



University receives anonymous \$1.5 million donation

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A mystery donor gave UNC Asheville \$1.5 million from a growing pool of donations now totaling \$60 million given to universities around the country since March, according to the university.

"The gift is among the largest ever made to UNCA," said Merianne Epstein, director of news information.

Scholarships made possible by the donation will be available next semester, according to Epstein.

"I read in the *Citizen-Times* that there were more than a dozen donations, and they all went to colleges led by women," said freshman biology major Violet Silwedel. "I think it's great (female chancellors and university administrators) are getting help running colleges because I can imagine it is hard to get that sort of a position as a woman."

Upon finding out about the donation on March 20, UNCA's chancellor made a statement. By that time, nine donations totaling \$45 million were already distributed, with more to come.

"This is a wonderful gift to our university, to our students and to the public that we serve," said Chancellor Anne Ponder. "It's as if this donor read our strategic plan and priorities and knew how important it is for us to invest in scholarships, in faculty expertise and in equipment to ensure that we continue to provide outstanding academic quality."

In the current economic climate, when investments in our academic programs are

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Hope remains after 36-year-old homicide *UNCA's only on-campus murder still under investigation*

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It was the perfect day for a Sunday picnic, exactly what Thomas Guthrie and Larry O'Kelly were enjoying before they discovered UNCA student Virginia Olson's bound and murdered body.

After 36 years, literature professor and UNCA alumna Deborah James's voice still quivers when she talks about the fear she felt as an upcoming graduate dealing with the murder of a fellow student. The hand that slew Olson is still a mystery.

"The young women were hysterical. Girls were sleeping in my room and on my floor until the end of the semester," James said. "People were afraid to go to the bathroom."

Guthrie and Kelley, high school students at the time, found the 19-year-old's body near the forest service building across from the Botanical gardens at about 3 p.m., according to the police report. An autopsy revealed Olson was gagged with her own shirt, raped and stabbed twice in the heart.

James and Olson were both drama students living in Governor's Village along with the other 200 residents students living on campus in 1973. James was a dormitory proctor, leaving her responsible for residential students after 5 p.m.

"After they published the news of Ginger's murder in the paper, pranksters would call in threats on the one hall phone," James said. "It was a terrible and terrifying time."

Olson's murder occurred against a backdrop of 1970s hippie culture, a flower-child era, as James called it. Watergate's scandalous waters were beginning to boil, dominating the front page of *The Asheville Citizen* for weeks following Olson's April death.

The Citizen mostly printed updates about the case toward the back of the paper. The follow-up coverage did not reveal anything but stale leads, reward money and a scholarship fund.

Olson's was the only homicide of a

UNCA student, although retired UNCA faculty member Arnold Wengrow said he remembered other deaths and suicides during his 28 years of teaching.

"I remember saying to my female theater drama students after our night rehearsals, 'Please don't walk down to the dorms by yourself,'" recalls Wengrow, who worked with Olson in a campus production of *U.S.A.*, and was one of only two faculty members in the theater department.

Olson's case is one of about 20 cold cases assigned to Asheville detectives Yvonne Cobourn and Kevin Taylor.

Although Asheville police and the State Bureau of Investigation continued to investigate the Olson case, the police department did not establish a specific cold case unit until last summer.

"We have hope with all our cases," Cobourn said. "This is not the coldest one we're working on."

Applying modern technology, Cobourn and Taylor hope to find new leads in the nearly 40-year-old case, according to Melissa Williams, Asheville Police Department's community relations manager.

The forensic technology in 1973 basically consisted of identifying a suspect's blood type, Cobourn said.

"The detectives in 1973 had the vision to save things, but simply had no use for them," Williams said.

Justice, especially for the family, resonates as primary motivation for detectives working on cold cases, according to Cobourn.

"We just have to keep working," Cobourn said. "The smallest detail could break the case wide open."

Although Cobourn said that she and Taylor have not talked to Olson's remaining family, they conducted extensive research on locating connected people and tried recreate the distant era.

"The original investigators provided the base," Cobourn said. "They started painting the picture. We added the color."

After nearly 40 years of investigation on the Olson case, the police have yet to make an arrest despite following a few leads, which a lack of solid evidence halted.

"Before we had a cold case unit, detectives who were working on more current cases also had a pile of cold cases to work on when they had time," Cobourn said.

The Asheville Citizen published an anonymous account a few weeks after police discovered Olson's body. The man, who was in town for work, said he recognized Olson's picture as a girl he witnessed getting into a car with two young men on Broadway Avenue.

This anonymous account did little to generate possible leads, however.

Ten years after Olson's death, police reported they were close to arresting a man who fled Asheville after police questioned him. They just needed more evidence before arresting the man who had a history of mental health problems. More evidence never surfaced, a familiar story at this point.

"Nobody would have believed that it wouldn't be solved immediately," James said. "We thought sure that at any minute, they would know."

Detectives relentlessly interviewed individual students for the remainder of the semester, according to James.

"Asheville police did a very poor job of handling it, from my perspective, which was only that of a young girl. The head detective would tell us that we should all be really careful because it was probably someone who lived on campus," James said. "All that did was create more fear. We were all looking around in the cafeteria thinking, 'Could it be that person?'"

James said she remembered a rumor that the suspect was the son of a prominent citizen so the police squashed the

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Virginia Olson