

[Transcript] Dateline NBC / On the Hunt for the Zombie Hunter

Tonight on DateLine.
Angela went out for a bike ride around dusk.
She never came back.
We thought it was someone she knew at the time.
She was living with?
A boyfriend, yeah.
Then details started coming.
It was surreal.
What did you find out about the zombie hunter?
That really caught our attention.
It said zombie hunter on the vehicle.
The zombie hunter car.
The zombie hunter car, yeah, with the dummy in the back.
He had everything there. Bars, handcuffs.
17-year-old Melanie was riding her bike.
She was later found floating in the canal.
The way she was killed just traumatizes you.
There is a madman on the loose.
I thought we would never know who did this.
Everybody wanted to find this guy.
Just either of you think that there are more murders that we don't know about?
I do.
The FBI profile said killer would not stop.
The zombie hunter.
It sounds like a Halloween costume,
but was this one worn by a killer?
I'm Lester Holt, and this is DateLine.
Here's Keith Morrison with On the Hunt for the zombie hunter.
It was a Sunday evening in November, Phoenix, Arizona.
A wash of cool air finally,
as the sun dropped behind the valley's mountains.
She loved this time alone,
as she pedaled the long path by the canal that snaked through the city
and out along the valley floor.
She could think on her bike,
prepare,
but of course we can't really know what she was thinking.
Can only imagine, all these years later,
can only remember.
That has burned into my brain.
I'll never, ever forget that.
No.
Not that horror.
Or the fear,

or the fear that went with it.

I was really scared.

I always thought that he was hiding around my apartment,
like waiting in a bush to kill me.

It still gives me goosebumps and a pit in my stomach.

What was it, haunting the Arizona canal?

I think it's just evil and deep and more than we know.

But now, back up.

Months before that bike ride by the canal,
when life was still normal, better than normal, exciting.

It was 1992.

Technological innovation was exploding everywhere.

Phoenix, eager to be a leader,

had become a magnet for young, ambitious people ready to make their mark.

People like Jill Kelly,

who worked for a company called Cintillect.

They were one of the first companies to do interactive voice response,

which back then was you call your bank

and you wanted to find out your balance

and so you'd enter your account number over the telephone

and it would speak the balance back to you.

Was this all kind of new cutting-edge stuff at the time?

Yeah, it was.

When I started working there, it really started booming.

What did it feel like to be working for a company on the cusp of all new things?

It was fun and interesting

and most of the people there were young and smart.

In that talented crowd, the new hire stood out.

Her name was Angela Brasso.

It was going to be her very first grown-up job.

What were your impressions of Angela when she came on board?

She was just very composed and very intelligent

and could really portray herself well,

which you need to be able to do in front of a classroom full of customers.

Classroom of customers?

Yes, companies that bought the technology had to learn how to use it

and bright young Angela was just the person to teach them

or so Sintelac decided.

She was brought in to develop a class for a new product

and she worked diligently for four months

and her first class with customers flying in from all around the country.

That must have been a very big thing that she was looking forward to.

Oh yeah, I mean we were all helping her get ready and it was a big thing.

Was she nervous?

I'm sure she was a little nervous, yeah.
Sunday evening, the eve of her big day,
Angela put on her white sneakers, her Walkman and her headphones
and left the apartment she shared with her boyfriend.
He was baking a cake for her birthday, her 22nd, the very next day.
She needed time alone.
It was going dark by the time she got on her bike.
She loved that bike, loved the long ride up and down the canal,
loved the solitude, the peace, time to think,
maybe the time to settle her nerves.
The next morning was going to be the most important of her young professional life
and she had to be ready.
And so she rode.
And then, Monday morning, November 9th, 1992.
We were waiting for her to come in for this class to begin.
We had customers sitting there and no Angela.
Dead little John was Angela's boss.
And she didn't show up, didn't show up, didn't show up.
Finally, one of the others stepped in to teach Angela's class.
But where was she?
She'd been so looking forward to this.
Angela's workstation, as it happened, was right next to Jill's.
The phone on her desk rang and I just automatically picked it up
and it was her mother and she asked it to speak to Angela
and I said she's not here at the moment
and her mother just really didn't say much more.
But it was chilling.
So you could tell her mother was looking for her
and it was pretty freaked out.
Yeah.
And so it began, a decades-long mystery.
Though the first part, where was Angela,
was not a mystery for long.
No, that was when the horror began.
Are you sure this is happening?
It's unbelievable.
Angela Brasso's workmates knew right away that Monday morning in 1992,
this was no ordinary absence.
Not a case of nerves.
No sudden, unannounced resignation, something was up
and it couldn't be any more.
And it was the first time that Angela Brasso's workmates knew
that it was an ordinary absence.
Angela Brasso's workmates knew right away

that Monday morning was up and it couldn't be good.
She never would have, you know,
not come in on time on this particular day.
It was her 22nd birthday
and Jill Kelly knew she had worked hard
to prepare for her very first class as an instructor.
So where was she?
Angela's mother, thousands of miles to the east
on phone and phone and phone.
It wasn't like Angela and not to pick up
and she was really concerned, really upset.
Angela's boyfriend had called her mother the night before,
told her Angela left to ride her bike but didn't come home.
He got so worried he called the police to report her missing.
She got on a bike ride, which was somewhat routine for her.
Kevin Robinson was the spokesperson for the Phoenix police back then.
She would always come home in time
enough to watch a particular show on television.
So it was so unusual when she didn't come back.
Angela's boyfriend Joe told police
he had stayed home Sunday night to bake Angela a birthday cake.
But after an hour or so past,
he went out on his bike to look for her at 8.30, at 9.30,
and again just before 11 p.m.
No sign of her.
And that is when Joe called 9-1-1.
But police noted this.
After he reported Angela missing,
he called another woman who came to their apartment
just before midnight.
He said he didn't want to be alone.
There were some strange things about it, most definitely,
and so obviously it drew the attention of the detectives
who may want to just find out a little bit more.
Police learned that Angela and Joe had been dating
for more than a year and a half.
They rented an apartment together
when she moved to Phoenix in June of 1992.
They'd even bought matching 21-speed diamond-backed
Topanga mountain bikes.
Angela's was her favorite color, purple.
She loved life and she enjoyed riding her bike
and she was, you know, 22 and fearless.
Angela had always been bold.

