

[Transcript] The Coldest Case In Laramie / Episode 1

Years ago, when I was a teenager, I lived in Laramie, Wyoming.

I've always remembered it as a mean town, uncommonly mean, a place of jagged edges and cold people.

Where the wind blew so hard, it actually whipped pebbles at you, actually pushed trucks off the highway.

Laramie stood at an elevation of more than 7,000 feet and got so sucked in by winter storms, it felt like we were trapped, like there was no way out.

My family moved away before my senior year in high school.

I never wanted to go back.

The town's only high school, Laramie High, was grim even by normal high school standards.

One of my classmates killed someone, other students killed themselves.

Some boys were held down and branded with letters, like they were livestock.

Coaches who caught guys fighting in the hallways made them fight for real, and it makes shift ring.

Laramie wanted to raise its men as macho cowboys, weakness wasn't tolerated, and the girls had to look a certain way, act a certain way, wear a certain kind of eyeliner, have a certain kind of bi-level haircut.

I was bullied for the way I spoke, the way I dressed.

I can still hear some boys mock barking my name, Kim Barker, down the hallway.

Whenever I'd talk about the roughest place I'd ever lived, I'd always say Laramie.

Not Kabul, even though I reported there from the middle of a war.

Not Islamabad, even though suicide bombs exploded there regularly.

There's a good chance that if you've heard of Laramie before, it's because of Matthew Shepard, a gay university student who was tortured there, and later died.

When I first heard about his death, I thought, of course that happened in Laramie.

But the main reason that Laramie has always stuck with me, the defining cruelty and the litany of him, was a young woman I had never met named Shelly Wiley.

In the fall of 1985, when I was a high school sophomore, Shelly was murdered in her apartment.

She was a few years older than me and had gone to Laramie High.

She went to college at the nearby University of Wyoming and earned money waiting tables at a truck stop.

She was 22, white, a pretty brunette, living a version of the life me and my friends imagined for ourselves one day.

The details of her death were less clear to me at 14 than the brutality was.

There were whispers about stabbings and blood.

I'd heard that whoever had killed Shelly had burned her apartment to the ground.

I remember the shock of her murder arriving at my high school.

Some students became suspects.

Others played the guessing game.

In one particularly terrifying round of Ouija with friends, we asked for a sign if the spirit knew who killed Shelly Wiley.

At that very moment, a knock came on the basement window.

Even the boys screamed.

Shelly's murder was never solved.

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Every few years, after I moved away, after I became a reporter, I'd search her name for news almost as an idle reflex.

There was never anything.

Then came January 2021.

I was cooped up in my apartment, just me, my dog Lucy, and a global pandemic.

Like almost everyone else, I was going a little bit stir crazy.

I also owed my newspaper some story ideas and, truthfully, I was tapped out.

So with a special kind of desperation, I googled Shelly's name again.

This time, there was news.

In 2016, 31 years after Shelly's murder, the police had actually made an arrest in the case.

A guy named Fred Lam.

He was a one-time cop, a former sheriff's deputy and Laramie police officer.

According to news reports, on the night Shelly was killed in 1985, Fred Lam had been staying in the apartment two doors down from her.

His blood had been found at the scene.

And after being confronted with DNA evidence in 2016, he had even told police that, quote, I'm not denying that I did it.

And Fred Lam did it.

But then, a few months after charging him, prosecutors unexpectedly dropped the case.

An article in the local paper headlined, possible delay in cold case, quoted the prosecutor, who said her office needed more time to get test results back.

She said they were dropping the charges against Fred, but only temporarily.

They planned to refile soon.

That was in early 2017.

To this day, prosecutors haven't refiled.

Which means, a former cop had been arrested.

His DNA had been found at the scene.

He'd even, apparently, given something like a confession, and then, nothing?

The whole thing seemed so Laramie.

I doubted this was a story my editor would be into.

A random 36-year-old cold case from my time in high school that might have a perfectly reasonable explanation for where it stood.

But I decided to make some calls anyway, pull some string.

I figured, what's the harm in a little side project?

From Serial Productions and The New York Times, I'm Kim Barker.

This is the coldest case in Laramie.

I'm Margaret Lyons.

I'm a TV critic for The New York Times and a writer for The Times newsletter called Watching.

To create this newsletter, my colleagues and I step through hundreds of movies and shows so we can help you find something you'll love.

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Watching is part of a collection of newsletters just for our time subscribers.

