

THE VICTIMS



**MEGAN WATERMAN**  
Age 22



**SHANNAN GILBERT**  
Age 24



**JANE DOE**  
Age 18 to 35



**MAUREEN BRAINARD-BARNES**  
Age 25



**JOHN DOE**  
Age 17 to 23



**AMBER LYNN COSTELLO**  
Age 27



**MELISSA BARTHELEMY**  
Age 24



**JANE DOE**  
Age 18 to 35

# HORROR ON THE BEACH

## THE LONG ISLAND SERIAL KILLER

The bodies of at least 10 victims have been found on New York's Gilgo Beach. Are they connected? Now the FBI has joined the hunt in hopes of bringing a sadistic killer to justice

BY ALICIA DENNIS AND CHRISTINE PELISEK

**H**er screams pierced the pre-dawn quiet of the gated community of Oak Beach along the southern shore of New York's Long Island. "They're trying to kill me!" 24-year-old Shannan Gilbert told a 911 dispatcher in a frantic call as she sprinted through the deserted streets on May 1, 2010. An escort who had been at the home of a man she had met through Craigslist, Shannan raced past her trusted longtime driver Michael Pak, refusing to get into his car before vanishing into the dark. By the time police arrived, she was nowhere to be found.

As days turned into weeks and

months, her mother, Mari, pleaded with authorities for answers about Shannan's fate. In December 2010 an officer and his dog, out searching for Shannan at nearby Gilgo Beach, found the body of a woman wrapped in burlap. Over the next several days, police discovered the bodies of three other young women, all wrapped in burlap and placed within about 500 ft. of one another, beneath the punishing bramble along the shore. Then over the next four months, six more sets of remains in various states of decomposition were found. Finally, on Dec. 13, 2011, Shannan's partially clothed body was found hidden deep inside overgrown brush at Gilgo. "The

first body we found we presumed was Shannan Gilbert," says Suffolk County Police Chief Stuart Cameron. "Then we found a second body, a third, a fourth... The shock set in."

Now police say they are desperate to catch the murderer dubbed the Long Island Serial Killer, scouring a crime scene Cameron calls "one of the largest we've ever had in the history of the police department." In December 2015, Suffolk County Police Commissioner Tim Sini pulled the FBI into the investigation; by February 2016 he had launched a Gilgo Beach task force, assigning two full-time detectives from Suffolk County to focus only on the serial-



Watch our new true-crime show *People Magazine Investigates*, a 10-part series debuting with the two-hour season premiere *The Long Island Serial Killer* on Mon., Nov. 7, at 9 p.m. ET on ID.

killer case, working side by side with FBI agents.

While police confirm they believe at least the first four victims' deaths are connected, they continue to investigate connections with the six additional victims found—and they are looking at all the other victims found in the area as far back as 1996, which could increase the body count to 17. Sini says he's sensitive to criticism the department faced in the past that because many of the victims were sex workers, "law enforcement doesn't care as much." "First and foremost, these were human beings, loved and who loved," he says. "And we have the public-safety issues too. Regardless of the lifestyle the victims chose, we have a murderer, or murderers, out there."

**Clues that could capture a killer may be found among the first four victims discovered:** Maureen Brainard-Barnes, 25, a young mother of two who disappeared in 2007; Melissa Barthelemy, 24, who had dreams of opening her own hair salon and who disappeared in 2009; Amber Lynn Costello, 27, twice married and divorced, who disappeared in 2010; and Megan Waterman, 22, whose older brother had tried to talk her out of the escort business before she disappeared in 2010. All had been in contact with their killer through online ads as well as via cell phone before they vanished. Those



**DESPERATE SEARCH**  
"This was a killer's dumping ground," says Police Chief Cameron of the search area (in 2011) for Shannan Gilbert.

facts alone reveal a lot about the killer, according to experts. "He is a hunter," says Mary Ellen O'Toole, director of the forensic-science program at George Mason University and a retired FBI agent and profiler. "He is manipulating them in three different ways: on the computer, on the phone and in person. He is extremely good at making people feel comfortable and making them believe he is not dangerous."