She grew up in a small Pennsylvania town called Camp Hill,
but moved across the country to study
at the DeVry Institute of Technology in Los Angeles.
And she was a good student, eager, ambitious.
Deb Littlejohn was impressed.
Her genuineness came through in her interview
and she had a sense of humor, you could tell.
She'd always make you laugh or smile.
We kind of got there at the same time.
Chuck Fitzgerald was a co-worker.
He and she were both assigned
to the new interactive voice response system.
It was new stuff that no one else was ever doing.
So it was pretty exciting to be involved in all that,
both for me and I think for her as well.
And she figured it out.
Oh yeah, oh yeah, she figured it out.
Yep, she was bright.
No way Angela would miss teaching her first class.
Unless she couldn't show up.
All that day they waited and worried.
And then late afternoon, detectives showed up at the door.
A woman's body had been found by the canal.
And they knew now, this was Angela's.
She had been murdered, sexually assaulted,
and stabbed to death.
Now that was horrific.
First she's missing and you don't know where she is.
And then you find out that she was killed.
And it just affected us incredibly for just months
and even years and even now.
When I think about it,
I feel the same way that I did way back then.
You have a lot of people who work for you that come and go.
But when you have something like this go on,
it really kind of cements you in the moment.
Jock was at a sales meeting halfway around the world in Thailand
when he heard what happened, bit by bit.
I remember sharing every one of those conversations we had
with the Cinelex CEO and just what that did to the atmosphere
of the sales meeting, learning what had happened.
What did that feel like when you heard it?
It was just bizarre. This can't be happening.
Angie, really? It just couldn't be happening.

Oh, but it was.
And it was about to get worse.
And then details started coming.
It was surreal.
A lot of detectives who had been on the department
for a very long time had seen a lot of things,
had never seen anything as bad as this.
On the afternoon of November 9, 1992,
William Herman got the assignment he will never forget.
Herman had been following an unusual career path.
A year earlier, he had left his job as a school principal
to work for the Arizona Republic newspaper.
I got a call that day and they said,
we need you to come in early and go out.
They told me we're up by Cactus Road in the I-17.
They said, you'll figure it out when you get there.
And I did.
It was serious. There could be no doubt about that.
Just based on the area the police had cordoned off.
How bad, though?
He couldn't tell.
Couldn't see the crime scene.
So he turned to a friend.
A television reporter I knew had a long lens on it.
And he let me take a look.
And it was about as bad as it gets.
What did you see?
It was of a woman's naked body.
She had shoes and socks on, I believe.
But the head was gone.
She had been beheaded.
Oh, my God.
I tell you, obviously my blood froze.
And she was eviscerated.
That has burned into my brain.
That has burned into my brain.
I'll never, ever forget that.
It was a extremely horrific, gruesome murder.
For those who knew Angela, the news was simply unbelievable.
We, as a group, the whole group of us got together
and went over to where they found her.
We couldn't believe it.
We were all shocked and, of course, distraught.
I can't imagine what that must have felt like.

It leaves you kind of numb.
I sat down in the dirt and wrote my story
and called it into my editor.
But I stayed out there looking
and trying to get police to talk to me.
And they were under orders not to talk to the likes of me.
I can tell you that.
No one could understand the sheer brutality of it.
In something like a state of shock,
reporter Herman joined others
in a macabre and fruitless search.
As I was looking for Angela Brasso's head,
there was a feeling of the horror of the thing.
And there were other people out there, you know.
And someone would pass me a police firefighter.
And we'd exchanged looks of, you know,
the looks at good God.
This is the worst, you know.
And some few murmured words.
Nor did the horror end.
For more than a week, police searched
for the rest of Angela Brasso.
And finally, on the 11th day,
a local drifter called the Fisher King,
for his habit of fishing the canal,
found her head in the water,
said he just came upon it.
But police said it seemed preserved somehow,
as if refrigerated.
And the whole city seemed to shudder.
It caught hold of everyone.
It was in the air.
There was something else in the air, too.
Fear.
My God, there is a madman on the loose.
You know, there is a bad guy out there.
Everybody wanted to find this guy.
This is somebody who identified a victim,
attacked that victim, killed that victim.
And were they capable of doing that another time?
Or have they done it already?
Were there any obvious things like any clues
or any witnesses who may have seen something happen?
No, there wasn't.

When you talk about starting at ground zero,
that's truly where the detectives started.
But why Angela?
Either she was just an unlucky random victim or...
Well, there's a kind of killing that is sadly more common.
A killing that often involves overkill,
a huge amount of rage, the domestic kind.
And Angela's friends began wondering
about the boyfriend, Joe,
who said he was at home baking a cake.
We thought it was someone she knew at the time.
That she was living with?
A boyfriend, yeah.
Philly said that friends and co-workers told them
the couple may have been on the cusp of breaking up
that he could be jealous,
and her mother didn't approve of him.
You go about talking to people who were close to her.
In this case, the boyfriend, most definitely.
That's always something that has to be done.
Later, Joe spoke by phone to NBC affiliate KPNX in Phoenix.
They went through my whole apartment.
You know, they found this knife in my kitchen sink
that had this pinkish red material on it.
And he's like, can you explain this?
And I'm like, yeah, it's for the birthday cake,
and that's icing.
Three times, they interviewed Joe.
Three times, he swore he didn't do it.
And then, less than five months after Angela was killed,
the DNA found on her body ruled out Joe altogether.
Though, didn't feel like it to him.
In the media or in the public's eye,
there are probably people that swore I didn't.
But there was someone else in Angela's life
who caught the attention of detectives.
One of Angela's professors at DeVry,
police believed he had a crush on her.
Could he be angry that she didn't return his feelings?
They traveled out to DeVry in California
to speak to him.
You're going to look at people closest to the victim
to make sure there wasn't something nefarious,
something going on there that you're unaware of.

The professor told police he'd seen Angela in LA
just days before she was murdered.
They had drinks, he said,
and then she flew back home to Phoenix.
Investigators were also chasing down a lead
about Angela's purple diamond-backed Topanga mountain bike,
a clerk at a Circle K near Angela's apartment
had tried to sell a bike that looked similar.
Was he the killer?
Or did the killer keep the bike discarded somewhere?
There was a chance, at least,
that the bike might lead them to the killer,
so they distributed a photograph.
Crime reporter William Herman
kept a copy of it in his pocket.
To show it to people, you know,
and the police thought if maybe that bike
had been abandoned somewhere,
that that would have been invaluable to the police.
Did it seem like the police were working
as hard as it should have been at this to solve the case?
Oh, yeah.
We talked to them several times.
They came to work,
and, of course, interviewed everybody at work.
But all their efforts produced no break at all.
Oh, there were still persons of interest.
The professor, the Fisher King,
who found Angela's head,
they both insisted they were innocent.
And then,
ten months after the killing of Angela Brasso,
a woman named Charlotte
took a ride on the bike path beside the canal.
All of a sudden, I noticed there were drag marks,
and it went right around here,
and my feet were right on the edge of this canal here,
and I saw nothing but just drag marks of blood
going into the canal.
It was early when they climbed on their bikes
that September morning,
almost a year after Angela was killed.
As usual, Charlotte Fottle, her sister, and their kids
took the canal path,

