

BETSY RUTH AARDSMA: 40 YEARS LATER

He came from the front. No one heard her scream.

By Kevin Cirilli
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

HER death became their life. For decades, Penn State graduate student Betsy Aardsma's murder has captured the lives of her friends, her family and the authorities who have investigated her death. Although labeled a cold case, it's far from inactive. Authorities work daily to uncover the truth. Currently, they're waiting for DNA test results of Betsy's red dress — the same dress she wore the afternoon she was killed.

Unanswered questions, unproven theories and unusual memories linger, haunting their thoughts. All are fueled by the same question: Who killed Betsy Aardsma?

This November, the obsession turns 40.

Leaving Hope

"I never considered her a saint," said Andrea Marchand, her University of Michigan roommate. "She didn't carry herself that way."

Betsy was the new girl at the University of Michigan in the late 1960s. She left Hope College, in Holland, Mich., after her second year.

"I'm not sure if I ever knew why she transferred, isn't that odd?" Andrea said. "Hope is right near where she grew up. I guess she wanted a bigger place."

Andrea and Betsy went to movies, playfully smoked cigarettes and giggled about boys together in their dorm room. The college boys always fell hard for Betsy, Andrea said. She wasn't drop-dead gorgeous, but she was pretty enough and educated.

"Every guy that met her was crazy about her," Andrea said. "Sometimes I just wonder if maybe she had met somebody at Penn State and they were totally crazy about her — it's just so weird."

Betsy was quite the cook, too. She could walk into a college kitchen and whip up a gourmet meal, Andrea said. She was never shy in offering her opinions, politically or socially.

"I met this guy from Holland,

uncle told him about Penn State's Milton S. Hershey Medical School. It was in its first few years of existence and offered smaller classes.

One night, David drove Betsy back to her apartment. She told him she had something to tell him. She stared ahead out the windshield and told him she got accepted into the Peace Corps. She'd be leaving for Africa in the fall.

"She asked if I would wait for her," he said.

"You could meet somebody down there," Wright said he told her. "I could meet somebody here."

Years later, David said he heard that Betsy told her friends she was never sure she wanted to be a doctor's wife. She wanted to travel. Betsy wanted Africa.

Betsy had a choice.

David told her he didn't want her to leave, but ultimately it was her choice. Ultimately, Betsy chose the boy.

She got accepted to Penn State's graduate school program for English — just 100 miles from the new Hershey Medical School; 100 miles from David.

"You feel guilty that might have changed — it might have changed things," he said. "She chose to turn that down and instead go to Penn State."

At the end of the summer, David received a letter from Hershey. Orientation had started and he wasn't there. Panicked, he called Betsy.

"This started today and I'm not even there," he said he told her. "She said, 'Let's get ready and go.'"

Dear Ol' State

It was the last Andrea saw of her friend. Andrea returned to the University of Michigan to earn her masters degree. Although they wrote letters, Andrea said Betsy never mentioned much about life at Penn State.

"Maybe that one English professor — but I don't know," Andrea said.

Professor Nicholas Joukovsky flew from Oxford, England, to begin teaching at Penn State in the summer of 1969. Forty years later, he's still here.

Just a few feet separate his

concerned about someone bugging her up there," he said. "I just have no idea. She kept saying how ridiculous it was to be apart."

David invited her to have Thanksgiving at Hershey with his new friends. She accepted, but upon her arrival began thinking about the pile of schoolwork that awaited her back at Penn State.

Betsy had a choice — return home early or spend the rest of the weekend with David. Betsy chose to leave.

He drove her to the bus station for what would be the last time he ever saw her, told her he loved her and watched her head back to Penn State.

David paused and cleared his throat before speaking again.

"I honestly don't know who killed her — I just have absolutely no idea. That's the honest-to-God truth," he said. "I'm sure [the police] know a lot more about it than anyone else does."

A cold case

State Trooper Leigh Barrows opened the file cabinet in her Pennsylvania State Police at Rockview office.

