

KINGS: murder and justice

From page 3A

not as a two-dimensional narrative from a report. They see what the police see, and they carry those images with them as they prepare for trial.

They would not soon forget the scene that greeted them at the Kings' villa.

Michael King, a 53-year-old retired insurance executive, lay partially on the floor, slumped against a striped easy chair near a living room entertainment center. A fire extinguisher lay on the cushion by his head. His throat had been slit, and stab wounds peppered his back and neck. One slice had severed a main artery, spilling his blood onto the stone floor.

Several feet away, between a dining room table and a granite kitchen bar, Thelma King, 57, lay dead in an overturned, high-back chair. Torn strips from a green beach towel had been used to bind her hands, tie her body to the wicker chair and keep her gagged and blindfolded. Her throat had been slashed twice with such severity the blade scarred her spine.

As they looked around, the prosecutors spotted a steak knife lying on the floor with the tip of its blade broken off. They quickly had the knife placed in a box and removed from the room without discussion. They told no one about it, unwilling to take a chance someone might leak the information and compromise the most promising clue they had.

What to expect?

Todd King's mind raced as he and his brother, Finley, tried to envision what awaited them when their plane touched down in St. Maarten.

It had been less than 24 hours since they had learned their elder brother and his wife had been killed on this small island where the couple had kept a second home. Todd and Finley left South Carolina on the first flight they could find, accompanied by Thelma's sister, Lois, and her husband, Mac Swain.

They knew next to nothing about St. Maarten's customs and legal system.

Did the island have a U.S. embassy? Where was the morgue? How would they get there? How did the Dutch legal system work? Did the police really care about the killings? Could they trust the police? Could they trust anyone? Where should they go first when they got off the plane?

At an immigration checkpoint, a worker held up her hand when she saw Todd King's passport. A tall

woman with an athletic build came over and introduced herself as Dientje Muller, a police officer assigned to serve as the Kings' family detective.

Island authorities typically assign an officer to work with a violent-crime victim's family and help them navigate St. Maarten's legal system. Muller got the assignment while dropping off her children at swimming lessons less than a half-hour before the Kings' plane touched down. She knew nothing about the case. In fact, this was the first time the 20-year veteran had served as a family liaison.

Muller decided she would follow one guiding principle: "I will treat them the way I would want to be treated if I was in their shoes."

That began with a trip to the morgue.

Meanwhile, Muller's colleagues beat the streets in search of leads.

Among them was Claudius Rogers, an island cop who used to run into Mike and Thelma at the popular Sunset Bar, where people gather to watch passenger planes swoop in over Maho Beach.

Mike always made him laugh, kidding Rogers about the low-hanging holster the officer kept strapped to his leg. When Rogers heard Mike had been killed, he volunteered to work without sleep to find the persons responsible.

"That smile," he said, shaking his head. "It was like a piece of the sunset was gone."

Rumors and support

As police built their case, word of the killings quickly spread around the island, where many folks knew the Kings as a kind, generous couple.

A husky man with a big personality to match, Mike could strike up a conversation with anybody or pop into an island grill and help with the cooking just for the fun of it.

When he learned the local bars didn't have his favorite bourbon, Maker's Mark, King brought down some bottles from South Carolina, handed them to bartenders and told them to sell it back to him at a profit if they liked. Soon, the bars started stocking his brand. But it would be henceforth known as "Maker's Mike" on the island.

Thelma, a retired banking official, was more reserved than her outgoing husband of 22 years. Friends spoke of her quiet kindness, poise and her distaste of speaking ill of others. They called her a quintessential Southern belle.



Vicki Cline, left, a friend of Michael and Thelma King, and Finley King, Michael's brother, light a sky lantern to release in memory of the couple, who were stabbed to death in their St. Maarten home on Sept. 19, 2012. Photo was taken on the roof of Cline's home in St. Maarten on 4/10/2013, the day the murder trial concluded for the three men charged in the Kings' death.

(Glenn Smith/postandcourier.com)

How could this have happened to them?

The island recorded 10 killings in 2012, a high-water mark in recent years. Still, tourist murders remain rare. Tourism is St. Maarten's lifeblood, as evidenced by the flotilla of hulking cruise ships that crowd the harbor in the capital city of Philipsburg.

Sarah Wescot Williams, St. Maarten's prime minister, made a point to quickly reach out to the Kings' family to express the island's condolences. Privately, she worried about rumors and fear spreading to fill the information vacuum in the immediate aftermath of the slayings.

It didn't take long. Bloggers soon speculated that the killings stemmed from a dispute over the rum business. Others suggested the Kings were killed in a murder-for-hire plot. No proof of either scenario was offered.

Detective Muller worked to keep the family grounded and in the loop. She took them to breakfast, to the police station, to the prosecutors' office. She introduced them to investigators, showed them around the island, helped them arrange to ship the bodies home.

At each stop, the Kings seemed to find someone with a story about Mike and Thelma. They met the bartender who'd been surprised by the gift of a new car from the couple after her old ride broke down. They learned how Mike had bought a refrigerator for another needy resident, and how Thelma had been a rock for a friend struggling with breast cancer.

These stories helped ease the pain. But the family still needed justice to feel whole.

Crucial clues

day at home smoking pot.

Woolford was known as a polite, normal kid who worked as a crew member on a charter boat. But the tourist season had slacked off of late, and he wasn't getting many hours at work. That made him anxious. The rent was due and his girlfriend was pregnant.

He badly needed cash, and the trio decided to rectify that by robbing Happy Star shortly before 8 p.m.

