that there was a woman in the apartment where he worked who committed suicide, and authorities tried to connect him to her death.

"I just think that whatever evidence they've dug up – whatever all of this is about – I just hope that the person he has become counts," she said.

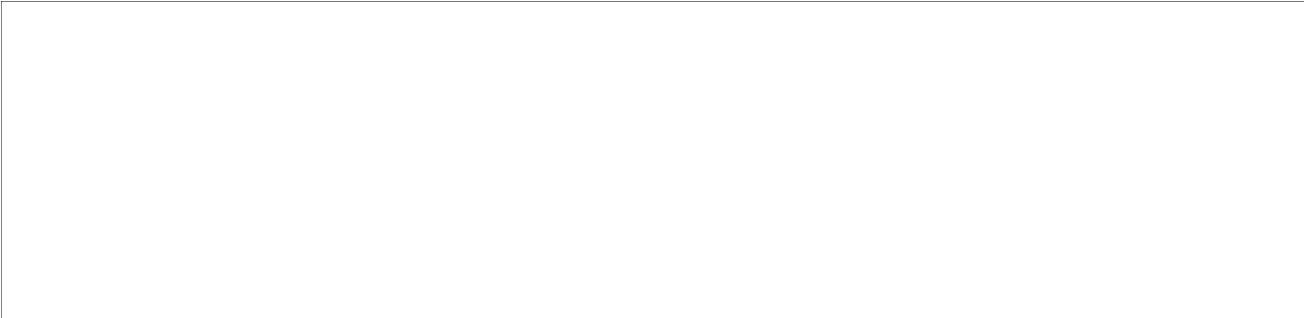
Stanley – or Wiechecki – got his one phone call when he was booked into the Henderson jail. He used it to call Sue, to make sure she was alright.

My second story about the death of Linda Cummings ran on the front page of the Register on Nov. 18, more than three decades after the first.

The headline read, "After 31 years, a knock at the door."

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Stanley, or Wiechecki, was held without bail for a week in Henderson, Nev., before he waived extradition and was taken to Santa Ana. On Wednesday, he pleaded not guilty.

"He didn't do it," insists John Barnett, the lawyer Wiechecki's wife hired to defend him. Barnett - like Ron Butler, who represented him in 1974 - is considered one of the best criminal-defense lawyers in the county.

In a 25-page motion to have reasonable bail set, Barnett said that Wiechecki suffers from emphysema, sleep apnea, eczema and a serious heart condition controlled by a pacemaker.

Wiechecki, Barnett added, has lived an exemplary life since his release from prison in 1977, rendered humanitarian service as a community volunteer, saved the life of a policeman and received an award for valor for doing so.

To bolster his pitch for bail, Barnett submitted letters from 44 of Wiechecki's friends, neighbors and relatives.

Each letter described Lou Stanley as a terrific person who for the last 30 years of his life cared about others first, was devoted to his wife and unselfishly cared for his ailing mother-in-law, among other things.

The letters described a man who couldn't be more different from the Louie Wiechecki who for the first 30 years of his life was in and out of reform schools and prison, and who had been convicted of manslaughter for the death of Marion Morgan.

His supporters wrote that Lou had volunteered for the Red Cross, for an organization called Operation React that assists police during emergencies, at Nevada hospices for people with terminal illnesses, and by tutoring underprivileged children. Lou and his wife also adopted a needy family every Christmas, providing food and presents.

"From the beginning, almost 30 years ago, Lou has been dedicated to Sue's happiness and well being," wrote Carole L. Giles, Sue Stanley's cousin.

When neighbor William Berryhill of Henderson had a severe heart attack in 2004, Lou came to visit the next day and almost every day after that. "Lou is always willing to help and be of service," Berryhill wrote. "He cares."

"I simply cannot imagine that Lou could do anything to hurt anyone," wrote former neighbor Shirley Rumack of San Mateo. "He is the most even-tempered and kind person I know."

Barnett said because of that support, his client's clean record for the past 30 years and his medical condition, Wiechecki deserved to be released on bail.

Superior Court Commissioner Cheryl L. Leininger on Wednesday released Wiechecki on \$750,000 bail and ordered him to wear an ankle bracelet that lets authorities track him using global positioning

satellites. He was ordered to stay near his home in Henderson, except to travel to Orange County for court appearances.

Sue Stanley quickly posted bail for her husband of nearly 30 years, and Lou was released from custody.