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I read through the handful of articles about Fred Lam I could find on the internet and then I started looking for Shelly's family.

I didn't find much, an obit for Shelly's father and a pleading Facebook post from a young woman named Brandy saying she was Shelly Wiley's niece.

She didn't name Lam, but she said a former sheriff's deputy, a quote, monster, had never had to answer for his crime.

Brandy said that she and her family needed help.

I messaged her.

We set up a time to Zoom, along with her mom, Lori, Shelly Wiley's younger sister.

Hi.

Can you hear me?

Yes, can you hear me?

Yeah, I'm just moving over to the Zoom, yeah.

Thanks so much.

You must be Lori.

I am.

Good to be too.

I'm obviously, and I'm obviously Kim and that's, oh hi Brandy, good to see you.

Hi.

So like, I figure we should start out with you guys asking me questions about what I'm doing and like, you know, I would imagine that you would have questions.

Yes, absolutely.

What are you writing about exactly?

So what I would be interested in doing is basically trying to find out what happened with the case against Fred Lam.

Right.

And like, just get records, do all the sort of things that you do.

I just, I feel like that there could be something there, especially given like the Fred Lam was a cop.

Oh, there is something there, I'm sure.

I'd hesitated before reaching out to Lori directly.

For one thing, I could see from LinkedIn that she was the director of nursing at a nursing home in California in the middle of a pandemic.

I figured she was busy.

I didn't want to do this story without talking to her and I knew my call could open up old wounds.

But Lori was blunt and matter of fact and willing to talk.

So why don't we start with what your understanding is with what happened with Fred Lam?

So what happened with Fred Lam is, well, like when they arrested him a few years ago, I know it's very political and I know they had to keep things a secret from a lot of people in the police department at the time.

But I did sit down with them about, I'm going to say three, four years ago and looked at most of the case with them, well, not most of the case, but I was there for like three

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hours and looked at a lot of it.

And what did you see, like what did they show you?

Oh, good Lord, it's a long story.

But when we went in, so I went to Laramie and actually I'm really good friends with my sister's roommate at the time, Michelle.

Oh, I would love to talk to her.

Yeah.

Michelle mentions of Shelly's roommate, Michelle, in an old news story in the Casper paper.

In the few articles I could find online, Michelle was the only person quoted who actually knew Shelly, the only friend mentioned.

I'm sure Michelle would probably talk to you too.

Okay.

So I'm actually, Michelle, with, I hadn't seen her in a long time, but I had flown from my dad's house and Michelle picked me up, but we drove to Laramie and she'd already talked to him, but I went there and I talked to the detective.

We were in the room and I know somebody was on the camera watching or guiding him.

I could tell, but they just went over the story and they basically said, so, so his apartment was two apartments down.

The basics, as I understood them from talking to Lori and reading about Fred Lam's arrest.

Back in 1985, he had just left the sheriff's department and joined the National Guard full time, married with a kid living just outside of Laramie.

But on guard drill weekends, he set at his friend's place in town, which happened to being the same apartment building as Shelly and Michelle, just two doors down.

The weekend of Shelly's murder was a drill weekend, so Fred was staying over as usual.

Lori told me the last time she saw her sister, Shelly, was just a few hours before she was killed.

Shelly and a girlfriend had spent the evening talking and drinking tea in her living room.

Lori stopped by after getting off of work, but soon Shelly sent Lori and her friend home.

Shelly had to get up early for her waitressing shift.

Michelle was gone for the night, so Shelly was alone.

At some point in the early morning hours of Sunday, October 20th, someone got inside of Shelly's apartment and attacked her in her bedroom.

It looked like she'd tried to escape.

She made it out the front door.

But on the sidewalk just outside of her building, her attacker caught her, stabbed her repeatedly, dragged Shelly back inside before setting the apartment on fire.

At about 5.20 in the morning, witnesses saw flames shooting out of Shelly's apartment engulfing the living room in the front door.

Fred was there, one of the few people at the scene.

Police interviewed Fred late that afternoon.

He told them he had guard duty the next day, and would be heading to Arkansas for a couple weeks of training.

And then, as far as Lori knew, the cops never looked at Fred again.

Not until three decades later, in 2016, when Laramie investigators keyed in on Fred for

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the murder, they gathered evidence and called Fred in for an interview.

This one lasted more than seven hours.

Near the end, according to news reports, is when Fred referred to himself in the third person, and said things such as, Fred lamb did it, and, bottom line is, I killed a girl.

