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and for a more detailed list of content warnings, please see the show notes for this episode on your app or on our website. Today's episode involves crimes against children and won't be suitable for all listeners. Married couple Deborah and Sherwood Helmick worked hard to provide a comfortable life for their three young children. In mid-1985, the couple saved enough money to move out of the home they'd been sharing with relatives and into a space of their own. The Shiloh Mobile Home Park in South Carolina's Richland County provided modest yet pleasant accommodation. With just 13 trailers on the property, it was a relatively close-knit, hard-working community where residents looked out for one another. By June, the Helmicks had been living at the trailer park for two months. Although their busy schedules didn't leave them much time for socializing with the other tenants, they were starting to settle in. On the afternoon of Friday June 14, Deborah prepared for her waitressing shift at a local barbecue restaurant. Her husband Sherwood hadn't yet returned home from

his construction job, so Deborah had little choice but to bring her three children along for the drive. Deborah didn't have a car, but her neighbor Vicky was happy to help out.

Vicky agreed to drop Deborah at the restaurant and then keep an eye on her kids until Sherwood knocked off from work. Just as they were about to leave, Sherwood returned home.

Six-year-old Becky still wanted to go for the drive, but nine-year-old Deborah May and three-year-old Woody decided to stay home. The youngsters said goodbye to their mother then went to play outside while their father cooled down indoors. Ricky Morgan lived in a neighboring trailer four doors down. At around 4pm, he heard a noise outside and looked out the window. A silver car that Ricky didn't recognize rapidly pulled into the trailer park. It stopped near the two Helmick children who were playing at the front of their trailer. A white male got out of the vehicle, leaving his motor running and the door open. He walked over and began speaking to the two children. In his hand appeared to be a white bag. Ricky didn't think much of it, assuming he was a friend of the family, but suddenly the man grabbed Deborah May around the waist and raced back towards his car. Deborah May began kicking and screaming. The man threw her into his vehicle where Deborah May continued to scream and started kicking the roof. By the time Ricky realized what was happening, it was too late. He raced outside, but the car sped past him and out of the trailer park. Three-year-old Woody desperately scrambled underneath a nearby bush shaking with fear. When asked what happened, a terrified Woody later explained, The bad man said he was coming back to get me.

Sherwood Helmick had been just 20 feet away, getting changed in his bedroom where the buzzing of his air conditioner unit drowned out the sound of his daughter's screams.

But a friend who had given him a lift home from work was sitting in the front room of the Helmick's trailer and overheard the commotion. He told Shurewood what was going on and the two quickly raced outside, just quick enough to catch a glimpse of the silver car as it disappeared down old Percival Road, a long rural stretch running through the heart of Richland County.

They jumped in Shurewood's friend's car and gave chase, but the vehicle was long gone.

Officers were alerted and a search for the 9-year-old kicked off immediately.

Trailer park resident Ricky Morgan had gotten a decent look at the kidnapper, describing him as aged in his early to mid 30s, 5 foot 9 and weighing roughly 200 pounds.

He had a brown receding hairline, short brown beard and was wearing shorts with a light-colored sleeveless top. The car itself had red stripes down the side and was possibly a 1982 or 1983 model Chevrolet Monte Carlo or Pontiac Grand Prix. Tire tracks at the trailer park were consistent with it being a General Motors model vehicle. Ricky had caught a glimpse of the South Carolina license plate just long enough to see that it started with the letter D.

The Helmicks were beside themselves. They had no known enemies and couldn't think of anyone who

would want to harm their daughter. Deborah May was an incredibly smart young girl who was obedient,

well-behaved and a little shy, not the type to speak to strangers. Although the Helmicks mostly kept to themselves, neighbors described them as a likeable family. No one had noticed any other suspicious behavior around the property. The only plausible explanation seemed to be that Deborah May had been the target of an opportunistic predator. For investigators, there were a couple

of details that caused particular concern. Deborah May Helmick's abduction had occurred on the two-week anniversary of Shari Smith's kidnapping, right down to the hour. The two girls lived roughly

24 miles apart. Both had been brazenly taken from the front of their own homes while their parents stood nearby, oblivious to what was happening. Although there was an eight-year age difference between Shari and Deborah May, they shared similar physical characteristics. Both were blonde with blue eyes. There were immediate concerns that Deborah May could have fallen victim to the same fate as Shari. At the time of her kidnapping, nine days had passed since Shari Smith's body had been discovered, and despite their tireless efforts, investigators were no closer to identifying her killer. Witness Ricky Morgan was shown the suspect sketch of Shari's abductor and noticed similarities to the man who had taken Deborah May. Although the man Ricky witnessed was younger and stockier, with darker hair and a beard, he also drove a completely different vehicle. It was believed that Shari had been forced into her attack his car at gunpoint, yet Deborah May had been physically grabbed. If the two attacks weren't linked, this prompted another terrifying possibility. What if Shari's killer had inspired a copycat?

If the same perpetrator was responsible for both abductions, police held grave concerns for Deborah May's welfare. They wasted no time in launching a full-scale investigation, with officers from surrounding counties called in to assist while helicopters surveilled overhead. If the Smith case had taught them anything, it was that the perpetrator thrived on power and attention. Investigators therefore anticipated that if the same person was responsible for both crimes, it was a matter of time before he contacted Deborah May's family. But there was one issue.