Last week Barnett told me it's unfair to bring charges 30 years later. "Your ability to defend yourself is diminished dramatically after time," he said.

Barnett said that the law allows for prosecutions years after a homicide occurs, but only if there is newly discovered evidence, such as DNA.

But in the Cummings case, he said, there is no DNA.

"I don't know what reason the prosecutor will give to explain 30 years of delay," Barnett told me in the third-floor hallway of the Santa Ana courthouse. "It's hard to imagine finding evidence that wasn't available 30 years ago."

Yellin believes he has met the requirement of newly discovered evidence, particularly with Hawley's opinion that the ligature marks found on Linda's neck were made "after death."

A judge will decide that issue during pretrial motions next year. If Barnett's request to dismiss the case is denied, Wiechecki could go before a jury in late 2006.

If convicted of first-degree murder, he could be sentenced to life in prison, with parole possible after seven years. Or, he could be found not guilty.

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Linda Cummings came to life for me when I first saw her driver's license photograph in the coroner's office in the summer of 1974. She's stayed a part of my life ever since.

If you look intently at that picture, you are immediately drawn to those piercing, pleading eyes.

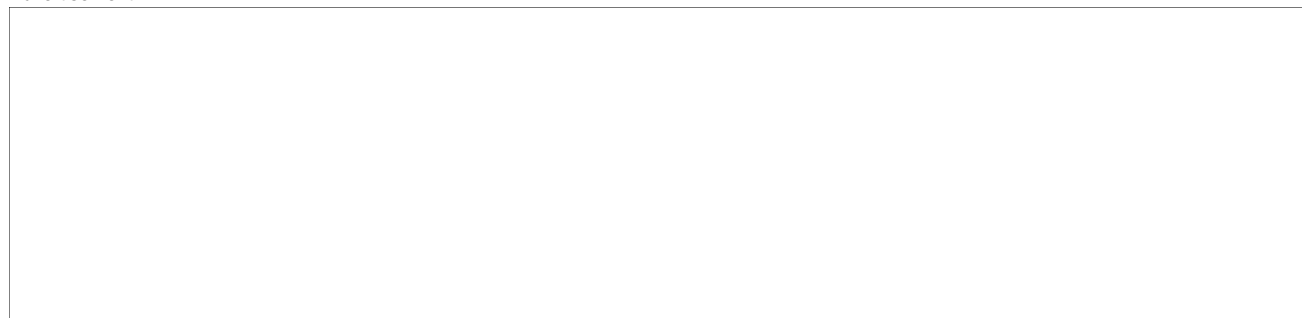
And it may sound a bit Pollyanna-ish to you - and in fact it sounds a little that way to me - but that sad stare straight into my own soul prodded me to pursue this story for most of my 35-year career.

Maybe it's because of Linda's naive and innocent look in that photo. When I think back on that day in the coroner's office, I realize that I was pretty naive and innocent then, too.

When everyone else forgot about Linda, I could not.

I just knew that a sad, lonely woman who had a horrible young life was on the verge of making it when something happened to her, something bad in Apartment 8.

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But I did not know what to do about it or where to go.

Coroner's investigator Joe Stevens told me back in 1974 that in his experience, suicidal women rarely hang themselves. And even if one did, she would never do it naked, especially if she had been a modest and shy person.

Colette Broadway, Linda's stepsister, told me when I visited her in Florida in October 2005 that Linda was not only modest and shy, but she was also a fighter who would never, ever kill herself.

It's possible, I suppose, that Linda stripped naked and tied a nonslip knot around her own neck with a rope tied from one end of the room to another, and balanced on that bed with her bad knees so she would be able to strangle herself on that clothesline.

But I don't think so.

More than anything else, I am glad that as a journalist I've been able to stand up for Linda, that I've been able to gather enough information and perhaps write a compelling enough account of her story to convince others that she was a woman determined to live.

She deserves at least that.

Maybe Louie Wiechecki - or David Stanley - is or has become the model and gentle citizen that his wife, relatives and friends and neighbors know him to be. Maybe he is innocent. Maybe someone else did it - someone we don't know about. It's possible, I suppose.

But I was never out to get Louie Wiechecki. I wanted to reveal the truth for Linda.

After all this time, I'm just relieved that Linda is getting her day in court, and that a jury in Orange County could have the chance to decide the case.

I think - in my Pollyanna-ish way - that no matter the final outcome, justice will be served.

Justice for Linda.

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