

[Transcript] The Coldest Case In Laramie / Episode 8

You're a good cop. Be proud, dammit.
Thank you.
Most people who looked at it and said,
pfft, and thrown it back on the shelf.
Previously on The Coldest Case in Laramie.
Well, I am not.
I'm not a lost for words for that,
because under the circumstances,
it's quite a compliment.
It's a beautiful compliment.
I think you deserve it.
Thank you.
I just can't even fathom him doing anything like that,
except if he was in his deemow,
all that kind of shit flailing his arms like he did.
Like he does.
How could, for the past 37 years,
I was afraid of this card?
There was something written inside.
It wasn't Merry Christmas, it wasn't that.
This homicide is not very difficult.
It's not complicated.
After more than a year of me asking,
and more than a year of him saying no,
Fred Lam finally agreed to talk to my producer, Alvin, at me.
By the time we arrived at his lawyer's office for the interview,
Fred was already there, along with his wife, Linda.
I recognized Fred from the video of his interrogation with Robert Terry.
But that was six years ago,
and I didn't know what he was talking about.
The man in the room with me now seems significantly older than his 73 years.
Hearing aids, a cane.
His limp was more pronounced than it was in the video.
Linda, who is 70, looked different as well.
But she seemed younger than she did in her interview with Terry.
More to ease, obviously.
So how do we want to do this that's good for you?
Would you hold my call?
I've always wanted to say that.
Would you want to be here on this side?
I didn't really have questions for Fred about his version of what happened back in 1985.
I'd read the case file and listened to his police interviews a number of times.
The idea that Fred would choose this Tuesday afternoon in his lawyer's office
to make some startling admission that would upend everything.

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It seemed kind of unlikely.

Fred's story had remained fairly consistent over the years.

Some of the details had changed, but the thrust of it hasn't.

Did you kill Shelly Wiley?

No. No way, no hate, no form.

But to my ear at least, back in 2016 in their interviews with Robert Terry, both Fred and Linda seemed not so sure.

Back then, they seemed to be saying that Fred could have done something, that he was capable of it,

that maybe he did do it and then forgot about it.

That's what I really wanted to know from Fred.

What was it like to have your own reality, your own story, rearranged over the course of a seven-hour interrogation?

I asked Fred what happened in that interview with Terry.

How did that all go down?

I was working as a maintenance person for the correction center over at the Albany County Sheriff's Department.

It was just before lunch.

I came out, the detective that was doing the interview, another deputy lieutenant was there.

He came up and said,

would you mind coming out and talking to us again about it?

Well, we just want to re-interview you,

because you don't just ask you a few questions

because you're our only link in this whole thing.

I said, sure, not a problem.

So I drove my truck out to the police department in South Laramie and was met there and taken in a room.

My rights were read to me.

I waived my rights because I had nothing to hide and personal opinion only,

but expressed from there it went downhill really bad.

So that's when we started the whole,

the whole, I'll call it an interrogation for life of a better term.

Everything I said to him,

he lied to me through the whole thing to get the answers that he required.

One question I think, I mean, I had in watching this interview is, why didn't you get a lawyer?

You know, I've been asking myself that same question because I didn't think they were out to hang me.

I honestly thought that I was going to help them.

And they got me just before lunch and I'm diabetic.

And to be honest with you, I can't answer that question.

I guess maybe because I was dumbfounded by the way it was going.