The Helmicks didn't have a phone. If the nine-year-old had been targeted at random, the perpetrator likely didn't know this. Instead, investigators monitored the phone in the manager's office of the trailer park. But the days ticked by, and the kidnapper remained silent. When the Smith family found out about Deborah May's abduction, the first thing they did was pray for

the Helmicks. They told reporters,

we knew when we lost Shari that no one could give us as much comfort as God.

That was able to strengthen us, and we want to pass that along.

Unlike the Smith family, the Helmicks refrained from making any public appeals. They were too traumatized. Sherwood was unable to cope with the fact that his daughter had been taken while he was mere meters away, and he wept uncontrollably. His wife Deborah sunk into a deep depression, blacking out from stress and requiring medical care.

They clung desperately onto the hope that Deborah May would be found alive,

but the very real possibility that that may not be the case left them crippled with distress.

Sherwood refused to let his other two children out of his sight.

When he finally summoned the strength to speak to a reporter for the Columbia Record, he said,

Up until this point, the composite sketch of Shari Smith's abductor had been withheld from the public. Desperate for leads, the decision was made to release it for the first time.

It prompted an overwhelming response. With the abduction of a second young girl from neighboring counties, the already fearful community became increasingly paranoid. Everyone was viewed with suspicion. Police tip-lines rang off the hook with locals wanting to report everything from psychic visions to their own personal theories. Officers who were already working around the clock to try and solve Shari Smith's murder were thrown into a spin with the introduction of a second possibly linked case. Hours of crucial investigative time went into checking license plate numbers, as tipsters reported every suspicious bearded man driving a car similar to the ones witnessed during the abductions. Complicating matters further was the fact that both kidnapping and the dumping of Shari's body had taken place in different jurisdictions, leading to issues when it came to communication and coordination between the different law enforcement

agencies. One official appeared on the news, he stressed evident as he told reporters,

We are on an 18 hour work schedule now. We just can't take really much more.

With the rumor mill swinging into overdrive and wreaking havoc on both investigators and the public, Lexington County Sheriff James Metz took a media vow of silence, refusing to speak about either case until substantial progress was made. Although investigators were treading with caution in case both abductions were linked, they still had no evidence to confirm this.

Deborah May Helmick's case was being treated as a missing person investigation, and hopes continued to be held that she'd be found alive.

Just like they had with the Smith case, the community rallied behind the Helmick's with an outpouring of support in the form of food and financial donations.

It was impossible for other parents not to put themselves in the Helmick's shoes, with the one woman remarking, Every time one of my children walks out the door,

I pray to God that they'll come back safely. Sherwood Helmick told reporters he was optimistic that investigators would solve his daughter's case within a couple of days. But by the time

Shari's killer made contact with Dawn Smith on Saturday, June 22, Deborah May had been missing for eight days. As soon as the caller asked Dawn Smith if she had, quote, heard about Deborah May Hamrick, investigators listening in hung on to his every word. Dawn was aware of the young girl's kidnapping, but she responded, No. Realizing he had mispronounced

Deborah May's surname, the caller corrected himself and said, Helmick. This time, Dawn responded that yes, she did know about Deborah May. Okay, now listen carefully, said her sister's killer.

Go one north. Well, one west. Turn left at Peach Festival Road or Bill's Grill.

Go three and a half miles through Gilbert. Turn right. Last dirt road before you come to stop sign at Two Notch Road. Go through chain and no trespassing sign. Go 50 yards and to the left, go 10 yards. Deborah May is waiting. God forgive us all.

The location the caller had described was in Lexington County, roughly 14 miles west of the Smith's home and to 30 miles from the Helmicks. The manner in which he'd given directions was so

similar to the way he described the location of Shari's body that officers descending on the scene had little doubt as to what they would find there. Following the instructions took them to a remote location in the back roads outside the small town of Gilbert, where they located the no trespassing sign as described. It led down a hill that backed onto a wooded area. At the bottom of the hill lay the body of Deborah May Helmick. As with Shari Smith, Deborah May's body was severely decomposed

to the point that her exact cause of death couldn't be ascertained. However, the residue of adhesive material in her hair indicated that she too had likely been suffocated.

The nine-year-old was still dressed in the same clothing she'd been wearing at the time of her abduction, pinstriped shorts, and a lavender-colored t-shirt. The level of decomposition meant it couldn't be determined whether she'd been sexually assaulted, but evidence found on her body indicated there was a sexual motivation to the crime. Deborah May was still wearing the same pair of cotton underwear she'd been dressed in on the day of her kidnapping, but over the top was a pair of adult women's silk bikini briefs. When criminal profiler John Douglas heard this detail, it gave him further insight into what kind of perpetrator they were dealing with. As explained in his book, When a Killer Calls, Douglas suspected that the killer wouldn't feel particularly good about taking a child victim. With Shari Smith, he could convince himself that the two had some kind of reasonable relationship. Without this delusion, he would likely feel somewhat ashamed of his actions.

