In a 20-year-old murder case, a photo stirs hope of closure

By Emilie Lounsberry
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

She was a pretty, blond-haired child of 11 with violet-blue eyes who loved gymnastics and wanted to grow up to be a teacher, just like her mother. He was a big-time baseball fan, a 10-year-old Cub Scout who adored his sister.

Karen and Michael Reinert were last seen alive the night of June 22, 1979, leaving their Ardmore home with their mother, Upper Merion High School teacher Susan Reinert. Three days later, Susan Reinert's nude, beaten body was discovered near Harrisburg, but in spite of a nationwide search, the children — dead or alive — have not been found.

Exactly what happened to them has been the most troubling unanswered question in one of Pennsylvania's most bizarre murder cases, which, nearly 20 years later, is still generating headlines and leads. Last week, investigators said that the public distribution of a photograph found in the prison cell of William S. Bradfield Jr. after his death had generated dozens of phone calls and tips. Bradfield, a former Upper Merion High School teacher, was convicted in 1983 of masterminding the murders.

So now, once again, there is a glimmer of hope for closure.

For the three surviving family members of the children — their father, Kenneth, and paternal grandparents, John and Florence Reinert — the last two decades have been a roller-coaster ride of raised hopes and bitter disappointments as they waited for evidence that would lead to the bodies.



Susan Reinert, left, and children Michael and Karen, whose bodies were never found, were last seen alive June 22, 1979.

"We thought it was over and finished and we had kind of reconciled ourselves to that," said Florence Reinert of Phoenixville, a polite, gracious woman who looks younger than her 81 years. "Still, it makes us feel good that they haven't forgotten the kids."

As painful as the discovery of their remains would be, she said, at least there would be closure, though nothing could ever extinguish the years of heartbreak, which she said seems as acute as ever.

"You feel pretty good during the day, but at night, as soon as you put your head on that pillow, things start running through your mind," said John Reinert, also 81.

So he said he was not getting his hopes up this time: "We get hope, then we lose it."

The photograph was among the personal effects of Bradfield, who died of a heart attack in January while serving a life sentence for plotting the killings of Reinert and her children to inherit $730,000 in life insurance he had bought; he was the beneficiary of the policy.

The photo depicts some sort of stone marker set in an unidentified wooded area, leaving police to wonder whether it could be a photograph of a grave site, possibly the children's. The photograph was developed in 1986.

State police investigators said they also were interested in what appear to be coded writings, along with other materials, found in Bradfield's cell.

Bradfield, whom Reinert referred to on insurance-policy documents as her future husband, had predicted for months before the killings that Jay C. Smith, formerly the principal at Upper Merion High, would murder Reinert, according to trial testimony.

Three fellow teachers testified that they left with Bradfield for Cape May, N.J., between 10:30 and 11 p.m. on June 22, 1979, saying that he asked them to accompany him so he would have an alibi in case Reinert was murdered.

The prosecution contended that Bradfield had lured Reinert, who was divorced, to an unidentified site after she and the children left their home around 9:30 that night, and that Smith then killed her and the children.

Smith was convicted in 1986 but was set free in 1992 after spending six years on death row; a court found evidence of prosecutorial misconduct that it said was so egregious that he should not be retried.

Both men maintained their innocence.

Reinert's body was found on June 25 in the trunk of her car in a motel parking lot near Harrisburg. That same day, Smith was in Harrisburg for sentencing on charges stemming from a 1978 arrest; he had been identified as the masked man seen running wildly around a van outside a Chester County shopping center, waving a gun in each hand.

He was convicted separately of posing as a security guard to steal money from one Sears department store and trying to steal from another.

Smith, who is now 70, also was a suspect in the disappearance of his daughter, Stephanie, and her husband, Eddie Hunsberger, who were last seen alive in early 1978. Their bodies have not been found.

In September, a federal civil jury found that law-enforcement officials had not violated Smith's right to a fair trial and appeal. Through the years, the Reinert family has attended hearings and trials, hoping to learn some new details of what happened to the children.

