



FORENSIC BEHAVIORAL SERVICES Inc.

FORENSIC BEHAVIORAL SERVICES
INTERNATIONAL

SHERI COLEMAN - VICTIM (DECEASED);
GARETT COLEMAN - VICTIM (DECEASED);
GAVIN COLEMAN - VICTIM (DECEASED);
COLUMBIA POLICE DEPARTMENT,
COLUMBIA, ILLINOIS;
MAY 5, 2009
CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIVE ANALYSIS

The following Criminal Investigative Analysis was prepared by Mark Safarik M.S., V.S.M. (FBI Ret.), Executive Director, Forensic Behavioral Services International, LLC on February 15, 2010.

The observations and opinions contained herein are the result of knowledge drawn from the personal investigative experience, educational background, specialized training, and research conducted by Mr. Safarik. On June 24, 2009 I received a call from Special Agent (SA) Jennifer Sullivan, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Springfield, Illinois Resident Agency, Chicago Field Office. SA Sullivan inquired if she could have the Chief of Police of Columbia, Illinois contact me regarding the murder of three members of the Coleman family including two young boys as I had been proffered as someone with an expertise in this type of violent crime assessment.

On June 26, 2009 I received a call from Chief of Police Joseph Edwards regarding the triple murder of the Coleman family in their family residence in Columbia, Illinois on May 5, 2009. On July 1, 2009 a conference call was conducted regarding the dynamics of this triple murder and the process utilized in this type of assessment. Present were Detectives Justin Barlow and Karla Heine, States Attorney Kris Reitz and Deborah Volmert, assistant to the prosecutor.

On July 14, 2009 I received a 3-ring binder of case materials regarding the triple homicide. Chief Edwards indicated that it was his intention to have me retained in this case but the details had not been finalized.

On October 2, 2009 I was contacted by Chief Edwards who advised that I had been formally retained by the City of Columbia, Illinois.

Professional Excellence in the Behavioral and Forensic Assessment of Criminal Behavior

The purpose of this analysis focused on two important areas. The first was to behaviorally and forensically assess the crime and crime scene dynamics through the interaction of the offender, **Sheri Coleman** (hereafter referred to as **Sheri**), **Garett Coleman** (hereafter referred to as **Garett**), and **Gavin Coleman** (hereafter referred to as **Gavin**), and the scene, which in this case was the Coleman family residence. The second focused on specific attributes of the homicide to include motive, the offender's ability to gain access to the residence and victims, cause of death, the known timeline, and the spray-paint writing left at different locations within the scene in order to render an opinion as to whether this crime scene had been *staged* (a point that will be further discussed in the **Crime Analysis** section of this report).

The following analysis is based on a thorough review of submitted investigative materials. My points of contact in this matter were Detectives' Justin Barlow and Karla Heine and Chief Joseph Edwards, Columbia Police Department. In order to conduct this analysis I requested the following documents: initial investigative case reports; crime scene photographs, autopsy photographs, crime scene video, aerial photographs; crime scene sketches and diagrams; autopsy protocol; forensic evaluations of evidence, crime demographics for the neighborhood for the one year period prior to and subsequent to the homicides, and finally complete victimology data derived from interviews of people who knew the victims.

The following documents were received for review on July 14, 2009:

- One FedEx package containing case report documents. These include:
 - Autopsy reports for **Sheri, Garett, and Gavin**
 - 159 autopsy photographs
 - Investigative reports
 - Toxicology reports for **Sheri, Garett, and Gavin**
 - Witness interview - Christopher Coleman
 - Two DVDs of Coleman interview
 - Crime Scene photographs - provided on DVD
 - 47 photographs taken by County Coroner
 - 344 crime scene photographs

- Diagrams/sketches
- Coleman residence crime scene video provided on DVD
- Laboratory reports
 - Two page dated May 12, 2009 - not reviewed
 - Dated June 11, 2009
 - Dated May 26, 2009
 - Dated May 21, 2009
 - Dated May 14, 2009
 - Five page dated May 12, 2009
 - Dated May 28, 2009 - not reviewed
- Crime demographic statistics reports