Douglas believed it was likely that the adult underwear belonged to another of the killer's victims. By putting them on Deborah May, it was possible he was trying to diminish his guilt about attacking a child. The call placed to Dawn Smith was traced to a payphone outside a Kentucky fried chicken fast food restaurant in the South Carolina town of Sumter, roughly 72 miles from where Deborah May's body was found. As was the case with all his previous calls, the killer had left behind no discernible clues. But with the addition of a second body and a second crime scene, investigators were able to piece together a few more details about the perpetrator.

The remote location where Deborah May's body was found added further weight to the belief that the killer lived locally. Like the Masonic Lodge where Shari's body was dumped, this wasn't the kind of location one would just stumble upon by accident. Furthermore,

the fact that he'd scattered his crimes among three different counties supported the theory that he had knowledge of forensic proceedings. Investigators believed he'd intentionally spread his offences between jurisdictions, knowing it would hinder the investigation. By this point, 22 days had passed since Shari Smith had been abducted. In that time, the perpetrator had successfully pulled off a second abduction and two murders. He'd made multiple calls to Shari Smith's family and one to news reporter Charlie Keyes. Yet, despite unrelenting efforts made by multiple law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, no prime suspects had emerged. On his latest call to Dawn Smith, the killer didn't disguise his voice. This indicated two possibilities, either he was getting sloppy or he was getting cocky. The Helmicks were saved from having to view their daughter's body by identifying her based on her clothing instead. As soon as Deborah Helmick saw the pink hair clip she'd placed in her daughter's hair before leaving for work on the day of the abduction, her worst nightmare was confirmed. As the grieving parents came to terms with their loss, a press conference was held for police to break the news to the public. Sheriff James Metz reluctantly confirmed what everyone had been fearing since Deborah May was taken. A serial killer was on the loose. Metz urged parents to remain vigilant, saying, I don't want to frighten anybody, but as your sheriff it is my duty to tell you that you should exercise extra caution during these trying times. The suspect sketch was revised to reflect the sightings from both kidnappings and was published in all the local papers. It showed a white, heavy-set male aged between 28 and 35 with longish hair and a dark beard. Although, if profiler John Douglas' assumptions were anything to go by, the perpetrator's physical appearance would likely have changed since his crime spree kicked off. He might be losing or gaining weight, looking unkempt and could be drinking heavily. If members of the public were paranoid before, they were now well and truly petrified. Panicked parents vied for a spot in a community program about child safety, while concerned citizens sought out self-defense classes and continued to report even the most remotely suspicious activity. People called the police to voice concerns that their families could be targeted next. Tip-line switchboards were completely overwhelmed with unsubstantiated rumours, with police becoming so inundated that they threatened to prosecute anyone who deliberately hindered the investigation. As journalist Margaret O'Shea wrote in the state newspaper, other crimes have shocked the public conscience and other murders have provoked community outrage, but none have so completely gripped the middolence in intense pervasive fear, as have the abductions and deaths of Shari Smith and Deborah May Helmick. The terror has circumscribed the lives and thoughts of thousands, consumed with the stark and dreadful knowledge that a bold killer or killers were at large. No driveway, no front yard, no pool or pond, no place where children play could be assumed to be safe anymore. Despite the killer claiming a second victim and the ongoing concerns that Dawn Smith could be targeted next, the Smith family agreed to go ahead with the staged memorial service for Shari's birthday as planned. On Tuesday, June 25, undercover officers strategically placed themselves

around the cemetery while covert security guards lay in wait in case anyone tried to cause any harm. When the service ended, Dawn took one of Shari's cherished stuffed koalas and placed it on her grave.

Various members of the press were there to report on the event in the hopes the media attention would re-engage the killer to make further contact. Speaking afterwards to the Columbia Record, Bob Smith said the only way they coped was through their belief in God. Hilda added, It's even harder today, knowing that this is the day you gave birth and she's not here with you. Knowing she's not ever going to be here with you again.

The following day was Deborah May's funeral. Over 300 people gathered to mourn the loss of the smart

young girl who dreamed of becoming a teacher or school principal. The presiding minister told those in attendance, This is a very difficult time for all of us. We are afraid, angry and confused. We are all sad and broken. We are afraid for our children. We don't feel safe in our front yards. We distrust every stranger. We ask, When will it end?

Convinced that the killer could be among the crowd, plainclothes officers were positioned around the cemetery while a police helicopter circled overhead. Meanwhile, Shari's gravesite was surveilled around the clock and the license plate of every vehicle that passed by was taken down. But the trap didn't appear to be working. No one made any attempt to take the stuffed koala, nor had the killer made a peep. All that didn't matter. On the same day that Deborah May Helmick was late to rest, specialists were finally able to run Shari Smith's last will and testament through an electronic detection apparatus known as an Esda machine. With the use of graphite, an Esda can pick up images that aren't visible to the naked eye, such as indentations left on paper. The Esda revealed several latent impressions on Shari's last will and testament.

On the same pad she'd used to write her letter, someone had written what appeared to be a grocery list. But that wasn't all. There was a string of numbers. Looking closely, investigators realized what they were looking at. A phone number.

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Thank you for listening to this episode's ads. By supporting our sponsors, you support case file to continue to deliver quality content. The discovery of a latent phone number on Sherry Smith's final letter was a major breakthrough, but there was just one problem.