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And that's why at the end of the interview,
after what seven and a half hours,
I finally said, I can see this is not going to go anywhere.
Congratulations, you just saw the crime of the freaking century.
And then I was cuffed and escorted to Cheyenne and ate peanut butter sandwiches.
I mean, what are you coming away from that interview thinking that the police have on you?
Nothing.
Despite like, because it seems like the only way I was going to get out of that interview.
And then the whole thing was, like I said, this is going nowhere.
There was no way and no out for me.
And I honestly should have thought with my experience in law enforcement of saying,
I want an attorney, I want to quit talking.
But by that time, I was just out of it.
Because the congratulations to him feels really weird.
Like, you know, I've watched the video.
If you listen to the tape, you will note a little cynicism in my voice when I tell him that I'm being very
sarcastic.
You know, well, congratulations, you saw the crime of the century.
And that was the way I figured I was going to get out of it and it worked.
Unfortunately, I got shipped to Cheyenne instead of home.
Earlier, Fred had shown me a book he brought with him called How the Police Generate False
Confessions.
I figured that's what we were going to talk about, false confessions.
But now it seemed like Fred was saying, actually, I'm not sure what Fred was saying.
He jumped in trying to clarify.
Can I bring you back?
I know how you feel now about what Terry was telling you.
But there seems to have been a moment where you go from I didn't do it to I didn't do it.
But if I did, I don't remember it.
And there's a little bit of a gap there and that eventually turns into you congratulating him.
Because he kept saying I was, you know, black and out.
If you go back to that tape, you'll say,
well, you know, you had blackouts when you drink too much.
Well, at that point, I had given up.
I knew that he was not going to let me get out of there without me telling him that I did it.
There's no part of you in that moment that wonders, well, maybe I did this and I memory hold it.
No, absolutely not.
In that moment?
Anytime.
At that moment, never.
Fred, I think it's important to say that having listened to this tape a lot that when you congratulate
Robert Terry,
it doesn't sound sarcastic and you also say something along the lines of a lot of other people would
have put this back on the shelf.

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And it's really hard to do these kinds of investigations because all of these people around you and you did the right thing by being unbiased.
You don't remember saying it that way. You remember saying it sarcastically.
No, I just, I knew at that point I was screwed and I just,
I knew that was the only way I was going to walk out of that room was to tell him basically what he wanted to hear.
And what he wanted to hear was that I had done it.
And, you know, it's just, I was tired, I was, you know.
Do you know any of this, Linda, at the time? Do you know that he's going into talk or anything like that?
No.
It was after they arrested him. He called and said, I just got arrested for Shelley Wiley's murder.
You know, it was just like, are you kidding me?
And what do you remember thinking when you got that call from Fred and then what are you thinking when you sit down with Robert Terry?
Do edit this language out. You got to be fucking kidding me.
This is what you remember saying to him or what you remember feeling?
I said that to him because he came to my house and he says, well, we, you can come down and get Fred's truck and we want to interview you.
After all, you've been living with a murderer for 30 years and I just lost it.
I'd had a run in with this particular officer who thought he was better than thou.
And I said, you, you obviously haven't looked at the case or read the case or something to that effect.
And he kept changing my words like he did for Fred.
Blackouts.
He had flashbacks. They're different.
And he only wanted to get what he wanted out of you.
And I just was kind of like, you know, I was really.
This is an interview that's happening at the house or at the station?
No, it's a station, but he came to the house to get me.
So as we're walking out the door, he's telling me that they want to interview me because after all, I've lived with a murderer for 30 years.
And so there's no, again, same question as I asked for Fred.
There's no part of you that thinks that this is remotely possible, even in 2016.
No, no, no, you, you got to know the man, you know.
Throughout this interview, Fred and Linda were disagreeing adamantly with my premise that Robert Terry had led Fred down a path for seven hours that ended in a manufactured half-admission of guilt
that Linda didn't take too much convincing to imagine that her husband was a killer.
Instead, they told me what they thought was really going on,
which is that Robert Terry was out to get Fred, to burnish his own credentials, get a promotion.
They were bitter about it, bitter at Terry and other police,
bitter at the local media outlets that ran headlines about Fred's arrest,
bitter at the people in Laramie who still believe Fred did it.
One thing they weren't bitter about, and this surprised me somewhat,

