

CRACKING THE CASE

"I wanted to give a voice to all the victims who were tossed out like trash," says Pelisek (near an intersection in L.A. where victims' bodies were found).



THE GRIM SLEEPER CASE

MY SEARCH FOR A SERIAL KILLER

FOR 10 YEARS REPORTER **CHRISTINE PELISEK** FOLLOWED THE BLOODY TRAIL OF **LONNIE FRANKLIN JR.**—AND HELPED VICTIMS FIND JUSTICE
By **CHRISTINE PELISEK**

HAIR & MAKEUP: DNELE ALMANZA INSET: NICK UTAP

Photograph by SAM COMEN

Reporter Christine Pelisek was covering crime for the newspaper LA Weekly when she found connections between the suspicious deaths of 38 women in Los Angeles County over a four-year time frame. Through relentless investigation and countless hours interviewing victims' families and other sources, she found a survivor of the serial killer she dubbed the Grim Sleeper because of the nearly 14-year break he appeared to have taken from killings, between 1988 and 2002. Currently Lonnie Franklin Jr., 63, a married father of two and former Los Angeles Police Department mechanic, is on trial as the Grim Sleeper, charged with 10 counts of murder and one count of attempted murder. He has pleaded not guilty and is facing the death penalty. Now a reporter for People, Pelisek—whose story was the inspiration for the 2014 Lifetime movie *The Grim Sleeper* and who is working on a book about the case (from Counterpoint Press)—reveals the twists and turns that led to catching the man police say terrorized women for decades.

I made frequent appearances at the Los Angeles County coroner's office, investigating everything from gang murders and organized crime hits to robberies gone awry. But on a chilly winter day in 2006, a coroner source told me his office had compiled a list of 38 random, suspicious deaths of women over four years. Many had been disposed of like trash in the dark alleyways of South Los Angeles or in Dumpsters across L.A. County. Most were strangled, shot or stabbed. Some were beaten so badly they were barely recognizable.

After months of prodding, the coroner source handed over the list, and I started looking for connections between the cases. I had reviewed 36 cases and was down to the last two: the 2002 murder of 15-year-old foster-care runaway Princess Berthomieux and the 2003 murder of Valerie McCorvey,

THE VICTIMS: SILENCE & SUFFERING

THOUGH POLICE SAY THERE MAY BE EVEN MORE VICTIMS, DNA AND BALLISTICS EVIDENCE CONNECT THESE WOMEN TO THE GRIM SLEEPER SERIAL KILLER



Debra Jackson, 29
The cocktail waitress was fatally shot in the chest.



Henrietta Wright, 34
Wright, a mom of five, was fatally shot in the chest.



Barbara Ware, 23
Ware, also shot, was found in an alley.



Bernita Sparks, 26
Her body was found in a Dumpster.



Mary Lowe, 26
The receptionist vanished from a local bar.



Lachrica Jefferson, 22
She had relatives in Franklin's neighborhood.



Alicia "Monique" Alexander, 18
Alexander disappeared from a local store.



Princess Berthomieux, 15
The foster-care runaway was found strangled.



Valerie McCorvey, 35
The young mom was found in an alley.



Janecia Peters, 25
A homeless man found her body in a Dumpster.

a 35-year-old mother who was found strangled in an alley in South L.A. A detective revealed to me that DNA evidence found on Berthomieux and McCorvey was linked to seven unsolved murders in the 1980s. That was when I realized a serial killer was on the loose.

These victims—shot with a .25-cal. pistol between 1985 and 1988—included a 29-year-old cocktail waitress and a teenager who lived at home with her

parents. All of their bodies had been dumped in dirty back alleys, hidden under mattresses and garbage. All were black. And the killer was at large.

For the next four years I conducted my own investigation: I drove through alleyways in South Los Angeles, knocked on doors, thumbed through coroner reports and interviewed more than 100 people. I tracked down family members of the young women who were mur-

dered. None had been told by detectives that their daughters, mothers or nieces had died at the hands of a serial killer.

When I showed up on the doorstep of the home of Mary and Porter Alexander—whose 18-year-old daughter Monique was found dead on Sept. 11, 1988, in an alley—they told me they had not heard from the police in more than 20 years. Monique's father, Porter, was devastated police didn't let his family know that a serial killer had murdered his daughter.

TIMELINE: THE SEARCH

Aug. 10, 1985

The first confirmed murder (of Debra Jackson); six murders follow. All the victims are shot with a .25-cal. pistol.

Nov. 20, 1988

Enietra Washington (right) is attacked and survives. She describes her attacker and says he drives an orange Pinto.



March 9, 2002

Princess Berthomieux is found fatally strangled and beaten in an alleyway.

July 11, 2003

The body of Valerie McCorvey is found by a crossing guard. She has been strangled and sexually assaulted.

2006

Pelisek gets a list of 38 women found in L.A. County and connects the cases of Berthomieux and McCorvey to the killings that occurred in the '80s.

Jan. 1, 2007

Janecia Peters is murdered. The LAPD starts the task force in May after it links her case with the others through DNA.

August 2008

Pelisek interviews more than 100 sources including police, coroner, victims' families, friends and potential suspects.