But the case also remains full of puzzles. All four of the first victims found had been strangled and wrapped in burlap, indicating to authorities that their killer is the same person. But other remains suggest there may be more than one killer at work. Jessica Taylor, 20, Jane Doe 6 and Jane Doe 7



## COULD THERE BE MORE?

Between 1996 and 2013 as many as 17 victims were found in the Gilgo Beach area, raising questions about whether the deaths are related—and whether there are more bodies hidden in the terrain. Police Chief Cameron says the area's heavy vegetation and thorny brambles have made it difficult to search. "It's possible," says serial-killer profiler Kelly, "there are other bodies that haven't yet been found."

were all found dismembered, making the victims' cause of death difficult to determine. The body of an unidentified Asian male wearing women's clothing was found fatally beaten. And a murdered toddler, a female judged to be between the ages of 16 and 24 months and connected by DNA testing to one of the Jane Does, was found seven miles away on the same stretch of beach. Moreover, because Shannan's body was found without any sign of trauma, police believe she may have gotten lost in the marsh and died of natural causes. But forensic pathologist and expert Michael Baden, who examined Shannan's remains, says her death could also be consistent with homicidal strangulation because a small bone in her throat was missing, which could indicate it was fractured when she was murdered. "We can't say beyond a shadow of a doubt all these murders are connected," says serial-killer profiler and expert John Kelly. "But serial killers

can change their [methods]. A sadistic killer would be about convenience."

**A chilling series of six calls that came in from Melissa Barthelemy's cell phone in the days after she went missing has posed more questions in the investigation.** In the first instance, Melissa's younger sister Amanda answered what she thought was a call from Melissa and heard a man's voice instead, calmly asking her if she was "going to be a whore like her sister." "He was tormenting Amanda," says Lynn Barthelemy, Melissa and Amanda's mother. "He would call in the evening and torment Amanda. In the last call, he told Amanda he had killed Melissa." Police were able to determine that the calls pinged cell towers near Madison Square Garden and Times Square. They even had Amanda listen to recordings of suspects to determine if she could make a match to the voice on the other end of her sis-

**'IT IS LIKE CHASING A GHOST. THERE IS NO CLOSURE'**

—KIM OVERSTREET, SISTER OF VICTIM AMBER LYNN COSTELLO



**MISSING SHANNAN**  
"I lost my soul when Shannan died," said her mom, Mari (in 2015).



**A KILLER STILL OUT THERE?**  
Police (at a 2011 press conference) "never stopped working this case," says Police Chief Cameron. Adds Police Commissioner Sini: "We have a room dedicated to Gilgo. We will keep it until we have our suspect in custody."

## A TIMELINE: THE HUNT FOR A SERIAL KILLER



**MAY 1, 2010**  
Shannan Gilbert, a 24-year-old escort, vanishes after an appointment at the Oak Beach, N.Y., home of businessman Joe Brewer.

**DECEMBER 2010**  
A search for Gilbert uncovers the remains of four women buried in the marsh near Oak Beach. The bodies, each wrapped in burlap, are found within 500 ft. of one another. Gilbert's is not one of the four bodies discovered.

**JANUARY 2011**  
The bodies are identified as Megan Waterman, Amber Lynn Costello, Maureen Brainard-Barnes and Melissa Barthelemy. All four women had worked as online escorts and had been missing for months or years.



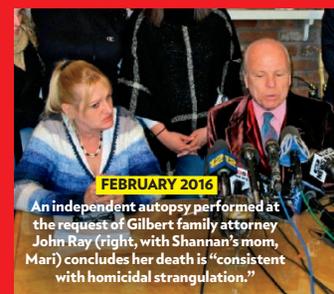
**MARCH-APRIL 2011**  
Police unearth the remains of six more bodies along the nearby beach: Four are women, one is a female toddler, and one is an Asian male in women's clothing. Two sets of those remains are linked to the dismembered torsos of two women found along a hiking trail in Manorville, about 40 miles away.