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they weren't bitter about Shelley's family and their belief that Fred is a killer.
When Fred talked about Shelley's family, he visibly softened.
He said he understood why they believed he was the murderer.
Even if he wasn't going to be prosecuted, her family needed to believe the mystery was over, that the case was solved.
Fred thought they needed that story.
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.
Sign up and we'll email you our best recommendations four times a week so you can get a quick fix on TV tonight or binge all weekend.
Watching is part of a collection of newsletters just for our time subscribers.
If you're watching, and browse all of our newsletters at mytimes.com.
Yeah, no, I'm okay asking this because it's one of the reasons Robert Terry was looking at you.
And it is because he believes you have said you are a Navy SEAL and that you are not a Navy SEAL.
My records reflect that I was a lithographer.
I was associated with it because I was with Commander Naval Forces Vietnam, but I really don't think I want to steal valor. No, thank you.
So you never told anybody you were a SEAL?
People asked me, do I know SEALs?
And I said, well, yeah, I associated with them, but I never went through the complete training I quit at the amphib base.
And you never killed anybody in Vietnam?
No, ma'am, not that I remember.
But you thought he was a SEAL?
But having never said it, I don't know.
Did you ever talk to him about what happened in Vietnam, like his tours in Vietnam?
No, if he brought it up, he would say what he wanted to.
I never, it was not a good time for him, so I never, if he wanted to talk about it, he would.
Um, do I need to hit any other big picture things?
Okay, um, just a couple...
I could have pushed more with the lambs about how this story they were telling me didn't match what I'd heard and seen and read.
I could have pushed them both more on the Navy SEAL stuff.
I could have played them back the 2016 tape that sounded so different to Alvin and me.
But I also knew there were plenty of reasons why they'd arranged themselves into a defensive crouch.
Sitting down for an interview with me, it wasn't without risk.
The case is still open.
When prosecutors dropped the charges against Fred, they did so, quote, without prejudice.
They could, in theory, bring back the charges any time.
This isn't entirely over for Fred and Linda.

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So 1,000% you think Fred Lam did this?

Absolutely.

It's been more than a year since I first sat in Robert Terry's office asking about Shelley Wiley.

In all that time, he hasn't budged.

I mean, do you worry at all that you had tunnel vision on Fred?

I've thought about that for 10 years.

And I think being conscious of that and being that a possibility, I don't think so.

And I've also shown this case to multiple other law enforcement entities to ensure that I'm not doing that.

I took the simple approach of, you know, what's the simplest answer?

What makes sense?

You have to let the evidence guide you to what's going on.

Let the evidence shows Fred was there.

Fred was bleeding there.

That's who I looked at.

Do you think they actually will try Fred Lam?

I don't know.

I'm not convinced.

I mean, I press it and I push it and I ask.

But I just give me a time and tell me when, when are we going to do it?

Or no, like tell me no, because I don't do well without.

If you're going to give me hope, I'm going to keep pressing it.

If you tell me no, then I don't know what to do except for wait for a new prosecutor.

If that's the case, because a new prosecutor could come in at any time on an election and decide that this case is worthy.

You know, and sometimes that's the best thing, but it's not going to get any better.

The case is not going to get better with time.

You know, it's just, it's just not.

Case is what it is right now.

It's as good as it's going to get.

So what's the other stuff that points to Fred?

We know there's the DNA, but he does admit an 85.

He's like, oh yeah, if you find something on that door, it's me, you know?

Yeah, yeah.

There's, there's a lot of things.

I just can't really go into it too in depth right now.

Just because of where we're at and trying to keep what we have, you know, secrets is not the best word, but it kind of is.

I mean, things that can't get out because there's going to be things that only the person there knows about that, you know, we're going to, we're going to bring forth.

I've still just seen the blood on the door.

I know, but I can't, I can't divulge it right now.

I can't tell you.

Don't you kind of want to?