After Fred was charged, Lori said the lead detective brought in her and Michelle, and walked them through the early mistakes in the case.

Because I asked the detective, I'm like, well, why did the crime scene tape only go to the first department?

And when he looked at the picture, sure enough, they didn't even go to the second or third department, even though there was more evidence further down.

So anyhow, yeah, they let Fred go, but there was, he did have some blood spatter on his door.

He had a cut on his hand, and he said, he cut his hand.

I can't remember what he told them knocking on the door.

I can't remember how he got that.

But I know he went behind the building at one point, cut the whole phone line.

I mean, what's it like to find out they, they arrest a guy, two doors down?

I think Michelle was like, I knew he may have had something to do with it.

Michelle said that from the beginning.

Um, I don't know if she knew it was him, but she questioned.

Lori says they all knew Fred Lam.

He used to go to Fosters, a huge truck stop off of Interstate 80, where Lori, Michelle, and Shelley all worked.

They'd see Fred at Fosters, meeting with other cops to drink coffee and shoot the shit.

Fosters was just across the dirt road from Shelley's apartment building.

The building itself wasn't much, five low slung units arranged in an L shape.

It was the kind of building that looks like a strip of crummy motel rooms, but is in fact a strip of crummy rental units along a sidewalk and parking lot.

That's the other place Lori remember seeing Fred sometimes when she was over at Shelley's apartment building.

We would sit outside sometimes with sunbathe out there, because that's what you did in the 80s.

I know when they said it in the report, I'm like, oh my God, you're trying to make us look like horrors, aren't you?

I pretty much told him that.

I'm like, that's not how it was then.

That's not really what we were.

But they came home.

But I remember I was, I don't even think we were sunbathing this time, but we were standing outside and I must have been leaving.

But I remember Michelle smacking me and telling me, look at those weirdos.

There's my neighbors.

He's a weirdo.

But I remember a couple weeks before their screen kept coming off their window.

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Different screens.

And somebody, they had somebody put it back on or he offered to put it back on and Michelle turned him down one time.

But I remember their screens in the front would come off and then in the back would come off.

But they never knew who it was.

They weren't too worried about it at the time.

Right.

What did you think about the fact that he was a former police officer and used to be in the sheriff's office?

Well, at first I had to realize, I was like, hmm, I didn't have a lot of feelings either way.

Well, they're assholes because they wouldn't really answer any of our questions.

But yeah, I was pretty naive then.

I'm not nearly as naive now or these days, you know, I would have counted them or called them more.

But yeah, no, they didn't tell us they had any suspects or that they really talked to them or that I remember.

The detective who was in charge of it now is not somebody who is originally a police officer at the time.

He's not from Laramie.

Okay.

So he's like, he's not familiar with the case.

I'm now sitting inside my bathroom because my dog's being super loud.

Oh, okay.

Can I move inside here?

He's familiar with the case.

He ended up with the case and he investigated it and he's the one who got the warrant to arrest Brad the first time.

And then I don't know, he's now like the assistant chief of police, but he kept the case.

So he sounds like he's very invested in it then.

He's very invested in it.

He's the only one that'll help me with anything.

Nobody else will go further.

He's the only one that tries to get them to press charges or to move forward or to do any of that.

Nobody else will really help.

And what's his name?

The deputy?

Uh, the detective area that he may be the, I'm not even sure his title now.

The assistant chief, his name is Robert Terry.

Robert Terry.

Okay.

And how did you find out that they were going to drop the charges, at least for now against

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slam?

I read it in paper.

Oh, they didn't call you and tell you.

Oh no.

No.

Anytime I call any of the attorneys, they have only had victims witness call me like twice.

I called a lot though.

I hounded the police station when he was arrested and the first police officer that answered at the jailhouse and she was really rude and she was like, I don't know what case you're talking about.

So she transferred me to another police officer and he told me that he wasn't allowed to discuss the case.

But then it got really quiet and it was like he was whispering in the phone and he said, you need to pursue this, don't stop and then he hung up the phone.

But at one point, Peggy Trent was the prosecutor for it and I called her a few times and she wouldn't answer the phone and then I kind of got on a kick of, you know, calling.

I thought in my head, I'm like, I feel like Laramie is really a bad place to try it.

So I wonder if there's something that I could do, you know, or to get it transferred out of Laramie to maybe Cheyenne.

So I remember calling Cheyenne and asking them, you know, if they knew about the case and that I was her niece and how they get it transferred or whatever.

