

FRETWELL MURDERS CHAPTER IV

Bodies found, case drags

Family frustrated as prosecutors and defense attorneys argue over death penalty

This is the fourth chapter in a four-part series about the life and murder of Karissa Fretwell and her 3-year-old son, Billy.

The Gaston man believed responsible for the kidnapping and murder of 25-year-old Karissa Fretwell and her 3-year-old son, Billy, was behind bars and denied bail, but their remains had not been found.

Michael Wolfe, who was married to someone else, had been ordered to pay Karissa \$904 a month in child support three days before she and Billy disappeared.

The ongoing investigation and search for Karissa and Billy gripped the community and was emotionally draining on law enforcement.

Salem Police officers involved in the 2019 case tacked photos of Karissa and Billy above their desks. Some of them had children about Billy's age. The case was just as heartbreaking for officers from assisting agencies.

Detectives from Salem Police worked around the clock, collaborating with counterparts from the Yamhill County Sheriff's Office. They pieced together evidence gathered from about 20 search warrants during what Yamhill County District Attorney Brad Berry called a relentless effort.

Wolfe, Billy's biological father, had left an electronic trail including video surveillance and cell phone records that would bolster the prosecution's case if the bodies remained missing.

Investigators believed Karissa and Billy were kidnapped sometime between the night of May 13 into the early morning hours of May 14. They have never revealed a theory on how, though.

Karissa left belongings, including glasses that Facebook posts indicate she wore most of the time, behind at her apartment, and her two cars were still parked outside. With her apartment sharing a wall with one neighbor and units in the complex tightly packed, it's difficult to imagine how someone would not have heard a struggle.

About two months before Karissa and Billy disappeared, a neighbor told KOIN he heard a fight in her apartment. A man and woman were arguing loudly, and a child was crying in the background.

'Good detective work' leads to bodies

One area police searched for Karissa and Billy in early June was about 10 miles west of Yamhill on property owned by the timber company Weyerhaeuser, the last mile up a narrow, winding, logging road.

Investigators knew Wolfe was familiar with the area and had a permit to cut fire-

wood there. He also recreated in the area and had Oregon hunting and fishing licenses and a registered watercraft.

The entrance to the area – just past Yamhill's city water treatment plant and where the pavement ends – has a large gate and signage. The posted rules say it is illegal to go in or out after sunset.

Traffic is scarce during the daytime, with few if any vehicles traveling the road. Someone would have to know the area well to make what would have been a treacherous trek at night with only the headlights of a car.

The property is remote, expansive and heavily wooded, with steep ravines to the south and spur roads to the north.

It would have been nearly impossible to find the bodies without help, but something lured law enforcement back June 15, nearly a month after Karissa and Billy had disappeared.

Berry would only say it was "just really good detective work" that took them to a location about 800 yards from where they previously had searched.

Confirming the heartbreak

More than 40 people from law enforcement, fire and search and rescue agencies teamed up for the search. After nearly two hours, a crew from McMinnville Fire found two bodies together, partially hidden and covered with what officials described as not naturally occurring debris.

The bodies were tentatively identified as Karissa and Billy and later confirmed by the state medical examiner.

An autopsy determined Karissa died of a single gunshot to the head and her death was ruled a homicide. A firearm also was found, but officials couldn't say at the time if it was connected to her murder.

The cause of Billy's death was undetermined in the autopsy. Officials have never publicly released information if additional testing helped determine the cause of death.

Wolfe was arraigned June 21, 2019, again participating in the court proceeding via video. He did not enter a plea.

Karissa's family and friends gathered in early July 2019 for a celebration of life at a McMinnville church. Tiny photographs of her beaming and holding Billy, with purple ribbons attached to safety pins, were handed out. Purple was Karissa's favorite color.

Legal wranglings have prolonged the case in the years since.

A Yamhill County judge dismissed the aggravated murder charge for the death of Karissa after a change in Oregon law, replacing it with first-degree murder.