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Because you know they're not going to prosecute, they're not going to prosecute this.
I just, I can't though.
And it would be very detrimental to a case that you admit is not going to happen.
Well, I'm just at the point now where I'm maybe accepting it, but I told you, I still have hope.
And I don't want to jeopardize that by divulging details that, you know, I can't divulge.
I have learned a few things about what Terry's been up to.
For one, I know he worked with experts to reconstruct the fire that burned in Shelley's apartment.
It doesn't seem like there's any new definitive evidence though.
At least no more DNA.
As far as I know, six years after arresting Fred Lam, the most damning evidence Terry has is still the match of Fred's DNA on the door of apartment number three.
It's remarkable really for a 37 year old case, but Shelley is still everywhere in Robert Terry's office.
Her case file is in the two plastic bins stacked next to the wall.
Her photo is on the yellow ribbon hanging behind his desk.
Terry's devotion to this case means everything to Shelley's family.
As far as they're concerned, he's the only police officer who's actually tried to solve it, who returns their phone calls, who is committed to seeing justice done.
You've been a police officer for 20 years now.
Almost.
I mean, how does this case rank in like your career?
Like you have this thing that you obviously worked so hard on and...
Yeah, that's, it is hard because I want to retire someday, you know, and I don't want to leave this case.
I mean, at some point I got to move on.
I have to personally.
I can't, I can't sit with boxes of files in my office.
I can't take them with me when I retire.
This is the hard one.
It's hard because I know, I know what happened.
I know who did it.
I know who's responsible and I can't do anything about it.
So that's it.
That's where this case stands right now in a holding pattern.
Robert Terry has talked about retiring.
He's got his 20 years in.
And when he does retire, here's what will probably happen.
The plastic bins will be handed on again to whoever is anointed Laramie's newest detective.
That person will read through all of the evidence and come to his or her own conclusions about who did it, create yet another story out of all the interviews and lab tests.
I know this because I've done it.
And here's what I got from reading through all the evidence in the case.
More accurately, what I got after I stopped focusing so much on Fred.
There is another suspect that popped out at me.
And I know now I'm doing the same thing that every detective in this case did.

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Picking out a name from almost 8000 pages of documents from hundreds of potentials. Insinuating that yet someone else murdered Shelley in a case where others have been falsely and publicly accused.

But I want to take a moment to tell you what I found.

Because it shows just how much you can take all of the same information and construct an entirely different story.

Larry Montez.

The car stealing party goer whose alibi for the murder was that he was stalking an ex-girlfriend. One of the town's usual suspects who died in prison in 2019.

When Fred's defense attorney Vaughn first mentioned Larry Montez, I didn't give it much thought. But as I reached out to more people, I kept hearing about Larry.

Like when I was talking to Angelo Garcia, the guy who was falsely accused by Jake Weidman. Angelo knows the pain and destruction of wild accusations.

He didn't know much about what the police had on Fred Lam, why they thought Fred was the killer. But he told me he knew Larry Montez.

He saw Larry the night Shelley was killed and the next morning.

He'd always thought that it was possible that Larry had something to do with it.

It was just like that with Larry.

I'd be interviewing someone about something else and Larry's name would just come up.

I always thought it was Larry Montez because he was just creepy.

Penny Munson grew up kitty corner from the Montezes.

She was at the same party as Larry the night Shelley was killed.

Penny was interviewed by the police back in 1985.

And even then, she'd told police that she thought it was possible Larry could have murdered Shelley.

He's just a really creepy guy, just not right.

And he always got that ugly vibe from him.

Penny's friend Valerie, who was also at the party, told the cops she'd remembered seeing Larry in the early morning hours right after the fire was set.

She described him as being out of it, dirty and rumpled.

Specifically, she noticed how grimy his hands were.

He was missing his glasses, had scratch marks on his face she hadn't noticed hours earlier.

And the thing is, you could make Larry fit the evidence.

Even if Larry had gone to stalk his ex-girlfriend that night, he still had time to kill Shelley and set her apartment on fire.

At one gas station, workers said a quote, scraggly looking man who was possibly Mexican had bought two dollars in gas in the middle of the night.

People, even Larry's friends, called police, repeatedly saying that they had heard Larry had done it and that Larry was acting strange.

Before Shelley was killed, Larry had been known to break into different women's homes.

And after, he was convicted for assaulting women, both physically and sexually.

In 1997, Larry ended up pleading guilty to a felony of second-degree sexual assault of a 19-year-old woman.

He spent more than six years in prison.

And then, in 2007, Larry was caught in bed naked from the waist down next to his friend's kids.

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The kid's mother had a steady boyfriend at the time named Eric Pisano, who remembers walking in on the scene.

I didn't think twice. I grabbed him and drove him out of that bed and beat the dog shit out of him. And he tried to press charges on me for assault and all this other stuff, and the DA just laughed at him.

Before this incident, Eric said he and Larry were acquaintances, not especially close ones.

Larry was tighter with the kid's mom.

But they'd have beers together sometimes, smoked weed occasionally.

Eric remembers that these hangouts would often consist of Larry getting pretty drunk and at some point in the night sort of crying and mumbling to himself.