racing along wind in their hair
toward a local playground near the canal.
So that particular day,
we came up here pretty fast,
and right as I got up here,
there was a big puddle.
Odd.
Not the sort of thing you'd expect to see
on the path on a hot September morning.
The reflection was hard to tell what color it was,
and so I just assumed it was a puddle of water or something.
Right here, right?
Right up here.
She shook it off.
No big deal, and on they went.
But as she pushed her daughter on the swing,
she wondered about that puddle.
What was it?
I was very uneasy,
and so we hurried back on our bikes
and started heading back home this way.
So once the sun was to my back,
I could see right where the puddle was, right up here,
that it had a red tint to it.
And it was pretty big.
And so I stopped,
and I had my sister hold the bike,
and I got down and looked at it really close
to see, is it what I really think this is?
But still in my mind, logically,
trying to make excuses for it,
like, this isn't blood, this isn't...
Well, you wouldn't think it could be, right?
Right, right.
But all of a sudden, I noticed there were drag marks,
and it went right around here,
and so I followed over to the drag marks,
walked around the tree,
and then it led me back right here,
and then I noticed the drag marks went off right here.
You just have this eerie feeling about you, like...
Eerie, I would say.
Yeah, you need to get out.
You need to get out of here,

and so we quickly hopped on our bikes
and struggled with the thought,
that was a big mall at the time,
and we had to use pay phones,
and I really struggled with,
do I stop and call 911 at a pay phone,
or do I just hurry and get home
and decide from there?
And still all the way home, trying to rationalize,
did I really see what I saw?
What else could it be?
And should I call the police?
She did.
And before long, investigators were following those drag marks,
to a young woman's body floating in the canal.
Oh, my heart just sunk in just that sick feeling.
Prime reporter William Herman heard about it on a police scanner,
and made his way back to the canal
and found a contact with Phoenix Police.
And he said,
we found the body of a young woman in the canal,
profound injuries to her chest.
And I said, was she riding a bike?
And he said, you guessed it, buddy,
and the bike's gone.
And I just, you know,
my heart sort of sunk.
I said, Jesus God,
here he is again.
He said, I'm not saying that, William.
We are not saying yet that this is our guy.
But of course it had to be.
Again, there were signs of sexual assault.
Again, he'd used a knife.
And again, seemed to know very well how to use it.
One particular wound was delivered
that may have incapacitated or, you know,
killed or right that toward the back.
So there was a thought,
maybe this person really understood
that type of thing.
What could incapacitate someone immediately
with one type of blow?
He'd carved letters into her skin,

as if sending some kind of sickening message.
And then police discovered
his victim was a teenager,
just 17 years old.
A high school kid
named Melanie Bernus.
I believe I found out at school.
Rachel Schappmaker was her close friend.
It just, it was hell, you know.
They let her friends come together
and just kind of grieve together.
They brought counselors in
for whoever wanted to talk.
And I think my mom just picked me up
and took me home.
But I remember I wanted to be with
Melanie's friends who all loved her closely.
But it was horrible.
What does that do to you?
When a friend who's that close to you
just suddenly is killed that way?
The way she was killed
just traumatizes you.
It's not like she, you know,
it's not like something innocent happened to her
and she felt she died in her sleep.
She was brutally attacked and murdered.
Some information was withheld, of course,
things only the killer would know.
Well, police started from scratch again.
For one thing, piecing together Melanie's last hours,
starting with the night before,
when she went out for an evening bike ride
and didn't come home.
Her mom had called our house frantically
at 11 p.m. trying to find her.
And my mom just said, no, she's not,
she's not here. Rachel's in bed sleeping.
Thing was, Melanie had planned to go riding with a friend.
But then her friend had to work late.
So Melanie climbed on her bike
and struck out on her own.
They found her body more than 10 miles from home.
And the first thought that came to my head was,

how the heck did she get all the way out there?
Daphne Marcus was a neighbor back then.
She could be shy at first and a bit quiet,
but once you had an opportunity to get to know her
and get, you know, in kind of her inner circle,
that's when she opened up quite a bit more
and she was energetic and happy.
Melanie had just started her junior year
at Arcadia High School.
She wasn't a party animal
and distracted by the social scene.
She had her close circle of friends
and she just took her school seriously.
William Herman, a former principal, remember,
happened to know one of Melanie's teachers
and spoke with him.
He said, we're not allowing any media on the campus
meet me and he named a sandwich shop
by Arcadia High School.
So I went out and my friend was in tears.
He said, we loved her, we loved her.
And ever all the students loved Melanie.
What was it about this path and bicycles?
That the killer was horribly depraved,
was just all too depressingly obvious,
but was he a serial killer?
Playing close police officers
wandered up and down these paths
as decoys for months,
but looking for what they didn't exactly know,
even as regular folk increasingly stayed away.
The man had struck twice.
Might he do so again?
You just couldn't believe that,
that it could happen to another person.
What's it seem like there was a monster out there somewhere?
Absolutely. Absolutely.
A monster who knew how to use a knife.
Well, at least the police knew that.
It might be a way to find him.
Phoenix wasn't the same
after the murders of Angela Brasso and Melanie Bernus.
It just changes the way you live.
Melanie's friends, Rachel and Daphne.

It changed me instantly.
I stopped walking the canal.
I stopped, I would not exercise alone.
I wouldn't walk anywhere alone
or do anything, always looking over your shoulder.
I think during that time,
for most of us young women,
you were more self-aware of everything,
everybody that was around you
because you never know what could happen.
People very quickly realized
that there was someone out there
who was now responsible for the death of two women,
two women who were on the canal.
So now everything starts back up again
if it had died down a little bit from the first incident.
It definitely heightened back up right away.
Kevin Robinson,
Phoenix police spokesperson at the time,
said the department had to walk a fine line
between warning the public about a potential serial killer
while not jeopardizing the investigation.
You're going to release a little bit more information
than what you normally would
so that someone might identify or remember seeing something.
The Phoenix police went public with a piece of evidence
they hoped might actually produce a breakthrough.
The killer had thrown Melanie's clothes
in a nearby trash bin
but had dressed her in an ill-fitting lycra body suit
post-mortem.
Might anybody recognize it?
I think the assumption was that he put that honor after.
Whoever killed her must have done that.
That adds a layer of something, doesn't it?
Yeah.
So what do you wonder about?
You have to turn your brain off at some point
and not keep on thinking like,
what was she thinking? How was she feeling?
My prayer is that she
blacked out right away and doesn't know
that she was mentally, emotionally saved a little bit
from all the trauma that he put her through.

