

A COLD CASE HEATS UP

WHO KILLED DENISE PORTER?

NEARLY THREE DECADES AFTER THE UNSOLVED MURDER OF A YOUNG BRIDE, HER HUSBAND FACES RENEWED SCRUTINY



STARTING OUT

Five weeks after her 18th birthday, Denise Washington married 25-year-old Joel Porter on June 12, 1982. Less than three years later, she was stabbed to death by an unknown assailant.

The crime was shocking and grisly. Denise Porter, just 20 years old, was found on the living room floor of her Baton Rouge apartment on March 14, 1985, in a pool of her own blood, dead of multiple stab wounds. Her husband, Joel Porter, then 27, found her body when he returned home from his night shift at the post office—and called his wife’s parents. “I heard [Joel] screaming and crying,” says Denise’s mother, Doris Washington, of that fateful 9:15 a.m. call. “He said, ‘I found Denise dead on the living room floor! I haven’t called police yet.’ And then he hung up.”

In the 29 years since that heart-wrenching call, the Washington family has waited in vain for another—telling them their daughter’s murder had been solved, her killer brought to justice. But now they have new hope: In the past year Denise’s cold case has been reopened by Det. John C. Dauthier of the Baton Rouge Police Department, who is questioning former investigators and reviewing decades-old evidence. Citing the ongoing nature of the case, police refused PEOPLE’s request for comment. “The Denise Porter murder,” Sr. Special Assistant Parish Attorney Kim L. Brooks wrote in an e-mail, “is considered an open criminal investigation.”

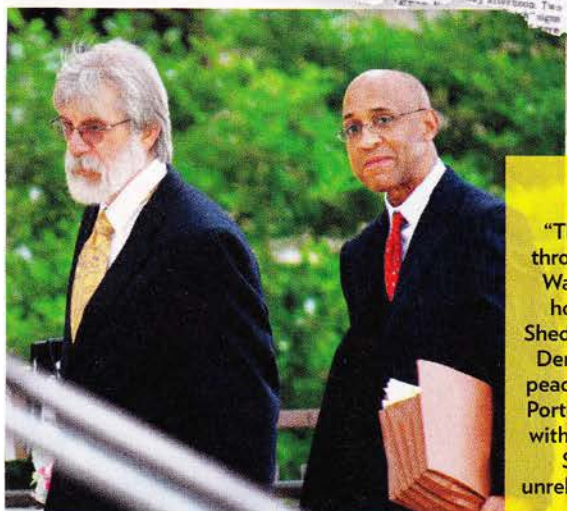
Whether or not it will lead to arrests remains to be seen, but so far the reopened case has pitted police against Porter, 57. On March 7, 2013, a warrant was issued for Joel’s DNA, and, he says, as he was heading to his attorney’s office to voluntarily submit to a test, he was



Paramedics remove the body of a young woman who was found stabbed to death in her apartment Thursday morning.

Woman found stabbed to death

A 31-year-old man, whose screams woke up his neighbors, returned home from work Thursday morning and found his young wife had been stabbed to death in their apartment. Porter woke up neighbors when he ran from his apartment and shouted for help, one resident said. Porter was arrested on Thursday morning. He declined to comment about the slaying. The charges were dropped at the apartment Thursday afternoon. Two other people were charged with the slaying.



SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

"The only way we got through this," says Doris Washington (right, at home with husband Shedrick and a portrait of Denise), "was from the peace God gave us." Joel Porter (left, in May 2013, with his former attorney Steve Irving in an unrelated case) maintains his innocence.

pulled over by officers and a swab was taken on the side of the highway. Joel, who has always maintained his innocence in his wife's murder, then filed a civil lawsuit in federal court against Dauthier alleging false arrest, defamation and constitutional violations. (Joel and Dauthier both declined comment.)

The lawsuit exasperates Denise's family in San Antonio, who say they simply want to know who killed their youngest daughter.

"Although Joel says he didn't do it," says Doris, 75, "he doesn't seem to be doing anything to help us find out who did."

Whoever killed Denise seemed to have been very careful. Police saw no sign of forced entry at the Porters' apartment on the night of the murder

and found evidence her attacker had showered in an upstairs bathroom "as if they knew there would be no one else coming home anytime soon," Doris says.

In his lawsuit against Dauthier, Joel maintains he had an ironclad alibi for the time of his wife's murder and fully cooperated with police.

But Denise, a former nursing student seven years his junior, had left him more than once during their troubled three-year marriage and had packed a suitcase on the

night she was killed. "Whatever occurred between Joel and Denise that night before she died had to be something out of the ordinary," says her sister Jeanine Anderson, 51, "for her to impulsively pack her bags."

After Denise's still-unsolved brutal

slaying, Joel rebuilt his life: He graduated from law school and became a judge advocate general in the U.S. Navy. In 2012 he ran unsuccessfully for City Court Judge and is a practicing attorney in Baton Rouge. He remarried but later divorced. "For many years I didn't believe that Joel had killed Denise," Doris says. "But my family felt differently; they felt it might have been him."

While her family waits for answers, they hold on to memories of the smart, funny young woman who loved to bake and write poetry—and whose life was ripped away too soon. "Denise loved people," says her father, Shedrick Washington, 80. "I'm confident that whoever murdered our daughter will be brought to justice."

By Steve Helling.

With Anne Lang in Baton Rouge

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: COURTESY WASHINGTON FAMILY; CAPITAL CITY PRESS/THE BATON ROUGE ADVOCATE; JIM MUSTIAN/CAPITAL CITY/THE BATON ROUGE ADVOCATE; TRAVIS SPRADLING/CAPITAL CITY PRESS/THE BATON ROUGE ADVOCATE