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Who killed Mark Snopek?

Despite \$15k reward for tips, case grows cold; wife upset with investigation

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Who killed Mark Snopek?

At about 8:53 p.m. on Aug. 8, 2007 someone driving northbound on Boone County Highway R18 struck and killed Snopek while he was riding his mountain bike on a favorite 16-mile loop near his rural home and left him to die on the side of the road.

Although witnesses reported a "small dark-colored vehicle" whose headlights were "briefly eclipsed" seconds before the tragedy occurred, the hit and run driver did not stop, or come forward and was never apprehended.

A little more than three years after it happened the case is still cold, despite numerous leads. Snopek was 53 when he was struck down from behind on the county road, also known as "L" Avenue, between 290th and 300th streets.

"It's pretty tough to have a lot of hope after three years, but I can't not (have hope)," Kay Snopek said of finding her husband's killer.

Iowa state law requires the driver of any vehicle involved in an accident that causes injury or death to remain at the scene. Leaving the scene of a fatal accident is a Class D felony punishable by up to five years in prison and a fine of \$750 to \$7,500.

"Mark was a good rider," Kay, 56, said in an interview last week. "He loved exercising, bicycling, getting outdoors. He was struck from behind. He was wearing a flashing red (warning safety) light. It was flashing red in the dark. You could see it from a couple of hundred yards behind him."

Her husband also wore a reflective vest and a helmet, she said.

The Boone County Sheriff's Office, along with the county ambulance, the Woodward Fire and Police Departments and the Iowa State Patrol responded to the scene. Mark was pronounced dead at the scene by the Boone County Coroner.

Lead investigator Sgt. Kenny Kendall, Investigations Specialist with the Boone County Sheriff's Office, said "several leads were called in the following day."

"Everything is investigated to the end," he said in an interview last week. "We interviewed a lot of people in the county. All (leads) were chased to the end. We'll chase every lead. We chase it down until we find out if it's relevant or not. All proved to be not relevant."

Since 2005, and not counting this year, six bicyclists have been killed on Iowa roads by hit and run drivers, said Scott Falb, Driver Safety Specialist with the Iowa Department of Transportation.



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Mark Snopek, pictured above, was killed by a vehicle in a hit and run on Aug. 8, 2007, while riding his bike on County Highway R18 in Boone County. Since then, investigators have exhausted leads and watched the three-year-old case turn cold.

"I suspect that the most we get is one a year in most years," he said.

In 2005, a bicyclist was killed by a hit and run driver and one was killed in 2006, Falb said. In 2007, three were killed by hit and run drivers. There were no hit and run bicyclist fatalities in 2008, he said, but five bicyclists were killed by motorists in incidents that did not involve hit and runs. There was one hit and run bicycle fatality in 2009. Falb said he did not recall any hit and run bicycle fatalities so far this year.

In its last legislative session Iowa lawmakers passed a measure that prohibits motorists from steering "unreasonably" close to bicyclists or throwing anything at a cyclist. The fine is \$250.

Kay still recalls vividly the night that her husband was killed while riding his bike.

"That night I was taking a final exam at DMACC (Des Moines Area Community College)," Kay said. "Mark was riding his nightly 16-mile loop. We were on a roll, riding four to seven times a week. I just wanted to get back home and relax with Mark, eat dinner and have a beer," and talk about their plans for an upcoming family reunion in Wisconsin.

"I got an A," she said, quietly. "Mark will never know."

"Mark left home at about 8:15," she said. "For him the loop took about 50 minutes. For me, about an hour and 15 minutes. He left going south from our house. He was beyond the halfway point (when he was hit). The light, it changes quickly at this time of year."

She said that there is no curve in the road that might have been a factor in the accident.

"R18 is one of the straighter stretches of road around our home," she said. "It's exceedingly straight for several miles, like an arrow."

High school sweethearts in Cudahy, Wisconsin, where they were both born and raised, the Snopek's were married for 28 years. They loved the outdoors and rode together as often as they could wherever they lived.