Whoever killed Melanie began his assault
with a single, carefully placed thrust of a very sharp knife
just as he had done to Angela.
So police thought maybe the killer had specialized training,
maybe military.
Remember Angela's professor from DeVry
who police had interviewed?
Turned out he'd been a major in army special forces.
So police kept him on their list
and kept looking literally everywhere.
They were looking all over the world for similar crimes.
How much concern was there that this guy would strike again?
There was plenty of concern.
But no evidence to tie any of their persons of interest
to the murders.
Pressure had to be just enormous.
Yeah, that's in the back of your mind.
You know, they've done it twice, at least twice.
And are they capable of offending again?
The odds will tell you yes.
Experts will tell you that in a lot of these cases
the only thing that stops these folks
is either getting arrested and going to prison or they die.
They don't just stop cold turkey in most cases.
Disturbing.
Extremely disturbing.
But you have to realize that we have people like that
that are out there.
They're capable of acting on those types of instincts.
And it was incumbent upon the homicide detectives
to identify anybody who could be responsible for these crimes
and to get them apprehended
and convicted as quickly as possible.
And yet, it didn't leave anywhere.
I mean, the case went cold.
Unfortunately it did.
What more could they do?
And years went by.
But there were no more similar murders along the canal.
And gradually the assumption hardened
that the killer was gone, maybe left town, maybe was dead.
That's what the police told the families and friends
of Angela and Melanie.
I was disappointed that they hadn't found anybody

to make them pay for what they did.
I thought we would never know who did this.
I gave up.
I thought, we'll never know.
Until this guy came along.
I remember reading word for word
and I was traumatized by what I read.
It was almost as if I was reading about something truly evil.
Somewhere in all this, there was an answer.
Just had to be.
All he had to do was find it.
It became kind of an obsession to keep researching,
is what is this?
The End
Anniversaries came and went.
Anniversaries of the killings by the canal.
Those who loved and missed Angela and Melanie
were left to wonder if they would ever know
who killed them and why.
Did it seem like the police were investigating all the while?
Or like they'd maybe given up?
I thought they gave up for sure.
I think they tried their hardest for so many years
and leads were just ending
and so they have to move on to the next case.
And then reporters looking for stories
and anniversary dates would write a story
and they tell it over again
and the police are glad for that
in the hopes of waking it up.
But nothing did.
Until 2011, when a sergeant named Troy Hillman,
who headed up the cold case unit,
opted to take on the ultimate challenge.
Almost 20 years after the murders,
he would try to give the families some answers.
We didn't want to give them false hope.
We didn't want to say,
hey, we're definitely going to approve this
and find our killer,
but we're going to give it one heck of a shot.
William Shira and Dominic Rustenberg
joined the unit too and, first things first,
pulled out the old case file.

It was a room full of files.
We had probably 800 people
that had been interviewed that had been questioned.
800 people? At least.
Wow.
A lot had changed since the early 90s.
For one thing, DNA.
The science had certainly advanced
even as the case grew cold.
One thing the DNA could confirm
was what they had long suspected.
The male DNA sample matched both the girls,
so we knew it was the same person.
One man, two murders.
The killer's DNA profile was uploaded to CODIS,
the National DNA Database, back in 2000.
But no matches,
meaning the killer's DNA was not in the system.
Of course,
Phoenix police had received hundreds of tips after the murders,
and some led them to persons of interest
who had provided blood samples.
But many, and there were many, had not.
Just seeing the amount of people
that were contacted along the canal banks
and how many dangerous predators,
it was a lot of people.
So, where to begin?
It happened that Hillman was an accountant first
and then a cop,
so he approached the case, like an audit,
line by line.
We cast a wide net to make sure
that we get everything,
because there could be just that morsel in there.
So, getting organized was priority one.
First, they came up with a long list of people
the original detectives had looked into,
but from whom they had not collected DNA.
There were a host of names that we saw
and were intrigued by and needed to rule out.
And how'd you go about doing that?
We put two detectives on a plane
to basically get their blood samples

so that we could do DNA comparison.
Just tracking them all down must have been rather difficult.
Yeah, we traveled all over the country.
But Hillman decided he needed to go beyond traditional methods.
So, he sought out the Vodok Society in Philadelphia,
forensic experts and investigators
who volunteer to review difficult cases.
They call themselves the modern-day Sherlock Holmes.
The Vodok Society gave Hillman
possible characteristics of the killer,
a man still living in the area
who had committed earlier crimes,
perhaps set fires or acted out fantasies.
They agreed with that earlier theory
that the killer likely had a military background,
but added they were looking for a sexual sadist
motivated by people's pain.
One of the biggest nuggets they taught us was
they kept saying,
in a case like this, he's in your files.
95% chance he's in your files.
So, Hillman and the detectives took another look
at men who had attracted suspicion early on,
including the professor who police heard
at a crush on Angela.
We'd received an anonymous tip
that every time somebody mentioned Angela,
he would go into a hysteria and an emotional rage.
And he just made some really kind of odd statements
that we found.
And the fact that he was a major in the Special Forces,
we said we need to go talk to this guy
and we need to get his DNA.
Off they went to Maryland to knock on his door
and collect his DNA.
I think every time that we would get excited,
we'd get the DNA, we'd wait.
But once the results came in,
he was ruled out.
It was like a punch in the stomach.
You get frustrated and you get upset about it for a minute,
and then you just kind of get back on the bandwagon.
They went back to that theory
that the killer might have been trained for combat

and tracked down former U.S. Air Force pilots who'd been stationed at nearby Luke Air Force Base back in the early 90s.

It's not too far from the crime scenes, so we thought maybe he's hiding in plain sight.

These are people who would be based there for a little while, and they might be based somewhere else.

They could be scattered all around the world, really. Absolutely.

Detectives even contacted authorities in Europe when they heard of a similar crime there.

Two young women that were killed in the early 90s in a similar fashion.

One was in Amsterdam and one was in Germany. But no connection.

My wife can attest that I truthfully became obsessed by this case. I desperately wanted to figure this out.

And maybe that's why Hillman agreed to meet with a woman from California who had been pitching an idea that sounded crazy.

It's new technology. It's unproven. There's a little bit of fear behind it.

Fear, resistance, a big gamble, and a world-changing result.

Sgt. Troy Hillman and his cold-case detectives have been dealing with the ups and downs of their investigation into the Arizona canal murders for three long, frustrating years.

I always describe it as a roller coaster ride.

Their most promising leads had been ruled out by DNA, and they were no closer to an arrest than they were when the murders happened.

They were no closer to an arrest than they were when the murders happened more than 20 years ago.

And that's when one of his detectives left him a voicemail.

And she said, hey, boss, he's like,

I got this strange phone call from a woman that says she's a forensic genealogy.

Would you take a listen?

But why not?

They tried everything else.