The bodies of Karissa Fretwell, 25, and her son, Billy, 3, were discovered June 15 on land owned by Weyerhaeuser in Yamhill County. Michael Wolfe, who is charged with their murders, was known to recreate in the heavily wooded property. ABIGAIL DOLLINS/STATESMAN JOURNAL



A celebration of life for 25-year-old Karissa Fretwell and her 3-year-old son, William, took place July 7, 2019, at a McMinnville church. CAPI LYNN/STATESMAN JOURNAL

The county judge also dismissed an aggravated murder charge for the death of Billy, but the Oregon Supreme Court reversed the decision.

Wolfe's attorneys unsuccessfully appealed to the state supreme court and now plan to file an appeal with the U.S. Supreme Court.

The trial date originally was scheduled for this December but has been postponed indefinitely. The next status hearing is March 14.

'What seems like games'

Karissa's family has been frustrated watching the court case drag on for nearly 2½ years, with prosecutors and defense attorneys arguing over whether Wolfe should be eligible for the death penalty.

During a July 12 hearing, Karissa's sister, who lives out of state, spoke on behalf of the family by phone.

"My sister and my nephew lost their lives. The (Oregon) Supreme Court had ruled, and I don't understand why (the defense) are continuing with what seems like games to me," Katrina Kent told the courtroom.

Wolfe has not yet made a plea to any of the charges. The death penalty remains on the table for Billy's murder. Death penalty cases, in general, can take more than twice as long as other murder cases.

In Oregon, the death penalty is almost symbolic. Executions have been officially halted since 2011, and the last one held was in 1997.

For the first-degree murder charges, Wolfe, who is now 54, faces a minimum of 30 years without the possibility of parole.

Friends are just as frustrated with the delays. The slow churn of cases like this can cause added emotional strain on a victim's family, as well as on investigators and prosecutors.

Fretwell

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support in December 2018, but Wolfe opposed the order, claiming the numbers used to calculate the amount of child support were incorrect. Court documents in the final judgment showed his monthly gross income to have been nearly \$3,800.

During this time, Wolfe sent what Karissa described to friends as "creepy" messages. This also was around the same time she was trying to arrange visitation for Wolfe.

That Christmas, he sent several boxes to her apartment. Most of the presents contained toys for Billy, but one box was for Karissa. It included lingerie, a pair of sweatpants with the word "Juicy" on the back, and a laminated card with his name and number stating it was good for a sexual favor.

Karissa told him to stop sending gifts to her and threatened to tell his wife. Wolfe told her to stop being dramatic.

Friends knew Wolfe made her uncomfortable. Karissa told them about an encounter with him and a family member at Walmart in McMinnville. The family member confronted Karissa, who had Billy in her arms, and said she had ruined their family.

Wolfe just stood there and didn't say anything.

Karissa and Billy disappear

In April 2019, the court ordered Wolfe to pay Karissa \$904 a month. A judge signed the order May 10.

Three days later, she and Billy disappeared.

Desirae Lay, a close friend from high school, texted Karissa on May 12 to wish her a happy Mother's Day. She received a "Thank you" in response. That was the last time they talked.

Police reports stated Karissa and Billy were last seen at 4 p.m. May 13, when Karissa picked up Billy from her babysitter. Karissa didn't show up for her next shift at Yamasa and had no contact with anyone, which was unlike her.

A family member visited her West Salem apartment May 17. The door was unlocked, the television on and Karissa's bank card and eyeglasses inside. Her cars, a green Mercury Mountaineer

and an older white sedan, were still parked on the street outside the single-story complex.

The family member called Salem Police and reported Karissa and Billy missing.

Karissa's mother reached out to her daughter's friends, asking if they'd seen or heard from her.

Her last two Facebook posts, two weeks before she disappeared, were a photo of her and Billy and the words, "He has my heart" and then a final photo of the backs of her and a tiny Billy holding hands as they faced a long, empty road ahead.

Lay called and texted Karissa but did not hear back. She assumed her friend lost her phone or left it in the diaper bag, and it had run out of battery, which was not unusual.

A day or two later, a detective called Lay asking about Karissa's whereabouts. By then, Lay was worried. So were Karissa's other friends.

