

40 years after 'Waverly stranglings,' a renewed search for answers



Mike Kilen, mkilen@dmreg.com 10:30 p.m. CDT July 26, 2015



Julie Benning was 18 when she disappeared in 1975, the day after spending Thanksgiving with her parents at their farm near Clarksville. She was found dead five months later, strangled and dumped in a rural culvert. *The Register*

This story is part of "Gone Cold," a series of stories exploring Iowa's unsolved murders



(Photo: Brian Powers/*The Register*)

Julia Benning lived on a farm near Clarksville, but she wanted to experience the wider world. She had pen pals in Michigan and Scotland and shared with them her righteous rants about small-minded prejudices against black people, Indians and young women who spoke their mind and didn't conform in dress or behavior.

Her family didn't know where this came from, but accepted it. The oldest of five daughters of Lowell and JoAnn Benning, Julia had been the picture of a good farm girl, following her father around to do chores as a youngster, growing into a beautiful 4-foot-11-inch tall young woman who sang in the Plainfield High School choir, played in the band and performed for the speech team.

But with no money to attend college, Julia went to nearby Waverly to find a job after high school. She loved the music of the era — bands like the Eagles. When the family took a rare trip to California in 1974, she begged to stop in Winslow, Ariz., because the Eagles sang about standing on a corner there. They did, and she sang.

Lighten up while you still can/don't even try to understand/Just find a place to make your stand/and take it easy

She wanted to work at a radio station, but the managers said she needed more experience and education. She settled for trying to find a job at a bowling alley, but they already had stacks of job applicants.

That's when Julia, 18, walked into the Sir Lounge in Waverly and was hired on the spot as a cocktail waitress. That it was a strip club pained her religious parents. This was a girl more likely to go to church camp than a party, one who had experienced only a couple of dates in high school, despite her good looks and free spirit.

PART 1: GONE COLD SERIES

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Julia wrote in her diary: "Everyone at school, home and everywhere else was duly shocked and amazed to think good ol' Julie was working in a 'strip joint,' as they inelegantly termed the Sir, which is really a fairly classy, plushly carpeted, dark-paneled club with a nice atmosphere. The dancers are pretty decent people, not the ten dollar whores most of the men think they are. It was a strange experience watching a chick strip and dance completely nude, but after the initial novelty, it soon became old hat and didn't bother me a bit."

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Her parents' garden is where Carol Kean, right, has some of the best memories of her sister Julia Benning, who was found dead after disappearing in 1975. At left, Kean's daughter picks peas in the same garden near Clarksville. (Photo: Brian Powers/The Register)

On Nov. 28, 1975, the day after spending Thanksgiving with her parents, Julia was seen walking to work. But then, she disappeared.

Nearly 40 years later, her parents and sister Carol Kean sat in the dining room of the same rural farmhouse where Julia grew up, and where her own father did, too. It was like a time warp. The carpet is still candy-stripped, popular in the 1970s. Julia's drawings are splayed across the dining room table — of fashionable rock stars and stylish women's dress of the era.

Her father stood in the doorway, well into his 70s now, and his voice cracked. There was no way he could talk about it again. He only whispered, "I gave her her first ice cream," before exiting to the farm shed, where his daughter's '70s-era platform shoes hang above his work bench.

JoAnn Benning said she tried to talk her daughter out of working at the club, but the young woman they more commonly called "Julie" said she wanted to be an "independent woman" and promised she would never be a stripper. She made pottery and chokers out of bear claws, feathers and beads, and sewed the dress she wore that last day on the way to work.

They didn't know it then, but Julia had been writing to pen pals the month before, saying she'd grown up fast working at the bar and had already learned not to trust anybody. "A sleazy guy offered me \$1,500 to go to bed with him and I turned him down. I saw the money and knew he had it, but the idea of it bummed me out. ... I just didn't think I could live with myself later."

Deep down, her letters show, she was concerned that people didn't accept her, and she wanted to save money to fix the "lazy eye" she'd had since childhood. She wrote that she was depressed and had a feeling that some drastic change was about to occur in her life.

Julia loved Thanksgiving, her favorite holiday. After stuffing themselves around the family table, she got up the next day and said she had to go to work. Her mother begged her to call in sick, but she left anyway.

"She looked back and waved at me, and I had a strange feeling," JoAnn Benning said. "It was the last time I saw her."

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The bar staff called her the next day to say Julia hadn't shown up for work on Friday. They waited a day before going to police. The family searched in fields and buildings in the area. They contacted television stations to get the word out. Nothing.

"I looked in culverts. By then I knew she was gone. It was a matter of finding her. I just had a feeling," said JoAnn Benning, whose own mother had died when she was an infant. JoAnn had given birth to Julia at 19, and they were deeply connected because she felt they had matured together.

"We just stayed here at home all winter. Just to be here."

Five months passed, and a black car pulled into the driveway. Julia's sister Carol, who was only 12 at the time, was in her bedroom and heard the words "black fingernail polish" — the color Julia wore — and "ID the body."

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JoAnn Benning stands in her Clarksville home June 23. Her daughter Julia disappeared after Thanksgiving in 1975, and JoAnn says she still hates the holiday. (Photo: Brian Powers/The Register)

Julia's naked body was found by a county maintenance worker in nearby rural Butler County. She had been strangled, and her body was stuffed in a culvert, washing out with the March rains.