Which is how Troy Hillman found himself on the phone with this woman, Colleen Fitzpatrick,

doctor Colleen Fitzpatrick.
She is a forensic genealogist,
which means, she told the detective,
that she uses a person's DNA profile,
that unique sequence we all have,
to figure out not exactly who they are,
but who they're related to.
A similar process people use to find distant relatives
on ancestry DNA or 23andMe.
It became very common for an adoptee
to test with one of those companies
and find their birth parents.
Dr. Fitzpatrick said she'd figured out
a way to reverse the process
and use genealogy databases to work her way
toward the owner of that unknown male DNA,
or YDNA,
police had collected from the crime scenes.
I could get DNA from cold cases,
YDNA, and compare them to the genetic genealogy,
YDNA databases,
and maybe come up with the last name for killers.
It's not that you can say it was individual A
or individual B, but that it was this family,
which includes A, B, C, and D,
and so look into those guys and you might find your killer.
No, it was even simpler than that.
I supplied a name, the last name for their killer.
Remember, this was back in 2014.
It was four years before the arrest of the Golden State Killer.
The mystery surrounding an infamous killing spree
That case widely celebrated for using a very similar technique.
But no one knew about that
when Dr. Fitzpatrick traveled to Phoenix
and told the detectives what she thought she could do.
It was quiet in the room amongst the team members
and we were trying to absorb what she was talking about.
Of course they were eager to try anything,
but this was brand new.
Nothing police had ever used before
and they'd have to share the killer's DNA profile
with someone outside the investigation.
Dr. Fitzpatrick, plus it wasn't cheap,
which became the next challenge.

It was about three months on trying to push the upper chain of command to approve this because they thought they had fears of it endangering our investigation.

My team and I tried to say there's no downside risk. We spend more money traveling across the country looking for DNA than we do on this.

So this is worth a shot.

I think at one point we almost took up a collection and just kind of went rogue and did it by ourselves.

Is that how it eventually got paid for?

No, eventually a chief decided to sign it.

What did you do? How did you work with her?

We didn't provide her really any details about the investigation other than we provided her with some type of DNA sequence.

Dr. Fitzpatrick went to work.

Weeks went by.

Nobody heard a word.

So was it a waste of money? Another dead end?

No, it was not.

She had a result.

I came up with the name Miller, turned it into the police.

I remember getting the call and I was with extended family and she said, hey Troy, I think his surname is Miller.

Did that make any sense to you that somebody would come up with a name?

At this point in the investigation, it made enough sense for me to want to rush out and go check our files.

So one of his detectives went to the basement and pulled files with the last name, Miller.

And he threw them on my desk.

I shut the door. I started looking through the Millers.

And when I got to a certain file, I was interested and it sent chills up my spine.

The name on the file?

Brian Patrick Miller.

It was about half an inch thick file.

And on the top of it, it said anonymous tip.

It was an old tip, decades old.

It had to do with the turquoise body suit Melanie Berners was wearing when she was found.

An anonymous person called in and said a roommate of Brian's had seen that same body suit that was found on Melanie.

That tip was looked at and based on Brian's age

and the circumstances that they felt at the time.
He was too young to have been the one that had done this.
And there was more.
Back in 1990, a few years before Angela and Melanie were killed,
Miller's mother told the police she was afraid of her teenage son.
She gave them something he had written, something ghoulish, awful.
He had called it the plan.
And there it was, still in the old file.
It described step by step what the author intended to do to this woman.
It was eerily similar to what happened to our victims.
It was in the file?
It had been all along.
Wow.
It had been all along, yes.
Did it make you wonder why that was not acted on earlier?
To a degree, yes.
What Miller wrote in The Plan was certainly disturbing.
It didn't prove anything, mind you.
Certainly not that he'd committed actual murders,
but there was another name in the Miller file too.
And another hair-raising story.
I wouldn't doubt that's what he was trying to do, or at least getting there.
It was the spring of 1989.
Angela Brasso was graduating from high school.
Melanie Bernus was a carefree kid in middle school.
It was three years before the terrors on the canal.
I felt very safe.
I rode the bus all the time.
Celeste Bentley was 24 years old then.
I lived in Phoenix all her life, and to her it was easy routine.
To ride the bus, the five miles from home to her job at a store
near the Paradise Valley Mall.
The drive to Paradise Valley was very short.
It was a straight shot to the mall.
That morning, the morning of May 17th, 1989,
she wore her favorite lime green shirt with white pants.
She noticed as she got on the bus a young man sitting near her.
Kind of a bookworm looking kid, and I just acknowledged him.
I kind of realized there was someone there, you know.
And then she sat back and thought about nothing in particular,
as the bus rumbled along.
And they dropped us off in the front of the mall.
It was when she was walking across the parking lot that she sensed it.
Someone behind her.

I had gotten about halfway across, and I had realized that he was walking behind me.
And I had just glanced over my shoulder, and I saw that, you know,
he was still walking behind me, but it was a ways back.
That nerdy kid must have gotten off the bus too, she figured.
Then I was walking, and all of a sudden I just felt something hit me in the back.
And he ran by me. He ran fast right by me.
I kind of turned and yelled at him and grabbed my back,
and I was like, what the heck did you do that?
You know, what the heck did you hit me for?
And he just kept running.
And then I pulled my hand in front of me and realized that there was blood on my hand.
And so I started panicking.
It felt like you had been hit.
Yeah, it felt like I had been punched in the back.
What was that like? Was it confusion? Was it terror? Was it what?
I was very afraid. I couldn't believe it.
Why would he punch me in the back?
And then when I saw the blood, I couldn't believe it,
and knew that he had stabbed me or something.
And I started running to my work.
And I had to go through that parking lot,
and I got to my work and started ringing the buzzer to get in.
You're bleeding all the way?
Yeah, yeah.
The manager came and opened the door and let me in,
and I was like screaming, oh my God, I've been stabbed, I've been stabbed,
and everybody was kind of like all in a panic,
and they were calling 911,
and took me back to the break room,
and we were waiting for the police and fire to come.
Once inside the ambulance,
she began to learn more about her injury.
It was about an inch and a half long,
and then they said it had gone in.
I believe it was like an inch and a half to two inches in.
Whoa. Yeah.
She gave the police a description of the person who had attacked her,
and it didn't take long.
They tracked him down at a nearby apartment complex,
and then they brought him to the ambulance.
Is this him? They asked.
They had the doors open, they had him standing right at the doors.
What feeling went through that?
I just was in shock and couldn't believe that this person had stabbed me.

Did he look sorry?

No, he looked blank.

He looked very blank and very just strange,
like not even caring.

That's weird.

Yeah, it was weird.

It was the kid from the bus, 16 years old.

He had used a steak knife to stab her in the back.

The doctors at the hospital had said that had he held the blade flat,
horizontal instead of vertical,

it would have gone straight through and punctured organs.

Yeah.

But he had held it vertical and it hit my ribs and slid around inside
instead of going through the ribs.

Whoa.

The small things that make a big difference.

Yeah.

I mean, it could have killed you.

Definitely, yes.

At the name of this person who'd almost killed her,

Brian Patrick Miller.

More than two decades later,

Sergeant Troy Hillman read the police report about Celeste's attack.

The original investigator had written,

I asked Brian if he did it to see what it felt like.

Brian said, yes, I guess that's why I did it.

When the officers asked him, hey Brian, what did this make you feel?

And he said it sent chills up his spine.

Oh my.

At that point, I was even more hook, line and sinker.

This is our guy.

This guy's looking good.

Brian.