Michel Polston knew how close Lay was to Karissa.

"Neither of us has heard from her for over three days, which is probably like a record amount of time for them to not talk," Polston said.

Salem Police detectives interviewed several friends, who told them she had recently been in court against Billy's father.

Police questioned Wolfe on May 18 at his house in Gaston. Wolfe acknowledged having an intimate relationship with Karissa about four years before but said he hadn't seen her since a child support hearing April 15.

He told them the hearing "did not go well."

He also told them he had not been to Salem in more than a year.

Police interviewed one of Karissa's babysitters who had several conversations with her over the past three months about Wolfe and his wife. Karissa told the babysitter Wolfe had threatened to seek custody of Billy.

An electronic trail of evidence

Wolfe gave police a timeline of his whereabouts, leading up to Karissa and Billy's disappearance, including his 6:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. shift from May 10-13 at Cascade Steel. He said he took the following week off.

Wolfe was interviewed again at the

Salem Police Department after being advised of his Miranda rights. He maintained he hadn't seen Karissa.

Cascade Steel video surveillance and AT&T phone records contradicted his claims. Footage showed Wolfe leaving work at about 8:45 p.m. on May 13. A cell tower picked up his phone heading south, then detected him in the vicinity of Karissa's Salem apartment at about 9 p.m. — on the day she was last seen alive.

Video surveillance also showed Wolfe returning to Cascade Steel at 2:35 a.m. May 14, carrying a white trash bag containing unknown items, and leaving again at 2:52 a.m.

Karissa's phone pinged near Wolfe's workplace and in the general area of Wolfe's Yamhill County home on May 14. Police said the evidence was consistent with their phones being in the same approximate place.

That afternoon, a text message was sent from Karissa's phone about 1.4 miles southeast of Gaston, placing it near Wolfe's house. Police have not revealed what the text message said or who it was sent to.

Many of the details were outlined by Salem Police Detective Anthony VanDekoppel in the probable cause statement used to obtain a warrant for Wolfe's arrest.

"Based on the interviews of Karissa's family and friends, I believe the only known person who would benefit from the disappearance or criminal homicide of Karissa and William is Michael (Wolfe)," VanDekoppel wrote in the affidavit.

On May 23, Salem Police and Yamhill County Sheriff's Office searched two properties in rural Yamhill County, hoping to locate Karissa and her son or find evidence that would lead to their location.

One was a ¼-mile radius field near Hopewell. The other was Wolfe's property in Gaston.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, Oregon State Police, Yamhill County Search and Rescue and other agencies assisted.

Wolfe arrested as search continues

Friends were initially hopeful that Karissa and Billy would be found safe. More than a dozen family, friends and

coworkers held a vigil May 27, 2019, at Maud Williamson State Recreation Site in Yamhill County to bring awareness to the missing mother and son.

Widespread media coverage kept the spotlight on the search, but their hope began to chip away as the search dragged on.

Friends prepared for the worst when police revealed the personal belongings found in the West Salem apartment — items Karissa would never have left without.

The same day police searched the two properties, Wolfe was identified as a person of interest. Police must have lost track of him because they asked for the public's help locating him for additional questioning.

A wanted poster was released with two photos of the 52-year-old man with thinning hair and a bushy mustache, one with glasses, one without. The poster described him as 6-foot-2 and 250 pounds with brown hair and hazel eyes.

Wolfe was arrested the next day at a donut shop in southwest Portland.

A Blue Star Donut employee told KATU that Wolfe acted strangely inside and made "weird comments" toward female employees. They assumed he was homeless.

Salem Police took him in custody outside the bakery without resistance.

Wolfe was arraigned May 28 in Yamhill County Circuit Court, appearing by video for the brief proceeding. Family members of Karissa and Billy sat in the back row of the courtroom.

Wolfe was charged with three counts of aggravated murder — one constituting domestic violence — and two counts of first-degree kidnapping. The judge told Wolfe it was a potential death penalty case.

Karissa and Billy were still missing.

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