

Thrill killer up for parole for 1973 Ohio State stabbing

By [Lori Kurtzman](#) The Columbus Dispatch • Monday March 24, 2014 7:42 AM

She woke up that morning, on the last day of her life, and tugged on a pair of pantyhose. She slipped into a green-and-white skirt and a blouse embroidered with her initials — BML — over her heart. She pressed her feet into a pair of leather loafers and climbed into her car.

It was Nov. 28, 1973. Beverly Lee was 32, married, quiet, well-liked. She and her husband had moved to Columbus almost three years earlier, where she'd taken a job as a research associate at Ohio State University.

No one wanted to harm Lee, at least not as far as she knew. That day, she walked into Room 433 in Lincoln Tower, directly below a police office, and sat in her chair to work. Her husband called her at noon, as he usually did. A secretary peeked in to tell her that Robert was on the phone.

Lee was facedown on the floor, elbows bent, hands clenched, a pool of blood seeping toward the west wall. The officers above came running down the stairwell.

“It’s bad,” someone told them.

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Over the years, there have been a handful of killings on the OSU campus, but none held the mystery of the Beverly Lee case.

In 1968, Harriet Frances Leeb, a freshman with a history of emotional troubles, set a fire in Lincoln Tower, killing two students on the 11th floor. Leeb was found not guilty by reason of insanity.

Sixteen years later, janitor Charles Ayers stabbed Antwan L. Pickens to death during a fight in the Biological Sciences Building. Ayers was found guilty of felonious assault and served nine years.

Two others killed themselves before they had to answer for their crimes. Mark Edgerton, 40, shot and killed OSU Police Officer Michael Blankenship in 1997 in the lobby of the Wexner Center for the Arts. Edgerton was found dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound two days later.

And in 2010, a down-on-his-luck OSU custodian, Nathaniel Brown, 50, shot and killed his supervisor, Larry Wallington, before turning the gun on himself.

Beverly Lee's murder was different.

"There were no obvious leads, no motives that were easily detected," said John Kleberg, a former OSU deputy police chief who had just begun working at the university when Lee was killed. "There just simply was nothing."

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Lee was a woman who mostly kept to herself, but she didn't seem to have any enemies. She was tall, with short dark hair and a shy smile. She and her husband were East Coast natives who met at an archery training school. They bowled and skied and camped and hiked.

Lee was physically strong, her mother told the student newspaper, but "she was sitting down and stabbed in the back. I couldn't expect her to fight, could you?"

The investigation showed that Lee was, indeed, stabbed in the back first. She didn't even have a chance to scream. She turned toward her attacker. He kept thrusting the blade.

The knife tore through the initials on her blouse. It slashed into her bra. Blood soaked her pantyhose and dripped into her loafers. A coroner's report said she bled to death from seven stab wounds.

Police interviews yielded nothing. Lee's killer had slipped through campus like a ghost. He hadn't taken a thing: Lee still wore her University of Connecticut class ring on her right hand, her two silver wedding rings on her left. There were no signs of a sexual assault.

Kleberg's frustration built. A dozen investigators had interviewed more than 100 people, and all the police could do was plead for help from the public.

What were they missing? Kleberg wondered. Was there something they'd overlooked, a question unasked, a stone unturned?

"As it turns out," he said, "there was nothing."

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He told his girlfriend what he'd done over dinner. They were eating steak at home in Delaware, and she accidentally cut her finger. He started talking about knives.

"He said that he always wanted to get some white person because he hates white people," Sherri Jeffries later told police. "I joked with him that he had better not do it with one of my knives."

He already had, he said. Someone on campus. A secretary, he thought.

“I asked him if she screamed or something,” Jeffries said, according to the transcript of her statement to police on Dec. 13, 1973, “and he said that he came up on her so fast that he surprised her but that she made some type of groans.”

Jeffries was 19 at the time. She’d known her boyfriend for nine months. Yes, she said, she thought he was capable of killing someone.

“I asked him where he stabbed her, and he said, ‘Where it counts,’” she told police, according to the transcript. “I said, ‘What do you mean?’ and he said, ‘What do you think?’ I said, ‘In the heart,’ and he said, ‘Yes.’”

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Leon Baskin Jr. was 24. Newspaper accounts of his trial describe him as small, with dark-framed glasses. He’d moved to Delaware from Peoria, Ill., that July.

He’d never been to campus until he grabbed a knife, got in his car and drove to Ohio State that November morning.

“It could have been you,” Baskin told Kleberg on Dec. 13, 1973. “You know, just something that I just wanted to do when I was young.”

Baskin didn’t say a word after a judge convicted him of murder and sentenced him to life in prison. He declined to talk for this story, too. But in 1973, he answered the questions that had stumped police for weeks.

He didn’t know Lee, had never even seen her before. He parked and walked around campus and ended up in Lincoln Tower, up four flights of stairs. He said he was looking for money.

He wandered through one open door and into another, into Room 433, where he saw “the lady.”

“What lady?” Kleberg asked.

“The one I stabbed.”

She was sitting in a desk chair, her back to the door.

“I think I panicked, really. Well, you know, I wasn’t anticipating to do it, but really, I don’t think I wanted to do it. I just wanted to see if I could do it, and I think I panicked.”

Baskin recalled stabbing Lee three times. And then, he said, he left. He put the knife in his pocket and walked back to his car and drove home and washed the knife and put it away.

“I never did like white people anyway, so it didn’t matter to me,” he told Kleberg.

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Baskin is 64 now. He’s the only person serving time for a murder on OSU’s campus. His prison photo shows an older black man, frowning, lights glaring in his silver-framed glasses.

Next month, he will be up for parole. The parole board has received two letters in support of his release and one against it.

Bret Vinocur, a local volunteer victims’ advocate and president of Block Parole Inc., has searched for relatives of Lee’s to speak on her behalf, but he hasn’t found anyone still living. So he has spoken to the board, hoping to keep Baskin in prison. So has Michael Miller, a former Franklin County prosecutor who tried the Lee case.

Miller said he rarely sent letters to the parole board during his 23 years in the prosecutor’s office. Maybe two a year. He didn’t want to dilute his influence. But when Vinocur asked him to speak on Lee’s behalf, he didn’t hesitate.

He handled maybe 500 homicide cases, but Beverly Lee always stayed with him. Killings are usually senseless, he said, but her death was almost too senseless to comprehend.

“You just remember things like that,” Miller said. “This woman had done nothing. Just sitting and minding her own business ... just sitting there — and boom.”