"Our first date was the junior prom at the Cudahy Senior High junior prom," Kay said.

Mark's work as a limnologist for the City of New York – limnologists are scientists who study inland waters - took the married couple from Wisconsin to the small town of West Shokan, near Kingston, in the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York. After several years there they returned to the Midwest when Mark was hired as a wetland biologist by Kevin Griggs of the Iowa Department of Transportation in 2001, where he worked until his death.

"Mark came out here for an interview," said Griggs, 39, who now runs his own his own environmental consulting company, Griggs Environmental Strategies.

"The staff and I immediately liked him," he said. "We lobbied to get him out here. He was perfect, a real good match. He worked with me a couple of years. We had a personal relationship well beyond our working relationship, also with my wife and kids."

Griggs, 39, came up with the idea for a reward, made in pledges, for any information leading to the arrest and conviction of the hit and run driver who killed Mark. The nearly 50 pledges amounted to \$15,000 and will still be given to anyone who has any information that might lead to the arrest and conviction of Mark's killer.

"If somebody is caught and convicted, we'll send it to them," Griggs said. "At the beginning I thought that if we came up with \$5,000 in pledges and it kept on going, I was sure (the case) would break open and somebody would talk, but it never did."

Newspaper articles about the reward money were published in the Boone News-Republican, The Des Moines Register, and The Ames Tribune. It also aired on television news, Griggs said, adding that he sent emails to some 4,000 Iowa Department of Transportation employees.

"Fourteen days (after the hit and run) and no one was arrested," he said. "I intended to do something. It really became an Iowa concern for Mark and Kay's families. I wanted to do something. I felt helpless. Mark

was gone. I did what I could to help Kay.”

“The \$15,000 was unheard of,” Kay said. “It was believed that at that time that would be a lot to generate a tip or some kind of leads. A lot of previous amounts (other cases) were something like \$5,000. When we reached that goal and nothing was happening it was more than disappointing.”

“What I think happened...” said Kendall, who’s been with the sheriff’s office since 1987 and an investigations sergeant since May 2007, “There are three points in an accident. An accident is defined as an unplanned chain of events. In an accident there is the point of possible perception, the point of actual perception and the point of no escape.”

“I think the point of no escape happened before (driver’s) actual perception,” he said. “Oncoming headlights did not help at all.”

“Visibility wasn’t the best that night,” he said. “It was cloudy, the pavement was wet, it was raining off and on that day. The time of night, the light conditions, oncoming traffic. Witnesses say headlights eclipsed the northbound vehicle briefly.”

Kendall said witnesses, who he estimated to be within a quarter of a mile, described the vehicle as a “smaller, dark-colored vehicle.”

He said the Iowa Department of Criminal Investigation lab’s criminologist said the vehicle could be a SUV because of the height of impact. Mark’s rear tire was the first thing that was hit, he said.

“There was very little physical evidence at the scene,” Kendall said. “A small amount of glass. A plastic grommet, which holds an inner fenderwell. I believe that Mr. Snopek went underneath the vehicle. There was a paint exchange onto the bicycle, a bluish silver color.”

Kendall said they obtained several search warrants on several vehicles, which were impounded and checked for fabric on the vehicle or damage to it. One vehicle was checked during the late fall of 2008, he said, and one as recently as last summer.

“If somebody has information they should come forward if they think it’s important or not,” he said. “Whether it’s about a strange vehicle, or a relative’s or friend’s vehicle. It could be very important. It could be what turns this investigation around.”

“I would like to find whoever did this,” Kendall said. “The county attorney will determine the charges and they would have their fair day before the court. I can understand accidents but why would you leave a man to die in the road?”

“This is something that is never going away,” he said. “Like spoiled milk, you don’t put it back in the refrigerator. It’s not a crime to have an accident, but it is a crime not to stop and render aid.”

When asked what the chances are of solving the case, Kendall said,

“It’s hard to say. I’m not going to give up on it. I’ll follow it to the end. Crimes out there that go unsolved, it doesn’t sit well with me. The victim deserves some justice. Whoever it is, they need to come forward. Somebody who knows something will tell somebody.”