Miller eventually pleaded guilty to attempted murder,

but as a juvenile, he served only a year in detention.

Did you with your grandpa?

He was released in 1990 when he was 17.

Hello, camera.

For a while, it seemed he had turned his life around.

He's real shy.

He worked for a religious charitable organization.

And here he is in a home movie with family in 1992.

This was just months before the first murder at the canal.

So anyway.

By 1999, he got married, had a daughter and moved away.
He and his young family to the Seattle area,
where Miller got in trouble again.
He was arrested in May 2002 for stabbing a woman.
He claimed it was self-defense and was found not guilty by a jury.
So late 2014, was he easy to find?
Was he around?
Yeah, he was definitely not hiding.
Miller and his wife eventually moved back to Arizona.
They divorced, but their daughter lived with her dad, with Brian,
in this simple home.
Now he was the focus of the cold case unit.
It was like a beehive of activity where everybody was researching
Brian Patrick Miller, and we began to really unlock Brian Miller.
He started in the Arcadia area.
He seemed to be living a normal life.
Worked at an Amazon warehouse.
But at night?
At night, he was something else entirely.
These bike trails go all the way down to the canals.
Cold case detectives investigating the death of two young women along the canal
were looking into one Brian Patrick Miller, whose life appeared unremarkable.
Single dad living in a central Phoenix neighborhood,
he worked at an Amazon distribution warehouse, a typical guy with a typical life.
That is, until you saw what he drove to work.
The zombie hunter car?
The zombie hunter car, yeah, with the dummy in the back.
Dummy in the back?
Dummy in the back.
You take a left turn and it slides to the right.
You take a right turn and it slides back behind him.
That dummy was actually a life-sized zombie doll.
The car was part of a fantasy persona Miller took on called the zombie hunter.
He and his friend Keena Zaria would cruise around in the decked out car with props,
including the dummy in the back seat.
It was his daily driver, was it?
It was.
He had everything there, bars, handcuffs.
My, my, my.
It was a real police car that Miller modified.
Instead of red and blue LED lights, the zombie hunter mobile flashed green.
Fake blood splashed the doors.
Letters on the trunk read zombie hunter.
What was it all about?

Well, that would go back more than a decade to a meeting of the Arizona Steampunk Society.

Similar to this gathering in the UK, it's where Keen and Miller met.

Steampunk is a science fiction subculture that shares a love for costumes and homemade gadgets inspired by a fusion of 19th century Victorian period and futuristic technology.

Who is an Arizona zombie hunter?

Arizona society members dressed up and sometimes showed off their creations in steampunk fashion shows like this one.

Thank you for keeping us safe.

Here is Miller on the catwalk.

What fires a steampunk gun?

Steen?

Gunpowder?

That's, I'm not sure.

I think it's, it's, it's a funny yet kind of ironic subculture.

Celebrating one of the most innovative times in the world.

Yeah, just that's all aesthetics.

It's fun and you meet some good people in it.

People like Mike Seifert, who told us steampunk appealed to his creative side.

This is Polly Styrene.

He hosted costume and gadget workshops in his dining room.

I bring all the, the stuff and teach you how to paint a gun or make a pair of goggles or, you know, whatever it is for your costume.

Miller and his daughter were frequent visitors.

The first time I ever saw him, he was with his daughter.

I think she was about 10 at the time.

Mike said Miller developed his character gradually.

How did he develop this zombie hunter persona?

It started with the gun.

It was a bit of fakery that Mike made and that became the centerpiece of Miller's costume.

How'd you make it?

What are the components made of?

cardboard and wood.

You're a creative guy.

So he got this gun and he's like, well, I've got this gun now.

I need to build something around this.

So I helped him with some ideas and then he found this trench coat at thrift store.

And he found this mask that he, I think it was one of those paintball masks.

Okay.

And then like a hard hat that he glued the mask into the hard hat.

The transformation from warehouse worker to midnight cruiser was complete.

But the car stole the limelight at events like the Phoenix Comic Con and annual zombie walk and so on.

Miller even posed with Phoenix police officers.

You know, it's like, oh, that thing's really cool.

You know, this car is like, it actually looked like he ran down some zombies.

Really awesome.

How did he react to this attention?

He loved it.

But he was under a mask.

He is a shy individual until he was able to put that mask on and then he could be a little bit more out in the open.

Friends Keen and Mike could not help but notice that the zombie hunter and Brian Miller seemed like two different people.

Very shy, you know, wasn't the guy who would make it easy to approach.

A seemingly shy, single dad, a warehouse worker and the zombie hunter?

Sergeant Hillman, when he picked up the Miller file, had never heard of steampunk.

What did you find out about the zombie hunter business?

So that really caught our attention for the fact that Brian lived in this fantasy world.

Did you get the impression that somehow his behaviors were at least existing side by side with other darker fantasies you may have had and maybe part of that fantasy?

Absolutely.

I think he was enjoying it.

Hillman added this zombie hunter business to a growing list of curious things connected to Brian Miller.

But was it enough?

No, they needed concrete proof like DNA.

But how to get it?

And then detectives decided to put on a little play of their own.

Would Miller take the bait?

The Phoenix Police Department cold case unit tried to rein in their excitement.

It was early in January 2015 and after more than three years crisscrossing the U.S. for a killer, they found a convincing lead in a most unlikely place.

I didn't know anything about these genres of zombie hunters.

Brian Miller had been putting on the show as Phoenix's very own zombie hunter for years.

Reporter William Herman was one of many spectators.

I've seen him for years driving around town.

There was more to Brian Patrick Miller than met the eye.

Who was it really behind that mask?

Could he be the brutal killer who'd slaughtered Angela Brasso and Melanie Bernus all those years ago?

The detectives needed his DNA and so the zombie hunter became the hunted.

Obviously we'd follow him from his home to work, then he'd be at work for several hours and we would sit there and watch and see if maybe he would come out on a break or lunch break and have a big gulp or something and throw it out the window

where we would be able to collect that and get some DNA, but he never did.

He just continued to sit in his car and would go back after break and then come back.

No big gulps and apparently Miller didn't smoke.

In fact, though they trailed him everywhere, eyes always on him.