After Bradfield was convicted, they hoped that he might eventually talk, perhaps as a means to get out of prison, perhaps in a death-bed statement. But authorities never got any indication that he had anything to tell them. Now, they hope to find clues in what he left behind.

Florence Reinert said that in spite of the bitter disappointments over the years, she's just glad the state police haven't given up.

"Whether they have any success or not," she said, "at least it gives us satisfaction to know that they care."

Inquirer staff writer Rich Henson contributed to this article.



SILVIA FLORES / The Press-Enterprise

Meteors streaked through the sky behind a Joshua tree at Joshua Tree National Park in California during the Leonid storm early Tuesday. The shower is caused by the Earth's passage through the tail of the comet Tempel-Tuttle. The storm got its name because it appears to come from the direction of the constellation Leo.

Worry stalks Saidel fund-raising gala

By Tom Infield
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Thursday night, upstairs at the members-only Vesper Club in Center City, a few dozen men and women in conservative suits were chatting at tables or milling around lamb chops in the buffet line.

What should have been a bubbly affair — a party to raise future campaign cash for City Controller Jonathan A. Saidel — instead had the atmosphere of a hospital corridor. No one wanted to say what was on everybody's mind: that their friend Saidel had taken a beating.

A day earlier, Pennsylvania Attorney General Mike Fisher had announced that Diana Roca, Saidel's former campaign treasurer, had been charged with 18 felony and misdemeanor counts related to alleged campaign-finance abuse.

Roca, who also is a former girlfriend of Saidel's, was accused of having conspired with him to unlawfully take $36,000 from the campaign account, part of which she used to make a down payment on a house, and $5,000 of which she gave to Saidel's parents, Israel and Mildred Saidel, who just days earlier had lent Saidel the same amount for his personal use.

Saidel, elected last year to his third term as controller, was not charged with any crime. But the implication that he was involved in financial misdeeds was a blow to him, personally and politically.

Christopher Mottola, a Republican political consultant, said that if Saidel, a Democrat, had ambitions ever to run for mayor of Philadelphia, he could forget them.

"This kills him for higher office," Mottola said. "He's the city's chief financial watchdog. This makes him look foolish. You don't want someone to look foolish when he's the city's financial watchdog."

Subdued and soft-spoken, Saidel stationed himself near the top of the steps at the Vesper Club on Thursday and murmured words of thanks to his guests.

Several dozen people contributed a reported $65,000 to $75,000 to Friends of Saidel, the committee that Roca had overseen. The event had been planned weeks ahead, but the timing seemed awkward.

Over there was Joe Rauscher, head of the AFL-CIO. Three tables away sat City Councilman Rick Mariano. Standing near the wall was Ted Kirsch, leader of the teachers' union. Going from table to table shaking hands was Democratic mayoral contender Marty Weinberg.

"I think somebody is trying to hang him for some reason," Rauscher said of Saidel. "He's one of the most honest, hardworking guys I ever met. There's no reason for him to play games with finances."

Saidel has been one of the most popular political figures in the city.

In his reelection victory last year, Saidel defeated a primary opponent by a 2-1 ratio, then trounced Republican William O'Brien, 125,000 votes to 48,000.

For much of this year, Saidel was the nearly constant companion of city Democratic Party chairman Robert A. Brady as he ran sucessfully for Congress. Brady knew politics but was a first-time candidate. Saidel looked out for Brady and helped him raise several hundred thousand dollars for his campaign.



Diana Roca is charged with taking money from Jonathan A. Saidel's campaign fund.



Brady on Thursday suggested that politics played a role in a Republican attorney general going after alleged campaign violations by Roca. He said he expected Saidel to weather the crisis.

"He's taking it fine," Brady said. "He understands it's political."

Frederick L. Voigt, who as executive director of the Committee of Seventy is the city's election watchdog, said Friday that it was unusual for criminal counts to be lodged for campaign-finance violations.

Candidates and their treasurers often mishandle official reports, he said. Some fail to file reports at all. It is common, he said, for campaigners to amend reports, as Roca and Saidel did after the $36,000 check that Roca wrote to herself in January 1997 became public knowledge.