Eric would ask him what was wrong, but Larry always waved it away. It's nothing, man.

Eric usually didn't push too hard on it, but...

I know there's one night I really did press this issue, and he kind of indicated that he was a suspect in a murder rate.

And I think it said 85, 86, and I looked and said, and I said, well, do you have any part of it or what? Do you feel guilty about something? I said, because you're always kind and apologizing about shit, bro.

Is that what you're reminiscing? Is that something that sticks to your heart?

That's killing you? That means let off your chest? That you got to talk to somebody about it?

Like, what's up? And he just looked at me, like, just stared me straight in my eyes.

I didn't speak for at least a minute, a minute and a half straight, and just straight looked at me, dead cold in my eyes.

Like, a deer in headlights was, like, going off all along his. I was like, all right, man, whatever.

Larry became the initial suspect in the week after Shelley's murder. He would have been 20 at the time.

It's not clear why he was ruled out, possibly because he passed a polygraph test, which, again, are unreliable,

or possibly because he had a pretty big deal in Larry Meade's defense attorney.

In any case, it seems like the police have barely looked at Larry in the past two decades.

After going through the case file and seeing how detectives tried to connect the dots,

I recognized that what this case has in abundance is sure-eyed confidence.

What it lacks is a measure of humility, because truthfully, I could also make Larry Montes unfit the crime.

He was extremely drunk that night. Hard to imagine him having the wherewithal to cut the phone lines in the back of the apartment building.

The memories that people have of Larry that point toward his guilt, they're hard to disentangle from the fact that he was, by many accounts, creepy and violent.

And he's dead. It's convenient to point the finger at a dead guy.

The bottom line is this. I know of nothing that ties Larry Montes to the crime scene.

Over the last two years, I have poured over the thousands of pages of police and lab reports, repeatedly watched and listened to dozens of police interviews, and talked to more than 75 people.

I've made six trips to Larry Meade. In that time, I've learned two main things.

The first thing I realized is that despite having more than 30 years worth of evidence, despite interviewing all these people,

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despite knowing that there is an answer to the question of who killed Shelley Wiley, I can't figure it out.

The mess that was made of the case is too built-in, too foundational to undo.

The failure of the police to collect crucial evidence and to pursue obvious leads, the years they spent on wild goose chases, or letting the case go dormant, altogether now, the case is just missing too many pieces.

I could talk to every trucker who had a route through Interstate 80 and former classmates and the entire town of Laramie, Wyoming, and I'm not sure it would make much of a difference.

The truth, as far as I can see it, is that unless someone confesses, unless someone comes forward, whoever killed Shelley Wiley got away with it.

The second thing I've realized is that we're all unreliable narrators, especially of our own stories. Time twists memories, as does new information, causing us to fill in blanks and create stories to fit new facts.

Michelle was certain that someone had sent her a menacing card, telling her to go home.

Pat was certain he had told police about Fred's suspicious behavior.

Former police tipped me off to evidence that I'm pretty sure doesn't exist.

I talked to witnesses who remembered whole exchanges complete with dialogue and colorful details that never happened.

I think we create these stories to make sense of things that fundamentally don't.

I had even been telling myself my own story about Laramie, about its meanness.

I'd never really looked hard at my time there, just kept my memories wrapped up in a vague, cruel bow.

Anecdotes I would tell about bullies and murders, and no wonder Matthew Shepard was killed there.

By going back, I've unspooled my own experience into a more complicated one.

Most high schools back then were probably their own little cauldrons of mean.

The girls at my school were actually pretty nice.

My junior year wasn't that bad.

I had found journalism that year, stopped wearing teal eyeliner, and traded my bilevel for a short boyish cut, with no repercussions.

Looking back, I remember that I had actually wanted to stay my senior year.

And if there is one constant I've had in reporting this story, it's that almost everyone I've talked to in Laramie has been extremely open and kind.

One Saturday evening, I got on Zoom with Lori and Brandy, Shelley's sister and niece.

For nearly two hours, I told them about all the evidence I'd seen in the case.

I told them how many ways the Laramie police messed up, how they dismissed Shelley as a woman who ran with the wrong crowd, how they smeared her.