The following documents were received for review on January 13, 2010:

- ☐ One 3-ring binder containing the following documents:
 - A ten-page crime scene report by Michael Grist
 - A three-page crime scene supplemental report by Abby Keller
 - A three-page crime scene supplemental report by Denis Janis
 - A three-page crime scene supplemental report by Gerald Zacheis
 - A report by Dr. Michael Baden dated 10-19-2009
 - Report of threat received by email 11-18-2008
 - Email threat dated 11-14-2008 and response by Renee Barton
 - Threat received in mailbox dated 01-02-2009 by Christopher Coleman and attendant police report
 - Threat received in mailbox dated 04-27-2009 by Christopher Coleman and attendant police report

- Weather report for 04/4-5/2009 from National Climactic Data Center
- Report regarding Christopher Coleman's attendance at Pound for Pound gym.
- Details of text messages and phone calls made to **Sheri** on the morning of 05-05-09
- Report of interview with Vanessa Riegerix dated 12/29/2009
- Color copy of photograph showing location of DVR
- CD of 47 photographs taken by coroner (previously received)

The following documents were received for review on January 26, 2010:

- Interview of Tara Lintz on 5-7-2009
- Re-interview of Tara Lintz on 5-7-2009
- Interview of Tara Lintz on 6-4-2009
- CD of aerial photographs (64 photographs)
- DVD - Interview of Tara Lintz dated 6/4/2009
- DVD - Interview of Tara Lintz - 1st Interview
- DVD - Interview of Tara Lintz - 1st Interview
- DVD - Interview of Tara Lintz - 2nd Interview

The following documents were received for review on April 2, 2010:

- Interview of Kathy and Robert LaPlante on 5-8-2009
- Re-interview of Tara Lintz on 5-7-2009

On February 25, 2010 I conducted an on-site visit to the crime scene. This visit consisted of a meeting with the Chief Joseph Edwards, Investigators Justin Barlow, Karla Heine, David Bivens, and

Kelly Cullen. The location was visited at two different times. The first time was during the day and the second time was at night. The daytime visit consisted of a complete walkthrough of the interior of the house as well as the exterior yard and the night visit consisted of a walkthrough of the interior from the identified point of entry to the bedrooms of each victim. The nighttime visit was done to get a realistic sense of what obstacles both physically and visually an offender would face in traversing the distance between the window in the basement and the bedrooms two levels above. Despite the fact that the street lights were working and there was a full moon on a cloudless night, it was nearly impossible to see where you were going without the use of additional lighting to illuminate your pathway. An offender would have needed to lighting in all areas of the house as the ambient lighting, even in this best case scenario, was completely inadequate. In order to identify the location of the victims in the bedrooms and put himself in a position to effect the strangulation the offender would have needed to illuminate each victim first.

In order to address the previously identified purposes of this analysis the following areas were factored into this analysis:

- The location where the homicides occurred
- The level of risk the offender assumed in order to kill the victims on that day and at that time and location
- The specific targeting of these victims at a time and place when the offender felt confident he could interact with them at little risk to himself
- The level of familiarity, knowledge, and comfort exhibited by the offender at the crime scene
- The offender's ability to access the scene and the victims
- The time frame of the victims' deaths
- The level of risk to which the victims were exposed
- The degree of physical security at the Coleman residence. The Coleman family residence was surrounded by video cameras
- The degree of control exercised over the victims
- The degree of organization and planning used in committing these homicides

- Whether the nature of the attack was mission-oriented or opportunistic
- The nature of the homicides
- The presence or absence of displayed anger
- The victimology and specific targeting of the victims
- The nature, location, and severity of each of the victims injuries
- The choice of weapon, its origin and final disposition
- The location and nature of the spray-paint writing.
- Post-offense activity-the offender remained inside the residence to engage in postmortem activity (i.e. the spray painting of interior walls.