Nearly a dozen blue three-inch binders line the shelf, part of the thousands of pages she inherited last February when she was assigned Betsy's case.

The 1969 edition of La Vie, the Penn State yearbook, rests on a shelf, above a photograph of Betsy tacked to the bulletin board.

"I'm not going to comment much," Barrows said. "This case is still under investigation. Several leads are still being followed up on."

She didn't specify which ones. But what police can confirm are the same details that have been rehashed, reiterated and relived for the last four decades.

Betsy wrote David a letter the day she died.

"The eeriest thing about this was Saturday morning, the day after she died, I had a letter from her in my mailbox," David said.

She went to Joukovsky's office. Joukovsky wanted her to bring him a book, G. A. Aiken's "The Life and Works of John Arbuthnot," which she had used for another assignment.



Forty years ago, Betsy Aardsma was stabbed to death in Pattee Library. Collegian archives

"In those days, we didn't know about grief," Linda said. "It took me several months to come out of this funk — it was a pretty bad experience and I blocked it all out."

Back in Michigan, Andrea heard the news on the radio. During Thanksgiving break, she walked into her parent's kitchen while her father's transistor radio played on the table.

"I said to my mom, 'That radio said that Betsy had been killed,'" she recalled. "I called the radio station, and sure enough, that was the case."

She went to a restaurant, trying her best to remain composed.

"The waiter came. I ordered and I burst out crying," she said. "I said, 'My best friend was killed.'"

At 2 a.m. on Nov. 29, 1969, David awoke in his Hershey apartment to a banging at the door. Two detectives dressed in dark suits took him into the kitchen.

For 20 minutes, they questioned him without explaining why

anything to do with the incident.

"Nobody knew anything," he said. "Is this person still hanging around? What's going on here? Even I was much more aware of my surroundings. You go to work everyday and you sort of take everything for granted, and then something like that happens."

Forty years later, the pain remains. Just last year, David told his grown-up children about the girl he dated before marrying their mother. He gave an interview to a newspaper and sent the article to his four children.

"Not one of them would read it," he said. "They said, 'Why didn't you ever tell us?' But by the time they would have been old enough to understand it, it was fifteen years later. What's the use in bringing it up in my mind — in theirs?"

David said he and his children have reconciled, although he has one wish for whomever killed the woman he was certain would have become his wife.

"The waiter came, I ordered and I burst out crying. I said, 'My best friend was killed.'"

and he was Dutch," Andrea said laughing. "She said 'Don't get together with a Dutchman.'"

Following her junior year, Betsy returned home to Holland, Mich. Andrea came to visit and the friends traveled out to Lake Michigan, where Betsy proudly accepted a campaign button from a supporter of Democratic presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy. She supported McCarthy, who challenged then Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson on an anti-Vietnam War platform.

At the start of their senior year, Andrea and Betsy rented an apartment and moved in with two other girls.

A few Alpha Delta Phi fraternity boys lived above, one of whom dated a girl living with Betsy. David Wright, another boy who lived upstairs, fell for Betsy, and for the first time, Betsy fell for the boy.

"She was just crazy about David," Andrea said.

Betsy in love

David said he invited Betsy to a fraternity party, then to dinner dates and later to Detroit for romantic evenings. Another place they'd frequent was the campus library.

The son of a psychiatrist said he never felt this way about anyone before.

"We were together all the time," he said. "As I look back on it, it was my first real long-term relationship."

On his 21st birthday, they went to a popular Ann Arbor bar where the employees rang a pretzel bell, and she watched him chug his first legal beer, he said.

They discussed plans to spend the rest of their lives together after graduation. But while Betsy and David grew closer, Betsy kept the intimate details of her relationship from Andrea.

"I knew she was seeing David, but I didn't know she felt that strongly about him," Andrea said.

To some extent, neither did David. Wright had plans — he wanted medical school, a marriage and a career.

He applied to medical school at the University of Michigan, but an

Burrows Building office from the library. His desk window overlooks the brick building.

