

CASE STUDY

Thomson Reuters CLEAR case study: Saunders County Attorney

A criminal investigator uncovers new evidence in a murder case that has remained unsolved for fifty years

Mary Kay Heese was last seen just after 5 pm on March 25, 1969, standing at the corner of Fifth and Linden streets in Wahoo, Nebraska, about 5 blocks from her home. The 17-year-old high school junior was alone. Later that night, her parents reported her as missing.

Early the next morning, a local farmer spotted schoolbooks scattered across a county road about 3.5 miles southeast of town. He notified law enforcement, and a short time later the teen's body was discovered in a roadside ditch. She was fully clothed, except for her shoes, which were found near the body.

In time, investigators determined Mary Kay had been driven out of town and potentially murdered outside city limits. An autopsy revealed a struggle had taken place, and a sharp instrument had been used as the murder weapon. She died of multiple stab wounds to the torso. Investigators gathered evidence and conducted interviews, and citizens called in multiple tips, but the murder weapon was never recovered, and no arrests were made.

Fifty years later, the case remained unsolved.

The county attorney asks a criminal investigator to review the case

The unsolved murder of Mary Kay Heese has cast a dark cloud over Wahoo, Nebraska, a tight-knit community of 3,500 people, for as long as anyone can remember.

"An unsolved homicide case never closes," says Ted Green, criminal investigator for the county attorney, "so it's always been on people's minds."

When the county attorney asked Green to conduct a top-to-bottom review of the case, he set off across Nebraska to round up the original reports from various state agencies that had worked on the investigation. Before long, he had generated an extensive list of potential witnesses, many of whom now lived out of state.

"It almost seemed impossible at first," he says, "because back in 1969 very few young people had Social Security numbers."

For some witnesses, all he had were maiden names of women who had remarried, often more than once, in the intervening years. And he believed some witnesses had passed away.

Green scoured old high school yearbooks and historical society records in order to learn anything he could about the witnesses. He plugged the bits of information he had into Thomson Reuters CLEAR—sometimes just a name or a nickname, or the name of a parent or sibling, or a vehicle, or a former address or old job.

One by one, he tracked down the current location and contact information for all but 3 of the witnesses he had identified. CLEAR also revealed some witnesses thought to be deceased that were still alive. He even located an individual who was working in a diamond mine in Tanzania, Africa.

"I would never have been able to identify these people without CLEAR, there is no way."

Ted Green
Criminal Investigator

The investigator uses CLEAR to track the suspect's every move

Green was making good progress in the case, but there was one hitch. Back in Wahoo, someone had heard the suspect identified in the original investigation had died. As a 25-year veteran of the Omaha police force, Green had been trained to accept nothing as true until he could verify every last detail.

When he ran the suspect's name and Social Security number through CLEAR, he immediately learned that the suspect was still alive and had recently moved. In fact, the suspect had moved about two dozen times since 1986 and had married numerous times, details all contained in the CLEAR report.

Re-interviewing the witnesses helped Green prove that some statements provided in the original investigation were false. Back in 1969, an associate of the suspect used one witness—the high school class valedictorian—as an alibi, claiming he had been out on a date with her the night of the murder. When Green interviewed her 50 years later, she said her parents would never have allowed her to be out on a school night after 8 pm. In fact, she had never dated the guy. Green discovered the original investigators never actually spoke with her about what the suspect's associate had said.

CLEAR helps to build a strong case against the suspect

In gathering a paper trail for the trial, Green produced more than 100 witness interview reports. Six witnesses are prepared to testify at a trial. Green is confident that all 6 have given statements that will lead to a conviction.

"And they came directly through CLEAR," he says.

Most crucial of all, Green used CLEAR to locate a law enforcement officer who investigated the crime scene in 1969. Green had a name but was unable to find the individual using state resources.

A retired state trooper told Green that the investigator had passed away years ago, but once again Green used CLEAR to verify the information. He learned that 2 officers with the same last name had served on the state patrol at the time. One had passed away, but the other one—the officer who had investigated the crime scene—was still alive. CLEAR provided Green with the retired officer's phone number, email address, and Social Security number, and Green tracked him to his current residence, which is out of state.

"He can testify in court and say, 'Yes, these are my reports. This is the crime scene. This is where the body was,'" says Green. "He'll say, 'Yes, these are the tire prints that we got. These are the shoe prints.'"

Green predicts the retired officer's eyewitness testimony will be pivotal at trial. "And it's because of CLEAR," he says. "It's totally because of CLEAR."

CLEAR is a vital investigative tool for law enforcement agencies

Providing current identification and the location of individuals is the most important thing CLEAR has done for Green as he builds a case against the suspect.

"I'll bet I make contact with 80% of the individuals I find through CLEAR," he says. "Without CLEAR, it would be below 5%."

For a small-town law enforcement agency that serves a large geographical area, CLEAR is helpful for Green and his team in a number of ways. His office has used CLEAR to resolve outstanding warrants, investigate check fraud, and identify an out-of-state criminal suspect who had spoofed an IP web address.

"We handle all of the criminal prosecution for the whole county, so it makes sense for us to have CLEAR," he says. "I'm not computer savvy, but it's really easy to use."

The information Green collected from CLEAR, combined with the witness testimony, will allow him to forward the unsolved murder case, along with a current witness list, to the Nebraska Attorney General for possible future prosecution.

"Without CLEAR, this case would have gone nowhere, I can honestly say that."

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