I answered all the questions I could.

I laid out my doubts about Fred's guilt and why I had them.

And I explained that despite Robert Terry's certainty, I didn't think new charges would ever be filed against Fred, let alone anyone else.

I think Terry really did want to solve this and really does want to solve this and really does believe it's Fred and really does want to hold him accountable.

And I think he does want to give you answers.

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I do too.

It's just a very, it's a very hard thing to get answers out of at this point.

When will they close the case?

I don't know. I don't know. I don't know if they will.

It feels like, I feel like it's a really weird position to be in, you know, to have looked at all the stuff that I've looked at and you don't have that same opportunity, which you would have that and more. You would know everything that's been done on this since 2016, right?

If you were to get the case closed and just get the information, you know, yourselves.

I don't know that my grandma or my mom wanted closed. I wanted it closed so I can have other people look into it because nobody else can look into it because they keep it as an open case.

I don't know how my grandma or my mom feels about that.

I don't care either way. Yeah, if it's closed, I guess they can look into it. I want to be nice to expose the Laramie Police Department for everything they did that they screwed up and lied about.

Yeah. And I think that's why they don't want to close the case because they don't want everybody to see how bad they fucked it up.

Because I definitely blame them too. They had a big part in not doing things correctly. And so it does piss me off because my grandpa already passed away.

He'll never see justice. My grandma is not getting any younger and she deserves something at least to know. She's not going to know who did it and sit in court and get to look the person in the eye. She deserves to know everything that happened and what they did or what they didn't do and what they should have done. And I think she deserves that at least.

After I talked to Lori and Brandy, I looked into why they haven't just closed this case. And I found out something weird. The new county prosecutor, Kurt Britsias, told me he's not even really in charge of the case anymore.

He said a special prosecutor had been appointed, an assistant U.S. attorney in Wyoming. According to Britsias, she had the ultimate say so on the future of the case against Fred.

I followed up with that special prosecutor. Her office said nobody there knew a thing about the appointment. So I went back to Britsias several times. He never responded.

At this point, it's not clear to me who would close Shelly's case. It's not even clear who's responsible for it. That feels like an awful limbo, with no one taking ownership of the case, with no official admitting that it's irretrievably broken, with Shelly's family waiting for promise charges that will likely never come, with Fred always having a cloud of suspicion hanging over him.

I don't know that closing this case and releasing the files will do much in the way of solving Shelly's murder. But I understand Brandy and Lori's impulse. I'm the last person to stand in the way of someone wanting to see what's there, to lay the whole thing out and try to make some sense of it. Even if the only thing waiting on the other end is knowing you may never have an answer.

The coldest case in Laramie was written and reported by me, Kim Barker, and produced by Alvin Melleth. Additional production and photography by Jasmine Shaw.

Julie Snyder is executive editor of Serial Productions. Additional editing by Sarah Kanig, Ira Glass, Jen Guerra, Katie Mingle, Neil Drumming, Ellen Berry, Kirsten Danis, Rebecca Corbett, and Bethel Hopte.

Our standards editor is Susan Westling, legal review from Dana Green and Alameen Sumar.

Research in fact checking by Ben Phalen and Jessica Suriano. Additional research by Julie Tate and Michael Keller. Original score by Kwame Brant Pierce.

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Sound design and music supervision by Michael Kamate. Art by Roderick Mills. Serial supervising producer is Ndei Chubu. Our digital manager is Julie Whittaker. Sam Dolnick is an assistant managing editor of The New York Times.

At The New York Times, thanks to Renan Barelli, Jordan Cohen, Kelly Doe, Jason Fujikuni, Ashka Gami, Desiree Abakwe, John McNally, Anisha Mooney, Crystal Plumados, Nina Lassim, Jeffrey Miranda, Kimi Sai, and Julia Simon.

Special thanks to Nancy Peterson, Lynn Andrews Trujillo, Barbara Burnett Ramsey, Dr. Maria Cuellar, Sandy Zabel, Dave Thompson, Lisa Rubikow, and John Butler.

And thank you to the Wiley family for opening up to us about Shelley and what 37 years of waiting has been like. The coldest case in Laramie is from Serial Productions and The New York Times.