This analysis is based upon information available at the time this report was prepared and assumes that the information provided to me was obtained through a comprehensive, thorough, and well-planned investigation. Should additional information or case materials become available at a later date, these materials would be reviewed in order to determine whether they are germane to the issues discussed herein. Subsequent to such a review, certain aspects of this analysis may be subject to modification or change.

Because statistical data identifies only 7% of homicide offenders as female, the pronoun "he" to describe the offender, is used colloquially (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2007).

COLEMAN TRIPLE HOMICIDE CRIME ASSESSMENT

VICTIMOLOGY

Examination of the victims' background is a significant part of the analysis process. In order to assess a person's vulnerability for becoming the victim of a violent crime, it is important to conduct a review of their lifestyle, reputation, behavior, and personal history. Such an examination provides the information necessary to assess the victim's risk level. Specifically, what was it about **Sheri** personally or the situation that existed on May 4-5, 2009 that resulted in her becoming the victim of homicide. The victim's risk level is assessed in concert with the level of risk assumed by the

offender as he gains access to the victims, commits the homicides, and egresses from the scene.

Although there were a total of three homicide victims, two of these victims were children. Children generally do not have any significant life histories or experiences that would elevate their risk level beyond that of very low risk victims. This is especially true when the children are killed in conjunction with the murder of one or both of the parents (family annihilation) and the killings occur within the family residence. In this case the children were attacked as they slept. There was nothing to indicate they were aware of the impending attack. They were not killed because they were witnesses to the murder of their mother and could have identified the offender or represented a physical threat to the offender. Instead, **Garett** and **Gavin** were killed in their own bedrooms as they slept. **Sheri** was the primary target and subsequent to her murder, the offender could have departed the residence and left the children sleeping. Instead, the offender chose to elevate his risk by remaining in the residence and killing the two young boys. Under these circumstances, the children's risk is subsumed by the risk level of the murdered parent and the circumstances that caused her to become the victim of homicide. The murder of the young children most likely resulted from a proprietary interest on the part of the offender (a point that will be more addressed in more detail in the **Crime Analysis** section of this report).

Sheri was a 31-year-old white female, approximately 5 feet tall and 95 pounds (autopsy report page 1). **Sheri** was considered to be attractive. At the time of her death she had been living in a residential home with her husband Christopher Coleman and their two young sons **Garett** (11-years-old) and **Gavin** (9-years-old) located at 2854 Robert Drive, Columbia, Illinois. The residence is located in a middle class neighborhood with minimal open space between the houses. A review of the exterior house photographs and the surrounding neighborhood homes revealed a lack of foliage around the Coleman house or their neighbors. The lack of a location to conceal oneself would elevate the risk for anyone who would approach the house on foot. There were no fences between the adjacent properties as one yard was indistinguishable from the one next to it. The residence directly south of the Coleman residence is approximately 20 feet away. The residence directly to the north is only slightly further. The two residences directly north of the Coleman residence both have an unobstructed view of the backyard and ground floor window and door of the Coleman residence. The residence directly east of the Coleman backyard is elevated compared to the Coleman residence and also has an unobstructed view. Such visibility makes an offender working to enter the ground floor window extremely vulnerable to being observed by no less than 4 different residences.

The residence is a two-story home built on a slope such that the upper level is the ground level at the front of the house. Access to the house is gained through the garage, front door or two front

windows. This location was covered by a surveillance camera located on the S/W corner of the home. Because of the slope, the back of the residence was also at ground level. The only access on this side of the residence was a sliding glass door and a single window. All other windows and door were inaccessible. The back of the residence was also covered by a surveillance camera located on the north side of the house.

Sheri was described by family, friends, and coworkers as a private person rarely sharing any personal issues with them. She spent most of her time as a homemaker although she did work outside the home on a part-time basis. At the time of her death **Sheri** had been working part-time as a salesperson at a clothing store called The Buckle for approximately six months. Her coworkers described her as an upbeat and pleasant person with a good personality. A close friend, Riegerix described **Sheri** as a loving mother who was devoted to her children. She drove them to school each day even though they could have taken the school bus. There was nothing uncovered in the investigation that indicated any problems at work or conflicts with fellow employees.