Only nine digits of the 10 digit phone number were visible. Investigators could make out the first three digits, 205. This was the interstate area code for Alabama. The next three digits were 837, which was the local exchange for Huntsville, an Alabama city roughly 380 miles west of Lexington. But of the last four digits, only three were visible. This was only a minor setback. Investigators realized the missing number could only be one of ten options.

They tried every possible combination and cross-checked each one against phone records to identify if any of the Huntsville numbers had communications around the Lexington County area. One of them had. One investigator dialed the number. A friendly sounding man answered.

He sounded like he was in his 20s or 30s, but his voice didn't match the killer.

He said his name was Joe Shepard and that he was stationed at an army base which he hadn't left in recent weeks. But when asked if he knew anyone in South Carolina, Joe said yes. His parents lived in Saluda County. 50-year-old Ella Shepard was an electrician. He and his wife Sharon lived near Lake Murray, less than 10 miles from the home of Shari Smith and just two miles from the location where Debra May Helmick's body was found. Investigators immediately descended on their home. But as soon as they met the couple, it was blatantly obvious that Ellis didn't fit the profile of Shari and Debra May's killer. For starters, he was older and didn't match the suspect description. Secondly, he had a squeaky clean criminal record with no prior run-ins with the law. Thirdly, he and Sharon were happily married, going against the belief that the perpetrator would be a loner with a history of failed relationships.

Although the Shepards were caught off guard by the police presence, nothing in Ellis's demeanour indicated that he was nervous. When asked if they knew about the recent abductions and murders happening in the area, the couple said yes, they were aware of them, but they'd been out of town at the time that each incident had occurred, and they didn't know all of the details. They could think of no reason why their son's phone number could have appeared on the final letter written by one of the victims.

The investigators described the behavioural profile of the killer to the Shepards,

and implored them to think if there was anyone they knew who fit that description.

The two exchanged a knowing glance. Over the past month, Sharon and Ellis had been away travelling.

One of Ellis's electrical assistants had been house-sitting for them during that time.

The couple had left him a list of phone numbers on yellow legal paper that he could call in case of an emergency. One of those numbers was for their son, Joe.

As the Shepards considered the criminal profile, they realised just how many of those factors matched their house-sitter. But it wasn't until they were played a recording of the killer's voice that they knew for sure. Dirty son of a bitch, Ellis said. That's Larry Jean Bell.

36-year-old Larry Jean Bell was a South Carolina local. Just like the profile anticipated, he'd once been married with a child, but the relationship ended in divorce, after which Bell's ex-wife and son relocated into state. Bell had previously served in the Marines but was discharged within a year after he accidentally shot himself in the knee while cleaning his gun. Since then, he'd had a range of jobs including prison guard, airline reservations clerk and electronic contractor. A search of Bell's background revealed that 10 years prior, he had approached a young woman at Knife Point and tried to force her into his car. A passerby heard the woman screams and called the police, who arrested Bell as he tried to flee. Bell pleaded guilty to assault and battery and was sentenced to five years in prison, a sentence that was ultimately suspended in favour of him paying a \$1,000 fine. Eight months after this failed attack, Bell was in Columbia when he saw a woman slip and fall. In the process of helping her to her feet, Bell flashed a gun and tried to force the woman into his car. Again, she fought back and Bell was arrested. He pleaded guilty to assault and battery and was sentenced to five years in prison. A mandatory psychiatric report concluded that the likelihood of Bell re-offending was very high. In one counselling session, he told the psychiatrist, I feel uncontrollable urges to attack females and want help before I really hurt someone.

Regardless, two years into his sentence, he was released.

A couple of years later in 1979, a 10-year-old girl began receiving obscene phone calls in which the caller detailed various sex acts he wanted the two to perform together.

He seemed to know where the girl lived and threatened to stop by her house. The girl's mother eventually recorded the calls and they were traced back to Bell. Again, he pleaded guilty but was only given a two-year suspended sentence. By the time of the Smith-Helmick attacks, Larry Jean Bell had spent the past three years living with his parents on Shole Island in Lake Murray. He rarely saw his 12-year-old child and made ends meet by doing casual electrical jobs for various contractors. When Ellis and Sharon Shepherd asked Bell if he wanted to house sit while they travelled for six weeks, he jumped at the chance. But when Bell picked the couple up from the airport upon their return, they were a little taken aback. In the short amount of time they'd been away, Bell had lost about 10 pounds, had stopped shaving and looked generally exhausted

and unkempt. He seemed a bit out of it. All he wanted to talk about was the kidnapping and murder of Sherry Smith. Sharon had asked him to save any news about the case so she could catch up on the events when she got home. But to her surprise, Bell had gone above and beyond, clipping newspaper articles from every newspaper in the area. When the Shepherds saw the revised sketch of the suspect,

they paused. It looked remarkably similar to Larry Jean Bell. They considered for a moment whether he could have something to do with the crimes, but quickly shook this thought off. Although Bell could be a bit strange and spaced out at times, they believed there was no way he was capable of anything so heinous. Bell was generally a quiet, reserved person who'd never given them or anyone else any cause for concern. Neighbours knew him to be kind and gentle, the type of guy you could count on for help and who made a great fishing buddy. As one former co-worker

later told the Charlotte Observer, Bell was always smiling and laughing. He was the most likable person you ever knew.