"It's a very sloppy system," Voigt said. "You'd be hard-pressed to find prosecutions."

The last prominent Pennsylvania politician to be charged with campaign-finance abuses was Fisher's predecessor as attorney general, Republican Ernie Preate.

Lloyd George Parry, Saidel's lawyer, said that the Roca case was "total nonsense" and that Fisher "ought to publicly apologize and withdraw the charges."

He said he hardly knew how to defend Saidel, because Saidel had not been charged. "This is a terrible thing, to name somebody as an unindicted coconspirator. ... You blacken their names and leave them without any way to effectively respond," Parry said.

Saidel, he said, never was questioned by investigators and was not called to testify before the statewide grand jury in Harrisburg that issued the charges against Roca.

Saidel on Thursday refused to discuss the case.

Like all lawyers, Saidel is subject to discipline by the Supreme Court if he violates professional standards of conduct.

"Although something may not be a violation of the criminal law, it may still be violation of the professional rules of conduct," said David Oh, co-chairman of the Professional Responsibility Committee of the Philadelphia Bar Association.

The grand jury depicted Saidel, a divorced father of four who earns $85,000 in city salary, as a man struggling with personal finances.

It said his parents, who live in Elkins Park, had lent him money to pay his city property and business taxes. From April 1996 to July 1997, it said, Saidel's personal checking account balance ranged from $644 to $4,194.

Two years ago, after a small bank controlled by the Saidel family went belly up, Saidel said publicly that he had lost his life savings — $200,000.

"I don't know if he's in hard times," Parry said. "I do know that it was necessary for him to borrow money from his parents from time to time. I take that as a sign of an honest politician. I worry about the ones who don't have financial problems."

Saidel had been widely mentioned as a 1999 mayoral candidate. After his campaign last year, he had about $200,000 left in his campaign fund. But in January he took himself out of the race. "If another office came along that interested me, then I could look at that," he said.

Mark Segal, Philadelphia Gay News publisher and a fan of Saidel, said Friday that he would bounce back. "This is a city where dead people have been elected, ... where the dead vote. ... If you serve your constituency well, people will support you. And that's what Jon has done."

35 years after the death of JFK, his legacy is decidedly mixed

By Alvin S. Felzenberg
SPECIAL TO THE INQUIRER

After President Clinton took to the airwaves and admitted that he had had an inappropriate relationship with a White House intern — after having denied it for months — he repeated his apology before his cabinet. Health and Human Services Secretary Donna E. Shalala reportedly berated the President for engaging in acts ill befitting his office and encouraging subordinates to make false statements on his behalf.

Clinton was said to have replied that, had the American people shared her opinions, Richard Nixon would have been elected president in 1960 instead of John F. Kennedy. Some of the President's critics took his remarks as evidence that he was less contrite than he insisted.

Clinton's supposed comments bespoke attitudes that historians and the public have held since Kennedy's presidency was cut short by assassination 35 years ago today:

- That it was good for the nation that Kennedy rather than Nixon succeeded Dwight D. Eisenhower as president. (Historians rate Kennedy above average and Nixon a failure. Public opinion polls, up to 1991, showed Kennedy, Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt as the most popular of past presidents.)
- That a president's private deeds, no matter how indiscreet and reckless, would and should have no impact on a president's standing in history.
- That Kennedy made a good, if not a great, president.

How well have they held up?

Kennedy entered office bereft of a mandate. Mindful of this, he named prominent Republicans to high economic and national security posts. He assiduously briefed national Republican leaders before initiating dangerous foreign engagements. He maintained friendships that he had forged with GOP congressmen with whom he had served. Many worked with him to clear the way for future civil rights legislation.

Outside of public view, Kennedy was less cautious. His private life could hardly be called conventional even by today's standards. Tales of his exploits circulated about Washington, New York, Palm Beach, Fla., Hollywood and elsewhere while he lived. After his death, many of them proved to have been true.