While Johnson waited behind the wheel of the idling car with tinted windows and a pin-up girl sticker, Mills and Woolford stormed inside with pistols in hand. Mills, wearing a Halloween mask, demanded money while Woolford stuck a gun to the side of a customer's head.

They barely escaped with a handful of cash after the Happy Star's owner alerted police. Officers blasted several shots at the fleeing Hyundai, with one round lodging in the trunk.

Sighting a target

Johnson hit the gas and veered down side streets until he reached the French side of the island, a common criminal ploy to evade the local authorities.

They switched license plates and drove through the darkness until they arrived in Cupecoy, an area of Dutch territory known for its picturesque beaches and cliffs.

Johnson pulled into a vacant lot beside by a dense maritime forest filled with twisted, gnarled trees and snaking paths that led to the beach. There, they left the car and set off on foot across the sand, taking advantage of receding waves to get around a security wall at the perimeter of Ocean Club Resort.

The three robbers spotted lights on at one villa perched on a bluff, surrounded by unoccupied homes. They moved silently up a staircase from the beach to take a closer look.

Inside, Mike King slept soundly in an easy chair with the television flickering before him.

He made a habit of locking up every night and closing the retractable hurricane shutters over the windows and doors for added security. This night, however, he nodded off before taking his usual precautions.

Caught by surprise

King had spent the entire day working with Melanie Daboul on the rum factory preparations in an industrial corner of Cole Bay. After a few drinks with friends on Maho Beach and a light dinner at a local cantina, he and Thelma decided to call it an early night. They were bushed.

King didn't hear the three men scamper up a gas cylinder alongside the back balcony that offered unobstructed views of the Caribbean Sea. Nor did he hear the sliding glass door open as they slipped inside.

He didn't realize they were there until Woolford tapped his face with the barrel of a pistol. He started to protest, but Woolford buried a fist in his gut. Johnson came from behind, grabbed him in a headlock and placed a knife to his neck.

They demanded to know where the money was, and King told them it was upstairs in a bedroom where Thelma lay sleeping unclothed in a four-post bed.

While Johnson held King, Woolford and Mills tromped up the tiled stairway and across the landing where a bucket of paint and brushes lay on a crumpled Miami Herald, the remnants of Thelma's afternoon home improvement project.

They stepped into the bedroom and woke Thelma, who came awake in a full panic. Mills told her to put some clothes on and help them open the small safe the

Kings kept in a nearby walk-in closet. "I promise we won't hurt you," he told her.

Shaken, Thelma fumbled with the combination, and couldn't get the safe open on the first couple of tries. But when the steel door finally popped, Mills and Woolford helped themselves to a pile of \$100 bills and a sack of jewelry with an estimated worth of about \$70,000.

They then marched her downstairs, gagged her and tied her to a chair to keep her from screaming or running for help.

Mills turned and grabbed a cold Heineken from the Kings' refrigerator to slake his thirst and keep his buzz going. He offered a brew to Mike and Thelma as well, thinking it might calm their nerves. They declined.

Then, the knife came down.

More arrests

As prosecutors listened to Johnson's tale, the details rang true. But it was one crucial statement that convinced them they had the right man.

Johnson explained that Mike King had tried to come to his wife's aid after she was tied up, resulting in the cut on his neck. As King rose bleeding from his seat, Johnson plunged the steak knife into his back with such force that it snapped the tip of the blade in the process.

Johnson told police he killed King with a second knife so he wouldn't suffer and then Thelma to spare her the pain of a life without her husband.

Benammar and van den Eshof looked at each other. They had kept the broken knife a secret. No one knew about the tip lodged in Mike King's back until it was found during the autopsy. The only way Johnson could have known was if he was there that night.

Mills and Woolford eventually gave statements to police as well. Though some details varied, key points became abundantly clear. This had not been a contract killing. There were no links to the rum business. The crime had been random and senseless. And while the Kings lay dying, the suspects went out to blow their money on prostitutes and booze at a brothel.

Tug of war

On a sunny April morning, Mike and Thelma's relatives gathered in the belly of Topper's Rum factory and watched as workers on the production line hand-filled bottles with Melanie Daboul's flavored concoctions. Mike's mother, Sally Gripkey, teared up when she saw her son's curling signature had been added to the label of each bottle.

The day before, the trial of the three murder suspects had come to an end, with prosecutors recommending life for Johnson and dozens of years behind bars for Mills and Woolford. A verdict and sentencing are expected next month.

The family's wait for justice is nearly over, but the Kings insisted they would return to St. Maarten and would encourage their friends to visit as well. The rum factory is one draw, of course. But it's more than that, Todd King told an island radio audience.

"We look at it like a tug of war. These guys took everything in the world from us that night. Every day since, we have tried to pull back on that rope. Every day, we try to get another inch," he said. "If we're scared to come to the island, if we're scared to talk about Mike and Thelma, if we're too scared to deal with it, then they've won. And we're not going to allow that to happen."

Reach Glenn Smith at 937-5556 or Twitter.com/glennsmith5.

Go ahead...
Sleep In!
with our great
Comforter and Bedding Sale

We are having an exclusive bedding sale! Come take advantage of the tremendous savings on sheets, comforters, pillowcases and more. This sale will be gone before you know it, so visit us today!



Nancy is here to help you with all your shopping needs!

BACK TO COLLEGE SALE!
Dorm Bedding & MORE!

New Shipment of Designer Swimwear
UP TO 70% OFF!

Designer Deals Outlet
Bedding & Designer Fashions
at Outlet Prices
703 N. Post Rd., Shelby

704-406-9957 • Tue-Fri 10am-5pm • Sat 10am-4pm • www.designerdealsoutlet.com

Thanks for reading the Kings Mountain Herald
'your hometown newspaper'