Ellis Shepherd tried to dismiss the idea that Bell could be involved in the recent murders, but the similarities he bore with the suspect sketch nagged at him. Late one night, Ellis felt compelled to check on his gun. He kept a loaded pistol at home and had told Bell about it in case he needed it for protection while they were gone. But the gun wasn't there. Ellis called Bell and asked about it. Bell explained that he'd kept the pistol under the mattress of the guest bed he'd been sleeping in. Larry went into the guest room and lifted the mattress. There lay a copy of Hustler magazine. On the cover was a blonde woman dressed in bondage gear and placed in a crucifix position. Beside the magazine was Ellis's gun. He picked it up. It had been recently fired.

On the morning of Wednesday, June 26, 1985, Larry Jean Bell made his way to the Shepherd's house to begin a day of electrical work. He was driving a grey Buick Riviera, a car that didn't match the vehicle used in either abduction. As he approached an intersection, a police car cut him off and an officer placed him under arrest without incident.

Inside his vehicle, officers found a double-edged knife on the passenger seat.

Bell appeared to be caught off guard but not completely surprised, asking simply, can I call my mama? Bell was taken into custody while search warrants were executed at the Shepherd's home. The guest room that Bell had been staying in was meticulously clean. It appeared to have been recently dusted and vacuumed and the bed linen was freshly washed. But when investigators removed the sheets, a special laser machine determined that the mattress topper was stained with a mix of urine, semen and blood.

The blood was type A, the same type as Shari Smith's. Red fibers were also found.

These were compared to red fibers found on Shari's body and determined to be a match.

Forensic investigators spent 12 hours painstakingly examining the property.

In the bathroom, they found six blonde hairs confirmed to be a match to Shari's.

A search warrant was also executed at the lakefront home of Bell's parents, who were upstanding well-regarded citizens in their local community. Unsurprisingly to investigators, Bell's bedroom was meticulously organized. He had a large pornography collection with a focus on BDSM.

A search of his dresser drawers revealed a bag of women's underwear, with one pair of silk briefs similar to those that Deborah Mae Helmick had been dressed in.

Also found was a sheet of postage stamps featuring commemorative duck decoys, the same as the stamp used to mail Shari Smith's last will and testament.

Meanwhile, police combed through the surveillance photos taken from Shari's grave.

In one, they saw a car parked on the roadside right near the grave.

The driver never got out of the car. A search of the license plate revealed the car was registered to none other than Larry Jean Bell.

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The circumstantial evidence against Bell was stacking up, but to secure a conviction, investigators were hoping for one thing in particular, a confession.

But upon questioning, Bell repeatedly denied any involvement in the murders of Shari Smith or Deborah May Helmick. He told interviewing detectives,

This Larry Jean Bell didn't do it. It's the bad Larry Jean Bell. I know for a fact that Larry Jean Bell did not do that to these poor women. I'm not lying to you. I'll do everything I can to help you, but I can't confess for someone else. When pressed further, Bell said,

All I know is that the Larry Jean Bell sitting here couldn't have done such a thing.

But there's a bad Larry Jean Bell that could have.

He then made an odd request. Could he meet with Shari's family?

Hilda and Dawn courageously agreed and were taken into the interrogation room.

Bell began to mumble that the person sitting before them could not be capable of such, ungodly things. While he admitted to feeling some form of guilt, he made no confession.

Bell told Hilda, If I'm directly responsible for this crime,

I do apologize if I've brought tragedy into your lives and tragedy to myself.

I don't know what to say to you. I just can't believe I've done those terrible things.

The mother and daughter made it very clear to Bell that they knew he was the man responsible for killing Shari. His denial filled Dawn with disgust. At the very least, she hoped he'd be

man enough to own up to his actions and apologize. Regardless, Hilda told him,

I don't hate you. There is not enough room in my heart for more pain.

After interviewing friends and family members, investigators could find no evidence to indicate that Larry Jean Bell and Shari Smith were known to one another prior to May 31, 1985.

It appeared that Shari had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

On the afternoon of Shari's disappearance, Bell had been in downtown Lexington, dropping his mother at a doctor's appointment. He had likely caught sight of Shari as she got into her car after her friend's pool party and made the decision to follow her home from there.

Although Bell had probably been fantasizing about pulling off such a crime for a while, the attack was somewhat opportunistic. When Shari arrived at her house and got out of her car to check the mail, Bell likely approached her, brandishing a gun and demanded she get into his

car. Back at the Shepherd's house, he answered a call from a friend who worked as a waitress at a local restaurant. Bell's parents had just arrived for dinner, and she invited Bell to come join them. Bell said he'd rather stay in and watch the College World Series baseball game instead. At this point, investigators believed Shari was tied to the bed, terrified.

A night of sexual assault likely preceded Shari's eventual murder at 4.58am, the time that Bell told the Smith family their souls became one.

During the search of Bell's bedroom, officers found a business card for a topsoil company located on Old Percival Road, directly across from the trailer park where the Helmick family lived. The company belonged to Bell's sister, Diane. Diane and her husband occasionally hired Bell to do some work for their business. Investigators theorized that Bell had caught sight of 9-year-old Debra May Helmick while working for his sister and had targeted her because of her blonde hair, and the fact should be easy to control. From the outset of the investigation, criminal profilers believed the serial killer would keep trophies of his victims.