He never did discard anything on which he may have left his DNA.
Almost to an unusual degree that he was avoiding the kind of behavior that you could make yourself.
Yeah, he was just very, very careful individual.
So what to do?
I got the call from one of my detectives and he was frustrated and he said,
hey, here's my plan. What do you think? And I said, green light, I like it.
The plan? If Miller could play a role? So could they.
The detective called me and said, hey, what about I introduce myself to Brian?
Obviously he sits in the parking lot a lot. What we know about him is he kind of is interested in security.
Why don't I pretend like I'm a building manager and there's a lot of theft in that parking lot and I'm going to hire him to basically watch for me.
Miller took the bait.
So the detective set up a job interview and very intentionally chose a restaurant.
The management of this chili is agreed to cooperate.
The idea was the detective would buy Miller's lunch hoping he just might leave his DNA on a dish or on a glass or a straw.
So this is the chilies. This is where we entered.
By then the cold case unit had prepared the place ahead of time and very carefully.
I know we had briefly discussed me dressing up as a waiter, but then we decided, you know, knowing how clumsy I was that I'd probably drop their drinks and their soup.
Instead, before Miller arrived, Detective Rostenberg carefully cleaned anything Miller might touch. I sterilized, you know, the plates, the cups, the silverware that they would be using at the table. I actually ran them through the dishwasher myself.
That's being careful.
We felt we only had one chance to get it right and we just didn't want anything to go wrong.
They took their places and waited.
I think all of our hearts were racing.
He arrived in his zombie hunter car.
Surprise. He wasn't alone.
We were taken aback, though, that he brought his 15-year-old daughter with him to the interview. My goodness, his daughter's there. Did you think this is going to mess up the whole idea?
We thought, hey, is he on to us?
The try to act natural lunch and the fake job interview lasted no more than an hour.
Miller ate a sandwich but barely sipped his drink and then he and his daughter left the restaurant. I think he only drank a couple times and so he wondered, hey, is there going to be DNA on there?
How did you get the water out of that, destroying the evidence?
Well, I wish I had some fancy way. I probably should have drilled the water out.
I just dumped the water out of the side that I believed he had his mouth probably hadn't touched. I mean, it's quite possible you just messed up.
Absolutely.
Detective Rostenberg sent the mug Miller drank from to the lab and they all waited and waited. Almost two weeks passed and then one day the unit happened to be gathering for one of its regular meetings.

We're all kind of going over some boring administrative stuff and the door burst open and it's Kelly and her whole team of DNA analysts.

Unheard of? Why not just phone?

No, this news needed to be delivered in person by the full squad with the boss Kelly Merwin leading the way.

The fact that a whole team of scientists would come over and abruptly open the door, we just again were in shock.

The first thing Kelly said is, you did it, he's your guy.

You could hear a pin drop in the room. I was in shock after all these years.

It was very emotional. I could still do this day.

We had poured our heart and soul into three and a half years chasing, hunting down this guy and to hear that.

And for the families just to hear that we got him and we can give that to the families.

Detective Shira, who rode a bike along the canal in 1992 to assist in the investigation, had just left work when he found out and he needed convincing.

One of the other detectives on the squad called me on the phone and told me as I'm driving home, I'm like, I don't feel like playing games today. I'm not in a good mood.

But he turned his car around and returned to the station.

It's a 20 mile ride. By the time I got there I was still going, this isn't true.

But it certainly was.

Sergeant Hillman called forensic genealogist Colleen Fitzpatrick with the good news.

And I went, oh my God, they got him.

I didn't expect the call. I didn't expect, you know, I hoped it would work.

But, you know, oh my God, it worked.

This was a DNA breakthrough that would eventually change the way cold cases were solved.

Hours later, a SWAT team arrested Brian Patrick Miller at work and delivered him to an interview room where Detective Shira was ready.

And what happened next? Well, that was a surprise.

It was as brutal as it was perplexing.

Young women, 22-year-old Angela Brasso and 17-year-old Melanie Bernus found dead.

Their bodies mutilated.

Finally, after more than 20 years and a rest,

Angela's friend Jill Kelly got the news from her niece, who, pure chance, worked in the same warehouse as Brian Miller.

She just happened to tell me, oh my God, this guy where I work was just arrested for murder.

When you thought about that the first time that hit you,

that she has been in close proximity to the very person you've been afraid of for years and years.

It was terrifying to think of that.

And now Celeste Bentley understood what could have happened to her.

I couldn't believe it. I was in shock.

Just to put that together, that he was the person that had stabbed me all those years ago, and now he's the person they're looking at for killing these women was...

So horribly? Yeah.

I mean, he was practicing on you, apparently.

I would believe that, yeah.

And Brian's friends?

Yeah, and it was a gut punch to say the least, you know.

It was just like, what? They can't have the right guy. Are you sure?

Sergeant Hillman and his cold case unit were sure.

Once Miller was in custody, Detective Rostenberg searched Miller's home for evidence and got another surprise.

It was probably only a 1200 square foot house, but it was a hoarder house that I've never seen in my 25-year career.

I remember one of our SWAT team members coming to me and saying,

hey, we can't clear the house because we can't even make entry.

Rostenberg and others spent more than five days working their way through it all, collected more than 6,000 items.

Among them, a hacksaw, a sword, teeth.

And this was worrisome.

Women's credit cards, a driver's licenses.

And here in the house where he raised his daughter were magazines, images, videos that Rostenberg wishes he could somehow wipe from his memory.

Women having their heads cut off, stabbed, beaten, strangled.

I remember leaving that place every night.

I would take a shower and I just had such a difficult time sleeping,

just trying to get those images and those pictures out of my head.

One graphic image hanging in Miller's kitchen stood out from the rest.

Not only did he have a large severed head on the front of his refrigerator door, but many of these videos, these photographs, arguably the worst photos I've ever seen.

But no evidence in the house seemed to connect directly to the murders.

And meanwhile, under questioning by Detective Shira,

Miller claimed he had no idea why he might be in trouble.

More concerned with what's going on.

Because they wouldn't tell me anything in the car.

And slowly and carefully, Shira brought up the location of the murders, the bike path along the canal.

You know all those little bike paths they have around?

Yeah, I know what you're talking about.

Those always scared me. That's why I didn't take them.

Had you taken them?

I may have taken them once and then didn't like it.

The detective started to press Miller a little.

Did you ever have sex with any women out on the bike trails or anything?

No.

So there's no reason that your DNA should be anywhere around out there.

Never had sex with any women, anything like that.

Then, down to cases.

You remember the name Angela Bross and what all?

Yeah.

Well, she was killed around the bike paths in 1992.

And then, in 1993, there's a girl by the name Melanie Bernas, who was also killed.

Around the bike, you know, the canals and the bike paths over there.

And there's some DNA evidence that kind of links you to those girls.

Is there any way you can explain that to me?

No, good. I don't know those names.

Sergeant Hillman watched the interview in real time from a nearby room.

What were your impressions of him as he sat there answering questions?

He was very stoic, really kind of no emotion.

Even when the detective pressed him again and again.

How can you explain to me that your DNA is there?

I can't.

I can't remember everything I did back then, but I know I didn't kill anyone.

So you sure you don't want to, you know, now's your chance,

kind of come and tell me, is there a reason something like that happened?

And would help you get that off your chest if you did something like that?

I didn't kill anyone.

Everyone, as far as I know, everyone that I've ever had sex with is still alive.

So you've never killed anybody?

Nobody.

The only victim Miller was willing to talk about was himself.

He claimed he'd been abused as a child.

How was your childhood with me and my mom? Horrible.

What made it horrible?

Physical abuse.