In the summer of '69 he was nervous, particularly about being "thrown into" teaching a challenging English 501 course.

"We really put them through their paces and a lot of them didn't survive," he said. He was Betsy's professor, whom she would report to while writing her research paper evaluating the works of John Arbuthnot.

She became friends with Linda Marsa, who lived near Waupelani Drive and was in Betsy's English 501 class. The new friends went to the Ye Olde College Diner downtown and ate grilled stickies together, she said.

"She was thinking about the whole marriage thing. It was 1969, just the crust of the women's movement," Linda said. "We all went into it thinking we'd get married and have kids. By that time we were all thinking about maybe possibly having careers. She was wondering if that was what she really wanted."

But Betsy's studies were interrupted with frequent weekend trips to be with David. Week after week, she'd pack her bags and leave State College, heading 100 miles to see him.

"Everyone says we were engaged — we were not engaged," David said. "We were looking at rings, the idea was that we would be engaged by Christmas. But no, I hadn't given her a ring at that point."

She mentioned permanently leaving State College, about wanting to continue her studies at Penn State Harrisburg. She never mentioned any of her classmates.

"I sometimes wonder if she was

"I was evaluating that previous project and I wanted to see that key book," Joukovsky said. "I asked her if she still had it out of the library. She said, 'No, I've taken it back, but I'm going up there right after I'm done here and I'll bring it back to you.'"

She left his office just after 4 p.m. She went to Professor Harrison Meserole's office before leaving her roommate and talking to a few other friends.

Betsy headed for the stacks. She bumped into another girl, who asked her for a pen. Betsy walked down the stairs and into the stacks.

Betsy was stabbed once in her heart.

He came from the front. No one heard her scream.

But the silence in the stacks was interrupted by the sound of falling books, as Betsy clutched the shelf in the final seconds of her life. Five minutes later, Betsy was dead.

"Somebody better help that girl," a man told the other students studying in the stacks as he ran out of the library. Police never identified him.

It's been reported that two men were in the stacks with her, but police are skeptical. Some believe there may have only been one.

"It wasn't a whole lot of people that went down to the stacks," Linda said. "I think it was some kind of stalker or something. What else could it be?"

Tuning out

The news swept the nation. Betsy's death would ultimately lead to the creation of the Penn State Police. But for Linda, Andrea and David, the news was personal.



Left: Aardsma in a period photograph. Center: A police sketch of a suspect. Right: Authorities sealed off the murder scene after Aardsma's stabbing.

"I would hope that whoever did this is dead," he said.

Returning hope

Forty years later, new technology and police techniques offer hope. The FBI works closely with the Pennsylvania State Police and authorities are now waiting for the DNA test results of Betsy's clothing — technology that wasn't available 40 years ago, Barrows said.

"I'm not leaving here 'til I solve it," Barrows said. "I look at this case as if I was searching for someone who did this to a family member — I treat her like she was one of my own."

Others outside of the police have also been captivated by Betsy's story, like Penn State English Professor Sascha Skucek. He said he was drawn to the case 40 years ago, on the 30th anniversary.

"You will find whatever answers you seek if you're willing to seek them long enough," Skucek said. "But sometimes, life just gets in the way."

He has his own theory — that Betsy was stabbed from behind. He said rows of books are too close together for anyone to have stabbed her from the front.

He's not interested in writing a book — the case has just become a hobby for him. He keeps Betsy's picture in his wallet.

"The killer will have a tie to Betsy in some manner — she saw something," he predicted. "The killer is still alive."

He and Barrows both believe Betsy in some way knew her killer. "If I thought it was random, I wouldn't waste my time and I'd just leave it to God," Skucek said.

The lure of an unsolved mystery captures Skucek, but it's become personal for Barrows. For her, it's not about the Betsy's death — it's about her life. It's about the girl who wanted to go join the Peace Corps, the girl who wrote innocent letters, the girl who left Hope.

"She came into our county — into our state — in that short period of time and loses her life. To me that's personal," Barrows said. "Betsy's not forgotten."

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