Despite extensive searches of Bell's home and vehicle, nothing belonging to Shari Smith or Debra May Helmick was found. But there was no denying Larry Jean Bell's obsession with the two cases. Not only had he kept the extensive collection of newspaper clippings for Sharon Shepard, a neighbor recalled that Bell had been eager to bring up Shari's kidnapping the day after it happened. He claimed to be a good friend of the Smith family and had made the odd comment, she's dead now. The neighbor hadn't thought anything of it at the time, but he did notice one thing. Bell had always sported a full beard. The day after Shari's kidnapping, he was clean-shaven. Questions remained regarding the vehicles used in the abductions. The only car linked to Bell was the gray Buick he'd been driving at the time of his arrest. Two days prior to this, a cranberry-colored Buick regal had been found abandoned in a hotel car park.

A search revealed it had been reported stolen in April and the thief had never been apprehended. But there was no evidence inside to link it to Bell, nor could investigators find the silver-colored General Motors vehicle used in the abduction of Debra May Helmick. However, when Bell was arrested, officers searched his car and found a license plate in the trunk that didn't match those on display. The witness to Debra May's abduction recalled the kidnapper's license plate beginning with the letter D. The plate inside Bell's vehicle read, DCE 604.

News that an arrest had been made in the Smith Helmick case was met with mixed reactions. While members of the community breathed the collective sigh of relief that someone had finally been held accountable, those who knew Bell were in disbelief. Neighbours and former colleagues struggled to comprehend that the friendly and likeable person they knew could be capable of such crimes. Many were convinced that police had caught the wrong guy, but investigators had no doubts.

After sorting out some complex jurisdictional issues, Larry Jean Bell was officially charged with the kidnapping and murder of both Shari Smith and Debra May Helmick. Both cases would be tried

separately. Both carried the possibility of the death penalty. But there was something else that investigators needed to get to the bottom of. While Bell was being transported for one of his court hearings, he turned to one of the accompanying officers. Bell said that he wanted to speak to law enforcement in Charlotte, a city in the neighbouring state of North Carolina, saying, I want to tell them some things about a missing girl named Sandy.

26-year-old Sandy Cornette was an insurance adjuster and part-time model who lived in

[Transcript] Casefile True Crime / 306: Case 261: Shari Smith & Debra May Helmick (Part 2)

East Charlotte. On Sunday, November 18, 1984, Sandy had dinner at home with her fiancé, who then

left to spend the night at his own home. When Sandy failed to show up at work the next day with no explanation, police went to her house to conduct a welfare check. The house was empty, but the television was on. The contents of Sandy's purse had been dumped onto her bed but nothing was missing besides a single ATM card, and there was no sign of a break-in or a struggle.

Based on clothes missing from her cupboard, it was deduced that Sandy had been wearing a navy blue

velour jogging suit at the time of her disappearance. Police considered whether she could have been attacked upon returning home from a run, but those who knew Sandy said she often wore her running clothes when lounging around the house.

However, they also said she was not the type to ever open the door to a stranger.

This raised the possibility, had Sandy been abducted by someone she knew.

For days, investigators searched the surrounding areas, but no sign of Sandy Cornette was found.

A trace was put on Sandy's missing ATM card, providing what appeared to be a breakthrough when it was revealed that the card had been used several times at a bank in Charlotte

by a man and woman. These suspects weren't identified, and Sandy's case eventually went cold.

That all changed as Larry Jean Bell unpromptedly began telling the accompanying officer,

On Monday, God is going to reveal to me where Sandy Cornette's body is.

He said her hands would be folded in prayer position, just like with Sherry Smith.

An interview was arranged between Bell and authorities in Charlotte,

during which he ranted for 12 hours, saying that he was the most gifted man in the world, and that God zapped messages down to him.

He claimed everything he knew about Sandy Cornette was revealed to him by God.

Investigators did some digging and realised that at the time of Sandy's disappearance,

Larry Jean Bell lived just four miles from Sandy's home in Charlotte's Mint Hill district.

The two were vaguely known to one another, having met at a party years prior through a former boyfriend

of Sandy's who worked with Bell at Eastern Airlines. Just a few weeks after Sandy vanished,

Bell moved away. The theft element of Sandy's disappearance didn't fit with Bell's MO,

but he was able to give accurate details about the ATM withdrawals that had never been released to the

public. Bell quickly rose to the position of prime suspect, but investigators failed to find any concrete evidence linking him to the crime. But Sandy Cornette wasn't the only one.

During his 12 hour interview, Bell hinted at having knowledge about two other cases involving young women. Although he didn't mention the individuals by name, investigators looked into

other unsolved cases from around Charlotte at the time Bell lived there, and found two that matched his MO. 21-year-old Denise Porch lived with her husband at an apartment complex in Southwest

Charlotte, where she also worked as the residential manager. At 8pm on Monday, July 21, 1975, her husband returned home from a day out to find a note from Denise from earlier,

saying she was going to show an apartment to a prospective tenant.