**DEC. 13, 2011**  
Shannan's remains are found in a swampy marshland near Oak Beach, about a third of a mile from where police discovered her purse, cell phone and jeans. Police say she may have drowned in a ditch, but her family believes she was murdered.

**MAY 2012**  
The Suffolk County medical examiner classifies Shannan's death as "undetermined."

**DECEMBER 2015**  
The FBI joins the Long Island Serial Killer investigation. The announcement comes the day after former Suffolk County police department chief James Burke is indicted on federal charges of assault of a suspect.



**FEBRUARY 2016**

An independent autopsy performed at the request of Gilbert family attorney John Ray (right, with Shannan's mom, Mari) concludes her death is "consistent with homicidal strangulation."

**LIVES LOST**  
Victim Megan Waterman's memorial is one of several on Gilgo Beach. "We have to bring justice to the victims' families and give that closure," says Sini. "I am not going to spare any effort."



ter's phone, but none sounded familiar. The ordeal has shattered the Barthelemy family. "Amanda made a little shrine to Melissa on her dresser," says Lynn. "I look at people differently now; I'm more skeptical."



**So who is the Long Island Serial Killer?** Police admit they currently have not named any suspects, but theories have abounded. When a prominent local businessman killed himself the day after Shannan's body was found, some speculated about a connection between the burlap some of the bodies were wrapped in and burlap bags used at his family's garden center. There were also rumors of a secret cabal of wealthy men who allegedly hired escorts and prostitutes for sex parties. Some have even tried to blame corruption in the Suffolk County police department for the lack of progress in the case. Former Suffolk police chief James Burke, 51, is currently serving time in federal prison



Share questions and comments on this story at [burst.com/liserialkiller](http://burst.com/liserialkiller) and watch *People Magazine Investigates After Show*, available Nov. 7 on the new **People/Entertainment Weekly Network (PEN)**. Go to [people.com/pen](http://people.com/pen), or download the PEN app on Apple TV, Roku players, Amazon Fire TV, Xumo, Chromecast, iOS and Android devices.

for assaulting a suspect in a burglary case. Says Baden: "His behavior raises some red flags." "There have been a lot of rumors," counters Police Chief Cameron. "I don't know why people suggest suspects without credible evidence. I can assure you again that our homicide section is working on this."

As for the last men known to have seen Shannan Gilbert alive—Joe Brewer, who hired her as an escort, and her driver Michael Pak—neither is a suspect in her disappearance, police say. Police say they have also cleared local doctor Peter Hackett, who Shannan's mother, Mari, said called her after Shannan's disappearance. Mari claimed Hackett had told her he had seen Shannan and treated her with medication as part of his work running a home for "wayward girls." Shannan's family has brought a wrongful-death lawsuit against Hackett—who de-

**'BODIES LINED UP COULD BE HIS ART. HE COULD REVISIT HIS DUMPING GROUNDS'**  
—CRIMINAL PROFILER JOHN KELLY

nies any involvement in Shannan's case—and is demanding that the 911 calls made the night she vanished be released.

For the families seeking justice for their loved ones' murders, the increased attention to the case in recent months brings a small measure of comfort. In a

bizarre twist, Mari was fatally stabbed on July 23. Her daughter Sarra, who has a history of mental-health issues, according to her attorney John Ray, pleaded not guilty to second-degree murder and is being held without bail. But before Mari's death she told *People*, "I hope the FBI's involvement [in the case] will help. I think we will find the truth with all the girls' deaths."

So too does Melissa Barthelemy's mom, Lynn, who remembers her daughter as being full of "life and energy." "I keep talking about her in hopes it will help solve her murder," Lynn says. "Everybody says you always think this kind of thing is only going to happen to someone else.... We have to keep talking about her no matter how much it hurts." ●