February 2009

Pelisek and Enietra Washington try to find the house where Washington's attacker allegedly drove her before he shot her.

April 2009

Pelisek attends the task force detectives meeting with victims' family members at a South L.A. church to discuss the case.

July 7, 2010

Franklin is arrested at his house after familial DNA from his son links him to the murders. He pleads not guilty. His trial started on Feb. 16, 2016.



"We should have had some awareness that it was going on," he told me. "No-body came to us."

In August 2008 my story about the Grim Sleeper hit newsstands. It focused on a secret LAPD task force that was set up after police discovered the unknown killer had struck again in January 2007, this time claiming the life of 25-year-old Janecia Peters. Her body was found in a plastic garbage bag in a Dumpster in South L.A. The killer left his DNA on the bag's twist tie.

I was flooded with potential tips. Most callers were concerned citizens worried that a neighbor or a friend might be the killer. Most of them didn't want to call the LAPD directly, while others were angry because they did call the police and hadn't heard back from a detective.

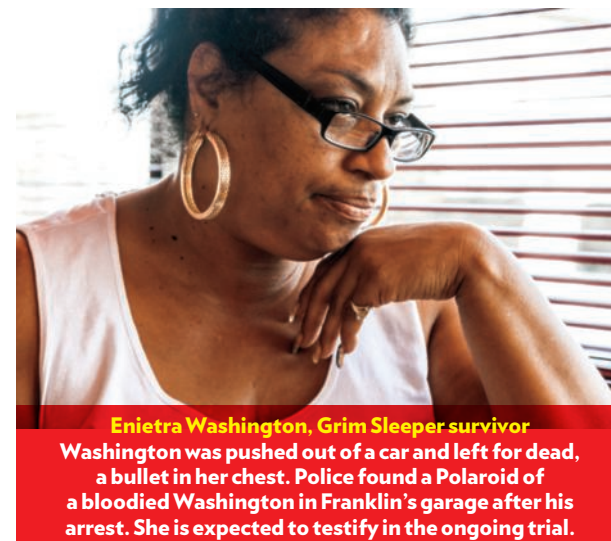
To my surprise, many female callers pointed fingers at their husbands or boyfriends. One woman said her friend, an attractive man in his 40s, was the killer.

"He's very sexual," she told me, "but he has the temper of Marvin Gaye and the cunning of Ted Bundy." She brought me a fork she stole from him at dinner to have it tested by police.

Another woman was certain her husband was the Grim Sleeper. She couldn't say exactly why she suspected him, only that she had a gut feeling. I met her a few weeks later, and she handed me a plastic bag. Inside the bag was a cup, and tucked inside the cup were napkins. "It's his sperm," she told me. At LAPD Det. Dennis Kilcoyne's urging, I refrigerated it, next

to the ketchup and mustard in my fridge. Again, I took the sample to the task force. I was told neither sample matched the Grim Sleeper's DNA.

I tracked down Grim Sleeper survivor Enietra Washington, a then-30-year-old mother of two who had narrowly survived a brutal November 1988 attack. We met at a restaurant in South L.A. in the



Enietra Washington, Grim Sleeper survivor
Washington was pushed out of a car and left for dead, a bullet in her chest. Police found a Polaroid of a bloodied Washington in Franklin's garage after his arrest. She is expected to testify in the ongoing trial.

winter of 2009, near the spot two victims' bodies had been dumped. There, she finally agreed to share the horrific details of that night: She accepted a ride from a stranger outside a South L.A. liquor store; the driver offered to take her to her friend's house, but instead he shot her, sexually assaulted her and took a Polaroid picture of her before pushing her out of his car. Police linked evidence in her case to the Grim Sleeper, including the .25-cal. bullet pulled out of her chest.

Washington feared for her life, but on several occasions the two of us drove the streets of South Los Angeles looking for the house where her attacker had briefly stopped to speak to a "relative."

During these drives Washington would often accuse me of not paying attention, not listening to her directions and driving too slowly. As we drove up and down the streets, she picked out close to a dozen houses that fit the description she remembered: a white house with a hedge in the front yard. I took photographs of each location.

As the months passed, the attention was raising awareness in the community and victims' families were opening up and sharing information. In July 2010 Grim Sleeper suspect Lonnie Franklin Jr. was caught through familial DNA testing after his 28-year-old son Christopher was arrested and convicted of a felony weapons charge in 2009 and had to give up a DNA swab. Once it was determined Christopher was related to the killer, detectives followed the elder Franklin to a pizza place. As Franklin finished his meal, a detective posed as a busboy to collect the fork, a plastic cup, plate and pizza slice Franklin left behind. DNA from the pizza slice matched DNA found on alleged Grim Sleeper victims.

It's been five long years that the victims' families have waited for Franklin's day in court, and dozens of victims' family members crowded in the ninth-floor courtroom on Feb. 16. I am so happy this moment has come for the families—their loved ones will never return, but now they have some form of peace. "I'm not relieved until it is over," says victim Barbara Ware's aunt Sherry Ware Costa. "There will never be closure . . . just, hopefully, justice." ●

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BRIAN SMALE; LOS ANGELES POLICE DEPARTMENT; TED SOQUI