The television and air conditioner were still on, Denise's purse was inside, and her car was still

parked outside. But there was no sign of Denise herself, nor was there any sign of a struggle. The years went by without a single trace of Denise's surfacing, or anyone being held accountable for her disappearance. At the time, Larry Jean Bell lived just 300 yards away. On Thursday, December 18, 1980, the body of 17-year-old Beth Marie Hagen was found dumped in the woods near Mint Hill. She had been strangled with an electrical cord. Bell lived just one mile away. Not only did this put him within the vicinity of both unsolved crimes, but like Sherry Smith and Deborah May Helmick, Denise Porch and Beth Hagen were blondes who fit Bell's preferred victim type. In September 1985, acting on a tip-off, police searched a sand pit at the topsoil company on Old Percival Road, owned by Larry Jean Bell's sister and brother-in-law. Suspicions were raised that the bodies of Sandy Cornette or Denise Porch could be found there. The search turned up nothing. Not a single piece of evidence was found linking Bell to either of the three cold cases. By the time Bell's trial for the kidnapping and murder of Sherry Smith commenced in February 1986, public interest in the case hadn't dissipated. Curious members of the public lined up outside the courthouse vying for a seat inside, with two women even breaking into a fight. Bell arrived with a shaved head and a homemade badge pinned to his shirt that read, I am the victim, I am innocent. Bell's defense lawyer didn't deny that his client was responsible for Sherry's kidnapping, but said there was no proof that he was guilty of murder. Either way, the lawyer argued that Bell should be found not guilty due to mental illness. According to the lawyer, the multiple calls that Bell had made to the Smith family were proof that he was mentally unstable, delirious, and out of touch with reality. He asked the jury, how many rational people who had abducted someone and who may have caused a death, would call the family collect so the call could be traced. The prosecution argued that anyone out of touch with reality would be incapable of tormenting Sherry's family the way that Bell did. They believed that Bell's mentally unstable behavior was all an act, and that securing a conviction of not guilty on account of mental illness would be a victory for Bell. As one psychologist who had spent significant time with Bell testified, he wasn't mentally ill, he simply had no conscience and derived sexual pleasure from the pain of others. The prosecution lawyer asked the jury, the question is simple, whether or not Larry Jean Bell could follow the law, or whether or not Larry Jean Bell would follow the law. From the outset of the trial, Bell's conduct in court was unpredictable and disruptive. He often interrupted proceedings by calling out nonsensical comments. When one psychiatrist testified that he was a sadistic sexual deviant, even though it was in his defense, Bell turned to the press rows and said, if you all believe that, Mona Lisa is a man. In a risky move for the defense, Bell also took the stand. He wouldn't sit down, saying, there are no chairs at the gates of hell. He refused to answer even basic questions such as his age, instead repeatedly saying, silence is golden. At one point he told the press, I'm so confused, ain't we having fun? Later he turned to the jury and said, food for thought, gifted, dumb, or a fruit cake, you pick one. But if the defense hoped that putting Bell on the stand would prove to the jury how irrational

he was, their plan failed. After closing arguments, it took the jury less than an hour to deliver their verdict. Guilty on both counts. Outside court, a reporter asked Bell how he felt about the verdict. He responded, silence is golden, my friend. Bell's sentencing took place two days later. At one point he turned to Dawn Smith in court and asked, Dawn, will you marry me, my singing angel? Look into my eyes, my holy angel. He told the jury, from the top of my head to the tips of my feet, I'm lusting for Dawn Elizabeth Smith. I'd like to take her hand in holy matrimony, that's the only thing I'm guilty of. The prosecution had implored the jury to impose the death penalty, saying, if this isn't the type of case in which the state should seek the death penalty and expect the death penalty, then there is none. The jury agreed. For the kidnapping and murder of Shari Smith, Larry Jean Bell was sentenced to death.

It was over a year before the family of Deborah May Helmick finally got their day in court, and it couldn't come soon enough. Young Woody Helmick continued to struggle in the wake of his sister's murder. He was plagued by nightmares caused by witnessing the kidnapping and was constantly terrified that the bad man would come back to get him. He refused to go anywhere alone. The Helmicks had no doubt that police had caught the right person. As reported by the Columbia Record, when Woody saw Larry Jean Bell in court during the Smith trial, he turned to his mother and said, he's the man that took Debbie.

The Helmicks prepared themselves for Bell's court romantics after he once again pleaded not guilty to Deborah May's kidnapping and murder, but they needn't bother. In contrast to his previous trial, Bell remained silent throughout the proceedings and showed no emotion.

The defense didn't call any witnesses, introduce any new evidence, or put Bell on the stand. Again, it took the jury just one hour to find Larry Jean Bell guilty on both counts, and again, he was sentenced to death.

As Bell sat on death row appealing his sentences, police received a tip-off from a young man who claimed his conscience had been eating away at him for years.

According to this informant, in 1984, at the age of 15, he and a friend were hitchhiking along the Interstate 85 Highway in Cherokee County, Georgia. Larry Jean Bell picked them up and took them to a location four miles off the highway. Bell allegedly led them to an abandoned well, where he showed the teenagers two dead bodies. According to the informant, Bell warned, if you don't do what I say, that's what will happen to you.

Investigators weren't sure what to make of the claim, but the timeline matched with Sandy Cornette's disappearance, so they weren't taking any chances. If Bell was indeed responsible for Sandy's death, they needed to work fast to secure a conviction before his execution.