There would be no confession from Miller in that room.

But that's not to say the interview was a total loss.

There were a couple of points in that interview that turned out to be helpful.

Vince Imbordino is the deputy county attorney on the case.

And those helpful moments?

Interestingly enough, one of them or two of them were when nobody was in the room but the defendant.

And he's talking.

I can't even stand the state of blood.

He knows he's being recorded.

Tell me.

I'll see if it works in my head.

No, these were not just ramblings, thought Imbordino.

They were a glimpse into Brian Miller's defense.

And he was worried it just might work.

Finally, the long delayed reckoning.

It was October 2022, almost eight years since the arrest of Brian Patrick Miller. Eight years of hearings and legal wrangling and COVID. Here he would face two counts of kidnapping, attempted sexual assault and first degree murder. The case against him anchored by the unmistakable signature of his own DNA on both his mutilated victims. But Miller pleaded, not guilty, by reason of insanity. The prosecutor had a feeling this was possible after watching Miller's police interview. Please tell me this was just a nightmare. Please tell me. I'll see if it works in my head. Our belief was that he was saying things to try to make it appear that he had mental health issues. Oh, it didn't just appear, said defense attorney RJ Parker. Miller, he said, suffered from a long list of disorders, autism, depression, hoarding, PTSD, and dissociative disorder. Illness is so severe, said Parker, Miller's brain simply won't let him recall anything about killing Angela and Melanie. He didn't remember killing these women? It's not a process as simple as he didn't remember. It's a more complicated process that involves not having access to very, very deep experiences that fundamentally conflict with his own humanity. So sanity, or the lack of it, would be the issue. Both sides agreed to a trial by judge alone. She would determine culpability, and if she found him guilty, she, judge Suzanne Cohen, would decide the punishment, life behind bars, or death. Prosecutor Vincent Bordino began with the plan the one Miller wrote as a teen that's described or imagined a killing so gruesome his mother took the note to the police. The plan basically outlined what he did to Angela and Melanie. Prosecutors said Miller's attacks were methodical and precise. He approached both Angela and Melanie, disabled them with a fatal stab wound in the back, and then dragged them to a secluded area where he brutalized them. There were more than 20 witnesses. Angela's boyfriend, Joe. I was baking her a cake that night. That was the reason I didn't go on the bike ride. Charlotte Pottle, who discovered the second murder scene. I often would stand up and pedal just to get more momentum, and then ended up riding through a puddle of blood. There was no doubt who committed the two murders, said the forensic scientist. The probability of selecting an unrelated individual at random, having a DNA profile matching the DNA profile from this item is at least one in 460 quintillion. No argument said the defense. Miller did it. But as so overcome by these disorders, they argued, he should be treated for mental illness, not thrown in prison or executed. Brian was treated like a dog, literally made to walk on all fours and eat out of a dog bowl. Defense attorneys told the judge that Miller's mother, Ellen, who has since died, routinely beat and

tortured her son. And that wasn't all.

The abuse he endured crossed many different lines that included sexual conduct.

Parker said Miller's mother walked around the house half naked and gave her son Playboy magazines when he was only seven.

It was all so damaging, said Parker, that Miller's mind created two states of consciousness, a normal state and a trauma state.

The trauma state was able to harbor rage, anger, resentment, humiliation, a desire for revenge.

And Miller was in that trauma state with the argument when he killed Angela and Melanie.

As part of this dissociative process, not having access to those experiences or that information means it's fundamentally not a part of his world.

It's not something that he can engage with.

But he did do those things.

He did.

His DNA is all over them. But he wouldn't admit in court that he did these things.

The case was never about whether Brian could or could not admit to offenses.

It was about what recognition within himself he could have about those experiences.

A forensic psychologist appointed by the court had an opinion about the trauma state claim.

Essentially, baloney. These were sex crimes, pure and simple.

I think they were planned and they were carefully executed.

He evaded detection and arrest for a long time.

That was the battleground.

Was he insane? Did he remember doing it?

After six months of testimony, it was up to the judge now, at last, an answer.

As to count one, first-degree murder, Angela Brasso as follows. Guilty.

As to count two, first-degree murder, victim Melanie Burness as follows. Guilty.

Guilty on all counts.

Angela and Melanie's families had watched the trial on a video call set up for them.

And now they address the judge.

Jill Canetta is Melanie's big sister.

Orders cannot even begin to describe the level of excruciating pain we experienced with the news of her horrific death.

Linda Brasso, Angela's mother.

The defendants stole her future, her innocence, her life.

Judge Cohen had one more big decision before her. Should Miller get the death penalty?

The lawyers faced off for the last time, one trying to save Miller's life.

Where would Ryan be now if he had a mother who nurtured him, who gave him hugs and showed him affection, who kissed him with love in her heart?

The prosecutor on the other side did not mince words.

This will sound harsh, I'm sure.

Angela and Melanie didn't get to choose when they died.

They didn't get to choose the day, the hour, the moment.

This defendant deserves to know the day, the hour of his death, for what he did.

It's clear that you took this case pretty personally too. I thought you'd get to know somebody and you'd want to represent them well.

Correct. I can still get emotional about it, as you can probably tell right now.

Judge Cohen got ready to read her decision.

The question the court must answer is if the totality of the mitigation is sufficiently substantial to call for leniency.

And there was a pause. I don't know whether she paused on purpose.

But during that pause, I wasn't sure what she was going to say, yes or no.

The answer is no.

Brian Miller was sentenced to death.

What's that feel like?

I don't know that I can put into words how it feels to sit next to Brian after all these years and hear the judge sentence him to death.

It's an overwhelming experience that carries its own trauma.

If you saw the horrendous things that Brian Miller did to those women, death penalty was suitable at that point.

We can't bring those girls back, but we can give them some form of closure and seeing Brian Patrick Miller remove from society.

Miller is now on Arizona's death row, where he has access to email.

He wrote to Dateline that he has always denied being involved with the murders.

And he did not agree with the defense and the opinion of experts.

Miller has appealed the conviction.

But is the investigating over?

No, it is not.

Just either of you think that there are more murders out there that we don't know about?

I do.

I'm hoping, praying that I can talk to him and hopefully clear some more cases, get some more relief for some of the other families,

because I do think he did other murders.

Thirty years ago, two bright young women each set out for bike rides along the canal and neither came home.

Justice has finally been done, but the loss is forever.

Well, she'd probably be a mother and have a few children and some dogs and some cats and some rabbits and some animals around her.

She would be a person of love. She really would.

I think of what she would have been like, what kind of mom she would have been, what kind of career she would have chosen.

In our yearbook, she signed it saying, I hope we are friends for the rest of our lives.

I think we truly would have been friends forever.

That's all for this edition of Dateline.

We'll see you again Thursday at 10, 9 central.

And of course, I'll see you each weeknight for NBC Nightly News.

I'm Lester Holt for all of us at NBC News. Good night.