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Bob Keppel, who helped hunt Ted Bundy and the Green River killer, to end detective career

by Arthur Santana
Seattle Times staff reporter

Though 24 summers have passed, Bob Keppel remembers the morning vividly.

It was just before dawn in September when Keppel, then a 30-year-old rookie homicide detective, crested a hillside in a dense patch of fir and cedar trees just east of Issaquah.

He was the first one there, and because it was 5 a.m., a volunteer search party was not due for another three hours. In that solitude, the silence was ominous.

The day before, two grouse hunters had stumbled over the remains of a human body. First there was the skull, and then, through the nettles of blackberry bushes and thick ferns, a backbone and some ribs.

And on it went, several discoveries each day for seven consecutive days. In all, 400 items belonging to at least three women were found, a virtual graveyard where someone had secretly stashed the bodies.

Two of the women, Keppel would soon learn, were last seen at Lake Sammamish two months earlier. Their disappearance was Keppel's second case as a homicide detective with the then-King County Police Department (now the King County Sheriff's Office.)

"This missing-persons case that I was expecting to close was really a case of multiple murders so savage that it would shake each of us who worked on it to the core of our psyches and would not release me from its grip for another 15 years," Keppel would later write in one of four books he would go on to author.

Nearly 25 years after that September morning, Keppel - now the veteran chief criminal investigator for the state Attorney General's Office and one of the nation's leading criminologists - will retire Wednesday.

His retirement will end the career of one of the state's most celebrated detectives. Keppel, now 55, has chased, interviewed and analyzed serial killers and rapists



Greg Gilbert © The Seattle Times

Bob Keppel, the chief criminal investigator for the state Attorney General's Office, still vividly remembers the day he was handed the case of serial killer Ted Bundy.



since the summer of 1974, when he was unknowingly handed the case of serial killer Ted Bundy.

Fifteen years after he began investigating the Bundy murders, he would hear the serial killer confess to the slayings of eight Washington women as he awaited execution in a Florida prison.

In his career, Keppel has also consulted on the Atlanta child murders, Seattle's Green River killings - in all, a total of about 2,000 murder investigations and more than 50 serial murder investigations nationwide.

He is still frequently consulted by law enforcement agencies, who rely on him to create a profile of possible suspects based on crime-scene evidence and any "signature" pattern left by the killer.

He is also responsible for creating the Homicide Information Tracking Unit (HITS) - a nationally recognized repository for Washington and Oregon records about murders, rapes, missing persons, ex-cons, sex predators and known gang members, as well as other data.

He also teaches a hugely popular class - titled "Murder" - at the University of Washington.

Keppel has been described by Seattle true-crime novelist Ann Rule as the "antithesis of the television detective" - a man she says is a "scientist-criminologist-psychologist-computer genius-detective."

A professor at the UW says, with all seriousness, that Keppel is just like the police character Joe Friday. "Just the facts," said Joe Weis, who has known Keppel for more than 20 years.

And that's not far off. Keppel says he puts about the same faith in computers that he does intuition. In his 31 years in criminal justice, Keppel has studied the bizarre intricacies of the murderous mind and has studied and logged - like a scientist peering into a microscope - the horror that those aberrant minds can create.

Keppel holds a doctorate in criminal justice, having studied aspects of psychology, psychiatry, forensic dentistry and anthropology, sociology and other disciplines that apply to homicide investigation.

Chasing common threads

In 1974, the start of Bundy's killing spree also set in motion the direction of Keppel's career.

It took him and his partner about two years to chase down common threads from other jurisdictions that eventually led them to Bundy. Finally, Bundy was arrested in Utah after a cross-country rampage.

In 1984, Keppel joined a team of detectives from different agencies who were trying to solve Seattle's Green River killings, in which as many as 49 women were slain between the summer of 1982 and early 1984.

The killer or killers abducted the women, mainly prostitutes, from Pacific Highway South and dumped their bodies in and near the Kent-area river and five other sites.

Near the end of that year, Bundy wrote Keppel from death row in Florida and offered to give his own profile of the Green River killer. Keppel quickly accepted, not only to learn more about how a serial killer thinks, but also hoping to get Bundy to confess to his Washington murders.

"He more or less confirmed that we were doing everything right," Keppel said. He met with Bundy twice more, in 1988 and in 1989.

Richard Walter, a prison psychologist in Lansing, Mich., who has been providing Keppel prison-inmate psychology information for the HITS database for the past seven years, said Keppel is exactly the right kind of person for such an interview.

"I think he's at the top of the field in terms of crime assessment and profiling," Walter said. "He has a marvelous poker face and a great ability to determine whether people are trying to shine him on or defeat him."

The Green River killings stopped in 1984, something many detectives, and Bundy,

believe serial killers don't do. The killer could be in prison or dead, **Keppel** says now.

A tool for detectives

Years before he would hear Bundy's confession, **Keppel** realized there was no clearinghouse of information, no quick way to narrow the field of suspects and no experts for detectives to turn to.

That prompted him, shortly after leaving King County for the Attorney General's Office, to help push for HITS.

Its staff - currently 13 people - includes experienced homicide investigators who work with local police agencies, monitor crimes across Washington and Oregon, and make connections between similar crimes in different jurisdictions.

HITS, originally developed with a grant from the National Institute of Justice and now run with state funds, contains 26 databases, holding hundreds of details on more than 7,000 murders and 8,000 rapes in the two states. It allows investigators to search for common methods, suspects or details.

Keppel said he is especially proud of a child abduction/murder database on HITS, which was started in 1995 and which holds information on 621 child abductions and murders in 44 states. Creating the database requires HITS investigators to gather information from hundreds of law enforcement agencies all over the country.

Since its inception, HITS provides useful information on about 860 cases per year, **Keppel** said.

"The HITS system makes our job a lot easier because all the data is in one place," said Seattle Police homicide detective Cloyd Steiger, who has known **Keppel** for about nine years. "Otherwise, we'd have to spend hours and hours, looking for all of this kind of information."

In the past couple of years, **Keppel** has been refining the HITS program. He hopes to update it with even more comprehensive information, such as the entire case file of each murder case, including pictures and videos.

"Even without him, we're going to continue on, but our success and future success will have a lot to do with what he's already done," said Marvin Skeen, an investigator with HITS who has known **Keppel** for about 30 years.

Retirement awaits

In his retirement, **Keppel** plans to stay involved in criminal justice issues. He will continue to co-teach his class at the UW, where he's been teaching for the past five years.

"People really like him on campus," Weis said. "He's unique in that he's a homicide investigator who has always had an academic bent."

In the next few days, **Keppel** will take down from his office walls the numerous framed plaques and pictures of himself as a track star at Spokane's Central Valley High School. The son of a Spokane police officer, he graduated from Washington State University.

He's looking forward to spending more time at his Bellevue home with his wife of 30 years, Sandra.

The two plan to run a nonprofit business, called the Institute for Forensics, which will involve scientific research in criminal justice issues. He will also continue to teach at police seminars around the world.

Keppel will continue to write books - on top of the two mass-market paperbacks and two textbooks he's already written - about the crime of murder. He said he's also given some thought to trying his hand at fiction.

"I don't think enough people understand the kind of contribution he's made," said Frank Tennison, a former King County Sheriff's Office homicide detective and now a HITS investigator. "There's no way you'll be able to replace him. There just isn't anyone out there like that."



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