Kennedy enjoyed romantic assignations with celebrated leading ladies and socialites of his era. The press of his day — most of it male and with similar proclivities — paid them no attention, at least in print or on the air. Kennedy's was the old-fashioned kind of womanizing. Not even his most severe detractors suggest that any of his exploits were anything but consensual. Nor do they speak of women offering themselves to him in exchange for higher-paying jobs. Not even the lurid, tabloid revelations hint of sexual harassment.

Most of Kennedy's infidelities will have as little an impact on Kennedy's standing as president as the recently revealed DNA tests that purport to establish Thomas Jefferson's paternity of African American descendants had on his.

At least two of Kennedy's indiscretions, however, will influence what history says about his presidency. One of his girlfriends was also the mistress of a Chicago mobster. Another was a suspected KGB agent.

Those activities aside, what should history's verdict on John F. Kennedy be 35 years after his death? His legacy is mixed.

He came to power in the afterglow of America's victory in World War II and the unprecedented prosperity that followed it.

Through his idealism and his soaring rhetoric, Kennedy tapped into the still-prevalent feeling that government could be a force for good. He captured the nation's imagination when he set a goal of putting a man on the moon, propelled thousands of young Americans into the Peace Corps, and inspired still others — not all of whom had been born when he was slain — to enter public service.

Kennedy and his Republican Secretary of the Treasury, C. Douglas Dillon, pushed for across-the-board tax cuts and increased tax credits to promote economic growth. They lowered top marginal rates from 91 percent to 70 percent. Ronald Reagan, citing their example, dropped them to 50 percent and then to 28. Clinton raised them to 39.6.

Free trade was another Kennedy hallmark. Two of the eight rounds of international trade negotiations were undertaken while he was in office. Both reduced tariffs. A latecomer to the civil rights revolution, Kennedy used the fullest powers of his office to change public opinion and ready the country for new and necessary legislation. "We are confronted primarily with a moral issue," he told the nation. "It is as old as the Scriptures and as plain as the American Constitution."

In foreign affairs, Kennedy averted a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union through his deft handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis. His test ban may have paved the way for Nixon's detente and Reagan's besting of Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev. Kennedy's "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" speech kept hope alive for a divided Germany.

Kennedy's record had its deficiencies. Some of his mistakes hamper his current successor to this day. His participation in the assassination of foreign leaders (allies such as South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem and the Dominican Republic's Rafael Trujillo) led to legislation that today impedes the removal of enemies such as Iraq's Saddam Hussein — without a war.

Kennedy's cloak-and-dagger botching of similar attempts against Castro may have tightened the dictator's hold over his people. It may also have precipitated the missile confrontation that Kennedy resolved.

Even Kennedy partisans admit there never was any "missile gap" and blame him for beginning an arms race. And there remains the question of what Kennedy would have done about Vietnam. His apologists insist he would have withdrawn U.S. forces after his reelection. Yet the best and brightest who led him into the quagmire and wise men they consulted somehow forgot to mention that detail to his successor.

Like other presidents, JFK taped his conversations without informing other participants. Like Nixon, he was not above using the IRS for political purposes.

Most damaging to Kennedy's long-term reputation may be the troubling, free-flowing, interconnecting, and overlapping relationships that existed between his White House and the underworld, corrupt political machines and spooks of all kinds.

Transcending the endless literature and ceaseless talk about him — pro and con — are Kennedy's spontaneity ("It was easy, they sank my boat," he told a youngster who asked how he became a war hero), his sense of irony ("Mothers may still want their sons to grow up to be president, but do not want them to become politicians in the process"), and his self-deprecating wit ("I thought he sounded more like Teddy," he said of a well-known Kennedy impersonator).

Kennedy may have been the last president to accept public responsibility for failures of his administration, which he did after the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

Aside from Reagan, he was the only president of modern times not to give way to anger, self pity, or self righteousness.

These have been rare qualities among our presidents. Ben Bradlee coined a term that sad November day in 1963 that still captures their essence: that special grace. They, too, are part of Kennedy's legacy.

Alvin S. Felzenberg writes and lectures about the American presidency.

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.