

The New Bedford highway murders

By R. Marc Kantrowitz

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The district attorney thought he had his man. And rather than try him on all nine murders, he'd start with one: The killing of 28-year-old Rochelle Dopierala, a mother of two young children, who had been living with the suspect. And better yet, the suspected killer had connections with some of the other murder victims. Nine months later, with the charge about to be dropped, another suspect killed himself.

Usually, when tough guy Frankie Pina came into a police station, he wore handcuffs. This time, in July 1988, he came in voluntarily. "My girlfriend is missing," he nervously reported. "Her name is Nancy Paiva. She's 36."

Initially, some saw little credence in the report, as drug addicts were known to drop in and out, popping up after a week-long bender. When her body was discovered a few weeks later, their doubts vanished.

And quickly, reports of others missing and the discovery of bodies sent shock waves through the New Bedford area. Those of Debra Medeiros and Paiva were found in July, followed by Debra DeMello and Dawn Mendes in November, Debroh McConnell and Rochelle Dopierala in December, Robbin Rhodes and Mary Santos in March 1989, and Sandra Botelho the next month.



The nine victims whose bodies were recovered.

All had been reported missing, from spring 1988 to early September, along with 19-year-old Christina Monteiro, whose mother was engaged to a Dartmouth cop, and 34-year-old Marilyn Roberts, whose father was a retired New Bedford officer.

What all had in common was a tragic addiction to drugs. Some prostituted themselves — \$20 for oral sex — to pay for a small \$20 bag of poison. Their ages ranged from 19 to 36. Most were white, dark-haired and small in stature. Some came from good families, others from a harder background.

Many met heroin through a boyfriend. Mary Santos was intelligent, married and the mother of two young boys, ages 5 and 7. Her husband, Donald, had no idea she walked the streets to earn much-needed money.

She and the others all were strangled, their bodies dumped in wooded areas off major highways — mainly Routes 195 and 140 — within 30 minutes of each other. And making matters worse, the police quickly discovered that far from having too few suspects, they had far too many.

As drugs crossed all lines of society, so did men seeking sex. Blue-collar workers, white-collar workers, the rich and poor, the unemployed and the best-employed, all in pursuit of a nameless orgasm. For some, sex included violence. Reports filtered in of men who punched, strangled and beat those they picked up. All leads had to be followed.



Kenneth Ponte, a suspect whose murder charge in the death of Rochelle Dopierala was later dismissed.

One man was indicted for the savage and brutal rapes of three prostitutes. Was he the killer? Or was the sicko who violently raped a prostitute with a pipe, or the one who raped a prostitute in a New Bedford parking lot?

Or was it a man later convicted as a killer, who indirectly claimed responsibility and had knowledge of where Sandra Botelho was buried, a mere mile from where he lived?

Or one who confessed to the crimes in a bar? Or even Frankie Pina, who reported his girlfriend Nancy Paiva missing? Or any of the dozens of others who brutalized prostitutes?

Complicating matters was the knowledge that not all of those killed frequented the streets. The common denominator was drug addiction. The search thus had to be expanded.

Soon, one name bubbled to the surface and remained there, thanks in part to the media attention against which he railed. He knew and was closely associated with some of the victims. When he moved away to Florida, ostensibly to get away from the hubbub, the killings stopped.

Kenneth Ponte was known to many and for a time was regarded as a great success story. Overcoming an addiction to heroin at a young age, he graduated from college and then law school, and opened a practice in the local area.

Soon, though, the lure of drugs proved too great and he crossed back over to the dark side. Paranoia set in and stories abounded of his strangeness — of bringing women to his house and not letting them leave; of seeing non-existent murders in a well-known comedy; of people hiding behind his couch or the police outside his door; of having women shoot him up in the neck, upon which he foamed at the mouth as he crawled around on all fours. But as weird as he was, he wasn't violent.

He represented Mary Santos and Nancy Paiva in civil matters. Dawn Mendes had been seen banging on his door. Robbin Rhodes dated him. At different times, Debra Medeiros stayed with him, as did Rochelle Dopierala, whom he drove to the Cape to pick up her welfare checks.

An angry Ponte in Florida called reporters — print, radio and TV — and ranted about his being railroaded. He liked to talk. Meanwhile, grand juries heard evidence about the murders, the suspects and Ponte. Soon, he would be indicated on drug offenses. That would turn out to be the least of his worries.

Diane Doherty claimed she not only dated Ponte, but that he confessed to the murders. As corroboration, she indicated that another, Leslie Mello, heard the confession. It appeared to be the break the police were craving.

And then it wasn't. Doherty was on probation, had a criminal record and could not stay on topic. Mello, far from supporting the claim, rebutted it. Doherty ultimately recanted. She also flew to Florida to be with Ponte, who, incredibly, took her in. She would later claim he choked her, resulting in his arrest. She then recanted and later recanted the recantation. Before the grand jury, she again indicated Ponte had confessed.

With that, the DA focused on Rochelle Dopierala, whose body was discovered Dec. 10, 1988. Ponte had been living with her and had threatened her when she disappeared in late April. An indictment for her murder was secured. The press touted his arrest.

When the DA was voted out of office, his successor named an outside special prosecutor to re-evaluate the case. Recognizing its many weaknesses, he dropped the charge on Monday, July 29, 1991. He later named someone whom he thought to be a stronger suspect.

Before the first victim even disappeared, the word on the street was to avoid the guy who looked like a boxer with a pushed-in nose. Anthony DeGrazia was that man.



Anthony DeGrazia, a possible suspect who was accused of numerous violent offenses against women.

Seemingly likable and religious, he came from a troubled background in which his parents beat and humiliated him. He would tell a psychiatrist he suffered from flashbacks, heard people talking to him and sometimes "the bad person comes out." Seventeen women told of being picked up and violently assaulted by him.

While he denied ever being violent, he admitted that he wrote a check to Sandra Botelho for oral sex. She disappeared on Aug. 11, 1988. Another told of him lunging at her, twisting her neck trying to snap it.

No one, however, could directly connect him to the murders.

In May 1989, he was indicted for numerous rapes, assault to commit rape and assault and batteries. A former employer posted the high bail and a priest vouched for him, counseling him to be cooperative and truthful.

While out on bail, he found work and continued attending mass. When the work dried up, he was allowed to stay in the rectory. In November 1990, he again was accused of a brutal assault and jailed, and again made bail.

Word leaked out that the case was going to be dismissed against Ponte on Monday. On Saturday, July 27, 1991, DeGrazia went to the backyard of his ex-girlfriend's parents' house and killed himself.

Epilogue

Ponte continued to get into minor trouble with the law and his neighbors, who complained about his trash and demeanor. On Jan. 10, 2010, he died alone in his house.

No one else has ever been charged or officially identified. The bodies of Christina Monteiro and Marilyn Roberts have never been found. They, too, may be in the woods by a highway.

This article is based on [Shallow Graves: The Hunt for the New Bedford Highway Serial Killer](#), by Maureen Boyle (and conversations with her). Kantrowitz can be reached at rmackantrowitz@comcast.net.