And the lady that I spoke to, she said, I can't just take the case.

She said it has to be given to us by Peggy Trent.

But she was like, can I call you right back in 15 minutes?

And I'm like, yeah, and I didn't think she was going to call me back.

Well, she called me back really quickly and she was like, yeah, I just spoke to a judge and we're, we want it, but we can't just take it.

So I called Peggy Trent back and I told her, you know, like Cheyenne wants it in the case and I feel like it would be better to be, you know, tried outside of Laramie.

And she was so angry with me.

She told me, who do you think you are just trying to take my case away?

So I was really frustrated with her and I would call her office every day, you know, just to ask questions.

And eventually I was sharing on my Facebook the article, you know, and saying this is my aunt, everybody please share.

So it started to get, you know, around a little bit.

And then Peggy Trent called my grandmother on me and told my grandma that I was jeopardizing the case and to make me stop.

She called my grandma on me.

I talked to Peggy Trent about this story.

She told me she didn't remember Brandy calling her office, nor did she remember calling Brandy's grandma.

Peggy has since left the prosecutor's office.

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She told me she wouldn't talk about an open investigation.

Lori graduated high school a few months before Shelley was killed.

She told me she spent much of her time at Shelley's, even spent the night there sometimes.

They were four years apart, but Lori told me they were really close.

They drank beer, went to university football games.

In a Garfield notebook they kept on Shelley's dresser.

They wrote about their lives from the perspective of a cat.

When Lori spoke to me about Shelley, she did it without a lot of sentimentality.

She seemed like she put her memories of her sister and what happened into a box that she never opened.

She ripped a charm bracelet of Shelley's with a dangling ballerina in a bag, in a drawer, where she rarely saw it.

Lori told me that Shelley's death devastated her family.

For Vicki, Shelley's mom, the murderer of her oldest child became the divider of life into before and after.

Life before, Vicki gave birth to Shelley just after high school, and the two pretty much grew up together.

They looked alike, like sisters even.

Talked all the time, even after Shelley's dad and Vicki divorced.

Life after, Vicki became more of a recluse according to Lori, more depressed, more off on her own.

Shelley's dad kind of disappeared after his daughter's murder, spent much of his time alone in the mountains, didn't want to talk about Shelley's murder, didn't talk much about her at all.

He seemed to walk away from his second marriage without actually leaving, and after the couple finally broke up, Shelley's father left Laramie for good.

He died alone in Buffalo, Wyoming, leaving behind Shelley's funeral notice tucked inside a book and a bitter hatred of the Laramie police.

One of Shelley's brothers started drinking after Shelley's death.

He never stopped.

He died shortly before my first conversation with Lori and Brandy.

When I asked Shelley's family about her, what she was like, who she was, they tended to lean on the platitudes of the long dead.

She lit up a room with her smile, she was smart, beautiful, inside and out.

And it makes sense, Shelley is, in their minds, forever 22, a pretty woman who liked John Denver, who loved animals, especially cats, who worked out at the gym regularly before that was really a thing for women, who was often, in fact, the only woman in any of her engineering or industrial management classes.

In truth, the most important parts of who Shelley Wiley was were still in the process of being ironed out.

Her family mourns this just as much as they mourn the person they loved, that she was murdered right at that precipice, before she or anyone else had a chance to find out who she was going to be.

Well, I've talked to you guys for like more than an hour this evening.

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I don't want to take too much of your time up in the very beginning, and I hate to say that I'm giving homework, but there's homework here.

If you guys could talk to Michelle and see if she'd talk to me, and I think that she would be really important to talk to, just because she would be more familiar with what his role was in the building at the time and all that stuff.

I'm sure Michelle will talk to you.

That'd be great.

Okay.

All right, and we'll just stay in touch, and we'll see where this can go, okay?

Okay, thank you.

Thank you so much.

Thank you.

Bye.

Thank you.

Bye.

What I gathered from talking to Lori and Brandi was that they didn't actually know a lot more about what happened with this case than what appeared in news reports.

In that vacuum, they'd started developing some theories.

They were pretty clear that the whole thing was mishandled from the start, that Fred didn't get a close look as a suspect back in 1985.

They figured it was because he was a former cop, that maybe this was a good old boy protecting their own thing.

It was hard for Lori and Brandi to feel like there wasn't something shady going on here.

They told me they'd be happy to have me find out what I could.

See you next time on The Coldest Case in Laramie.