On Wednesday, Kay told the B N-R that she is very dissatisfied with the investigation that was conducted by the sheriff’s office.

Several hours before press time, she emailed the following statement: “I have been deeply dissatisfied with Sheriff Fehr’s and Deputy Kendall’s handling of Mark’s vehicular homicide case from the start. In three years, they have never offered unsolicited information or contacted me without my initiation or prodding. They have implied that all investigative leads have been thoroughly examined and exhausted, yet last I knew they agreed with me that several matters needed to be re-investigated. I have heard nothing further on these matters. Furthermore, I consulted someone knowledgeable about criminal behavior and investigations who reviewed the records available from the Sheriff’s Department. His assessment is that Sheriff Fehr’s investigation has left many unanswered questions. I remain frustrated, angry, and feeling very hopeless.”

When informed of Kay's statement, Boone County Sheriff Ron Fehr said, "I understand where she's coming from. The frustration of not having somebody to pay for what happened to her husband. But at the same time, I feel that Detective Kendall exhausted every avenue that he was given. We also had assistance from the state patrol from the beginning."

"Everything that has been presented as possible evidence and all the avenues were taken to the best that could be done at that time," Fehr said. "If we get anything new after the fact...the case is never closed. We will pursue any new evidence that comes in to the fullest as though it had taken place yesterday."

"I do understand her frustrations and when you lose somebody like that in a violent form you have a lot of emotions. Our family has personally has gone through it," he said. "I know what the feelings are."

Fehr said that if any new lead comes in "we will look at it and go to wherever it leads us."

He said the sheriff's office conferred with the county attorney, Jim Robbins, several times and he was satisfied with their investigation.

"If we could arrest somebody, we would," Fehr said. "When (Kendall) works a case, he works a case...Kenny is capable and I have all the faith in the world in him."

Fehr also pointed out that the Iowa State Patrol and DCI also helped in the investigation of the case.

Kay no longer drives on R18. She did, however, "drive it slowly" on the recent third anniversary of her husband's death.

"I cried a lot," she said.

Also, she did not ride a bicycle for more than a year after the accident. Her first ride after it was on Labor Day in 2008, when she rode in a memorial bike ride for Bill Perrier, who was killed on R18, near the corner of 300th Street, while riding his bicycle. A semi-tractor truck driver did not stop at a stop sign.

Last year, Kay rode in the Bill Perrier/Mark Snopek Memorial Ride the week before Labor Day. She had T-shirts made, which she sold for cost and donated the proceeds to the Madrid Trail Head committee. On the front of the T-shirts was printed: "Bill Perrier/Mark Snopek Memorial Ride." On the back it said: "Share the Road, Cars and Bikes Together."

Kay, a research associate for Pioneer Hi-Bred in Johnston, adopted a two-mile stretch of road of 16-mile loop on County Road E57, or 270th Street, about 2-1/2 miles from where her husband was killed. From the Snopek's home, the loop went south on R26 to 325th Street and then west to R18. There, it went north to E57, which they rode east to home.

"I had this mindset, before anything happened to Mark that I would get in the other lane (driving by bicyclists)," she said. "When I see bicyclists on the road it always give me a pang of anxiety."

Mark Wyatt, executive director of the Iowa Bicycle Coalition, asked Kay to be on the coalition's board.

"She has a big impact on traffic safety," he said.

"In these hard economic times," Kay said, "I'm blessed with my friends and my new life as a single person."

Kendall said that anonymous tips about the case can be texted to the sheriff's office by dialing 274637 (CRIMES). Type "Boone" in the message box and then type in the message. Tips can be sent by computer by going to www.Tipsubmit.com, clicking on "Submit a New Tip" and entering the requested information. Tips can be emailed to tips@boonecounty.iowa.gov, however, the sender's address will become known.

"This family needs some closure," Kendall said, "and the person who is responsible needs to be held accountable."

