

JEREMIAH MURPHY; AN OBSESSION TO FIND KILLER

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Everything changed for Suffolk County Assistant Dist. Atty. Tim Burke last September when he was assigned to prosecute murder cases.

He was 33 years old, and things were going pretty good that day, because he was happily married with a two-year-old son, whose desk photographs smiled at Burke in his tiny, eighth-floor office of the Suffolk County Courthouse.

Then Burke started checking the folders on his desk of the unsolved murder cases that had been assigned to him. He wanted to be familiar with the details and that is when he came across the newspaper photographs of Kenneth, 3, and Joanna Rodriguez, 4, and that is when the long ordeal of Tim Burke began.

Kenneth and Joanna Rodriguez and their mother, Basilia Melendez, 25, had been found butchered to death - and those words are the only accurate description - in their first-floor apartment on Jacobs street in Dorchester on Dec. 5, 1979 and the murder remains unsolved.

Burke then went through 40 police color photographs in the same folder that were taken in the apartment shortly after the bodies were found. They had the same effect upon him as if he had been punched, over and over, in the stomach. The mother and the two children had been butchered, and some of the Station 11 police officers present that day became physically ill when they saw the bodies. It was that bad.

But that all happened two years ago on a poor street in Dorchester where mostly blacks and Hispanics live. So after a day or two the story dropped out of the newspapers, because it didn't have the old standby elements of prominence of the people involved and possibility of sex and the presence of mystery. The case was unsolved despite many hours of police work.

Now, it was almost two years later and the manila folder was on Burke's desk and he kept coming back to the photographs of the two kids smiling. That is when he started waking up at night, and thinking about those kids, even though he knew that you can't get emotionally involved in a case. He would lie in bed and think about the evidence in the case and try to put the puzzle together. That is when he started making trips out to Jacobs street to look again at the three-decker where the kids and their mother had been killed. That is when he started talking about the case with his wife, because Sarah was sympathetic. Now a single day does not pass when he does not think of those children.

The father of the children, who had been out of the house at the time of the murders, had been questioned and released and has returned to Puerto Rico. But there is one good suspect, and the evidence is there but not strong enough. Tim Burke thinks about the man and wishes aloud, "If only somebody saw something that day. If only somebody would call and tell us."

It has been going on for eight months with Burke, and he said the other day, "This case is driving me crazy. You just can't come into a house and butcher a mother and two little kids and just walk away. There has to be some accountability. There has to be some justice."

Burke's background may provide some clue to his obsession. He grew up in the tiny upstate New York town of Cohocton, as the youngest of 12 children. He came to Boston in the early 1970s for eye surgery after graduating from Syracuse University. He liked the city, enrolled eventually at Northeastern University Law School, and eventually came to work at Dist. Atty. Newman Flanagan's office. He and Detective Robert Bird have gone over the case time and time again. Burke shows you the photographs of the smiling little kids and says, "I know you have to keep your distance. But this is different. There are children involved here, and I am sure that anybody that looked at these photographs - all the photographs - would feel exactly the same way."

So Tim Burke continues his lonely ordeal, the long vigil that has turned into an obsession. A defenseless mother and two innocent little children were horribly murdered and nobody knows why and by whom. Three people are dead and more than two years have passed since that awful day in Dorchester. The public has inevitably forgotten, because other

subsequent murders have taken their place and a few of the stories stayed in the papers for weeks. Now most people have forgotten about a young mother and two little children. But Tim Burke hasn't forgotten and continues to awake in the night and try to put the puzzle together. He desperately needs a phone call from someone who saw something on Jacobs street in Dorchester on that terrible day. His number is 725-8701.

The telephone call will only cost you a dime, but it could lead to the butcher of children.