A homicide investigation ensued.

"I couldn't feel anything," Carol Kean said. "My other sister cried on the floor. But for years, I didn't think about it."

Then one day last spring, she started thinking about it again because of a man she met with in a park who claimed to know what happened and who did it. She hasn't been able to stop thinking about it every day since.

After a few months, state investigators disappeared. After a few years, the Bennings quit checking in with local cops. The case had gone cold.

The Bennings were upset, too, about the damage to their daughter's reputation. It was as if because she worked in a strip club, she got what she deserved, despite their insistence that she never stripped and despite her diary entries stating that she was a waitress there only to save money for college.

They felt guilt about not providing her the money, and still do. But they followed the ethic learned hard on the farm to pick yourself up by the bootstraps, go to work, be strong. Carol Kean even went to school the day after her sister was found.

In the months following the murder, questions arose.

Her case was similar to that of Valerie Kossowsky, 14, whose strangled body was found in 1971 on a creek bank off a gravel road near Waverly. Six months after Julia's body was found, 20-year-old Wartburg College sophomore Lisa Peak's nude body was found in a ditch north of Waverly. She had also been strangled.

The three unsolved cases became known as the "Waverly stranglings." Bremer County Sheriff's Department detective David MacDonald believes they may be connected.

"We do believe the possibility exists that there is still a suspect out there somewhere, which is one of the reasons the case remains open," he said.

Lisa Peak's body was exhumed in 2010, and other tips have been pursued through the years. But no charges have ever been issued in the three cases. Authorities say the stranglings have become urban legend among young people in the area.

But in the 1970s, the disappearances of young women who were later found dead was all too common, said Susan Chehak, who authored the website and book titled "What Happened to Paula?" about the murder of Paula Oberbroeckling, 18, of Cedar Rapids in 1970.

She said the sexual and cultural revolution around civil and gender rights made it "a particularly dangerous time to be a girl of 18 or older. ... The rules had been removed, but safety nets weren't in place."

The Bennings had tucked away Julia's lock of hair, snipped from her so her mother could always have a piece of her lovely daughter, and a hairpin JoAnn found while scouring the ground one day where Julia's body was found. Her mother used to suffer thinking of the act of dying and whether Julia felt physical pain. Now she just regrets that her daughter never got to experience life.

"I wish she could have had a horse," JoAnn Benning said.

Recently, the sorrow was channeled into a new lead. A man from a nearby small town told Carol Kean he was at the Sir Lounge the night of the murder and named the people responsible. He said he had first told authorities what he saw in the months after it happened. Then after his own daughter's death, he was determined to tell it again, and contacted Jody Ewing of the website Iowa Cold Cases.

He later met with Kean, and both women believe his story.

"I'm not going to get anything out of this. I have no reason to lie," said the man, who spoke with the Register only on the condition he wouldn't be named because he said he's been threatened by the men he saw with Julia that night.

This is what he says happened, while acknowledging that he is a former felon who had been drinking that night: He was at the Sir when he saw Julia taking money at the door, although authorities reported at the time that she was last seen walking to work. A struggle ensued in the hallway. Men blocked his vision of it when he tried to look back there.



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A short time later in the parking lot, he saw what appeared to be Julia slumped in the passenger side of a pickup. When the pickup door was opened, he saw a man he knew with his hand near her throat, trying to cover the dome light with his other hand. What he thinks were the victim's clothes were later planted in his garage by the man he suspects or his associates. He says he threw them away, not yet knowing Julia was missing.

Waverly Police Capt. Jason Leonard said he has taken information from the man, and police have looked into every new lead. But there hasn't been any "new information" in the past two years, he said.

Every day since she met with the man who says he witnessed the slaying, Kean said she has been on a mission. She wants to repair her sister's reputation and shame the man who was in that pickup. She is researching, drawing up theories and tracking down the locations of people there at the time.

"It consumes me. For the first time in 40 years, I have a name," she said. "To imagine this beautiful girl, nude and stuffed in a culvert covered in mud and leaves, the indignity of it. The man who did this is walking free, and I can't live with that."

The family still notices one less plate on the Thanksgiving table every year.

"I hate Thanksgiving now because that was her favorite holiday," JoAnn said. "She'd say, 'I'd walk all night to be there.' "

Left to console her is a short story Julia wrote for one of her high school classes. In it, a dying girl told her weeping mother on her death bed that she was going to heaven, "and I will be waiting for you."

Cold Case breakdown

Who: Julia Benning


What happened: Julia, 18, disappeared on Nov. 28, 1975, and was found dead five months later, stuffed in a culvert in rural Butler County. She had been strangled.

Status: Unsolved.

How you can help: Anyone with information about Julia Benning's unsolved murder is asked to contact contact Special Agent Jon Moeller at the **Federal Bureau of Investigation** (<https://www.fbi.gov/omaha/contact-us/territory-jurisdiction>) at 712-258-1920.

The Des Moines Register, in partnership with the Iowa Newspaper Association, is highlighting some of Iowa's unsolved homicides in the hopes that it will lead to new tips and potentially help solve cases.


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