Despite eight years passing since this alleged incident, the young man was able to retrace his steps through the rural dirt roads and thick woods of Cherokee County. He couldn't recall the exact location of the well, but remembered that it was near an old ranch-style farmhouse and a wooden

bridge. Leading a search party of 30 officers, dozens of abandoned wells were located, and through a process of elimination, investigators honed in on one. Water was pumped from the well

and a high-tech camera was used to search within, but no human remains were found.

Throughout his time on death row, Bell's questionable behavior continued. One psychiatrist once found him naked and washing himself with water from the toilet bowl. He claimed to be the

second to Jesus Christ and that he bathed in his own urine because it was holy water. He told another

psychiatrist that there was a bird in his soul who had been sent to him by God. According to Bell, he could memorize even the most complex medical textbook in one night.

As the years went on, concerns were raised that Bell would be found incompetent for execution due to mental illness. Once he'd exhausted all appeals, a competency hearing was held to determine whether he was mentally fit. The judge concluded that Bell was able to control his mental illness and exaggerate his problems when it benefited him, and therefore was competent for execution. Sheriff James Metz told reporters for News 19,

he ruined the families of two beautiful young ladies. He ruined the community of Lexington and Greater Columbia. Larry Jean Bell deserves to die, and he should have died a long time ago. Bell was given the option of lethal injection or electric chair. He chose the electric chair, reasoning that there were similarities between the wood of the chair and the wood of the crucifix. The execution was scheduled for Friday, October 4, 1996, just over 11 years after his arrest for the murders. Shari Smith's family chose not to attend, but several of Shari's friends gathered outside the prison gates holding candles in her memory. Deborah May Helmick's mother told News 19 reporters that she felt she owed it to her daughter to be there. While she genuinely believed that Larry Jean Bell was mentally ill, she also believed he knew right from wrong, and wanted to see him punished for the pain he'd caused her family. Bell gave no last words. If he knew anything about the crimes against Sandy Cornette, Denise Porch, or Beth Hagan, he took that knowledge

to the grave. For the Helmick family, life was never the same after the day that Deborah May was kidnapped. Her sister Becky, who on the day of the abduction had chosen to drive to work with her mother instead of staying behind to play with her siblings, continued to carry guilt for not being there for Deborah May. In the lead-up to Bell's execution, Becky wrote a statement about the impact of Bell's crimes, saying that Deborah May was a sweet innocent girl who had never been beyond

her childhood years. Becky explained, she had so many hopes, plans, and dreams for the future. They just all shattered right in front of my five-year-old eyes.

The girl's father, Sherwood Helmick, began drinking heavily to escape his overwhelming grief. He'd spent hours just sitting and staring at photos of Deborah May. Shortly after his daughter's murder, Sherwood lost his job altogether. He had a nervous breakdown and was hospitalized, where he received treatment to overcome his alcohol abuse. His wife worked part-time in a struggle to keep up with the bills and to keep food on the table, but it wasn't enough and the Helmicks eventually lost their home. But the surrounding community wasn't going to let them go down without a fight. Residents of Lexington and Richland Counties rallied together to raise money to help the Helmicks get back on their feet. A chairperson for the fundraiser committee told the Columbia Record, Deborah May Helmick is not the only victim here. Her family still suffers every day. They shouldn't have to worry about whether they have a roof over their heads too. Conditions improved for the Helmicks, but Sherwood and Deborah's marriage didn't survive, and they divorced in the lead-up to Bell's execution.

Deborah May's mother found comfort in her daughter's favorite doll named Scotty, whom she began sleeping with in the wake of the crime. She told a reporter for the state,

It's not like having her with me, but it's the next best thing.

In Sherry Smith's last will and testament, Sherry had assured her family, some good will come from this. The Smiths clung to this sentiment. For them, that final letter provided more closure than any legal outcomes.

Sherry's father, Bob, continued to serve as chaplain for the Sheriff's Department.

At one point, he accompanied officers when they had the unfortunate task of notifying another couple that their daughter had been killed. When the agonized father of the victim realized who Bob was, he threw his arms around him. Bob tearfully told a reporter for the Prison Fellowship that the two had an immediate bond, saying, God had me there for a reason.

In the years following Sherry's murder, her sister Dawn went on to win the Miss South Carolina Beauty contest. She became a public figure, spreading her message about the importance of keeping faith no matter what life throws our way. Later appearing on the true crime TV show, Eyewitness, Dawn said, In her final moments, Sherry didn't choose fear.

She chose faith and courage. Losing Sherry made me realize every day that what I have is a gift God's given me, and I have a decision. What am I going to do with it? I am going to choose faith.

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It's obvious the unthinkable is going to happen soon. With all the distractions in the media, we probably won't see it coming. Your gut tells you there's something very wrong going on, and all the evidence suggests that there is. Those in charge say everything's fine, stop noticing, but you know better. American families are preparing. Folks are getting into self-reliance and investing in emergency food storage. MyPatriot supply, the nation's largest emergency preparedness company, is the place you can trust. Go to mypatriotsupply.com and secure their best-selling three-month emergency food kits. Each contains tasty breakfasts, lunches, and dinners, averaging over 2,000 calories per day. Get at least one food kit for each family member. For a limited time, save 25% plus get free shipping and all their three-month emergency food kits. Go to mypatriotsupply.com today. Order by 3pm and your items ship the same day. It's time to prepare for what's coming. MyPatriotSupply.com