Sheri had no known enemies and those who knew her were not aware of anyone with whom she was having ongoing problems other than the personal issues with her husband Christopher. In an interview with J. Wade, she indicated that **Sheri** suspected that her husband was having a sexual affair with her best friend Tara Lintz. She advised K. LaPlante that she had received weird messages on her MySpace account saying that she did not deserve her husband. Based on **Sheri's** conversation with LaPlante, those messages were received in April 2009. There was no further information provided regarding the nature of the messages. S. Akers confirmed that **Sheri** had talked to her about messages on her FaceBook account and she thought it was a woman who liked Coleman.

R. LaPlante was shown the face plate of a DVR recorder found on Interstate 255 at mile marker 4.0 and said it looked like the one he saw in the Coleman residence on 5/1/2009. She never reported to any family members or friends that she was being followed or physically harassed by anyone.

Sheri was not known to have any medical problems. She had knee surgery earlier in the year but at the time of her death this did not affect her mobility. She did not have a criminal record and was not known to associate with criminals. She was not known to abuse alcohol or drugs. There was nothing identified in the toxicology screen done at her autopsy that indicated she was under the influence of any substance at the time of her death. **Sheri** did have a membership to the same Gold's Gym as her husband but did not go regularly.

Sheri's husband Christopher Coleman was head of security for Joyce Meyer of Joyce Meyer Ministries in Fenton, Missouri. He spent

a large amount of time away from the family on business. There were no administrative business offices for the Joyce Meyer Ministries in Columbia. Coleman worked out of his home. This aspect becomes important in the context of the threatening communications he received in the six months prior to the homicides (a point that will be discussed in the **Threatening Communications** section of this report). Coleman reported that he and **Sheri** had been having marital problems in late 2008 and had even discussed divorce but they attended counseling through Joyce Meyer. He said the main problem between them was communication.

The highly visible level of security at the **Coleman** residence and the absence of any items affording concealment made this residence an extremely unlikely target for a financial gain crime (e.g. burglary or robbery). In addition, **Sheri** was a stay-at-home Mom with a part time job and had working hours that varied. There were also two children at home in the afternoon. For its location and unpredictable activity it was not a good house for a financial gain crime. At the time of her death, **Sheri** had no known enemies and those who knew her were not aware of anyone with whom she was having ongoing problems.

In order to assess whether homicide was a crime problem for the area in which the victims were killed, I requested crime statistics. There were no crime statistics available for the regional area in which the homicides occurred but there were crime statistics for the city of Columbia, Illinois, Monroe County as reported to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports. For 2007 and 2008 there were no homicides in Columbia. For 2009, the murders of **Sheri**, **Garett**, and **Gavin** were the only homicides in Columbia. Any type of violent crime is a rare event, not only in the city of Columbia, but Monroe County as well. The level of risk for becoming the victim of a homicide in Columbia, Illinois is exceptionally low because homicide is a rare event.

Sheri, **Garett**, and **Gavin** would be considered low risk victims based on the victimology of **Sheri** and the location of the homicides. At the time they were killed, they were inside their locked and secured residence, which was a low risk environment. Because of their low risk status, the potential offender population is greatly reduced. It is unlikely, based on the location and time of the homicides, that they were the victims of opportunity, randomly selected by an offender operating within the geographical area of his choice. Instead, these victims were specifically targeted by the offender because of who they were and what they represented to the offender.

Offender Risk Level

Committing these murders on a weekday morning when the boys were scheduled to attend school meant that **Sheri** would be up early in order to get the boys ready. According to Coleman it was her routine to be up early, usually up around 5:30 AM. This was confirmed by

Riegerix who said that because of her military background she usually got up in the morning between 5:00 and 5:30 AM. This is important because it ultimately reflects not only on the threats that were received by Coleman but the actual time of the attack.

Ingress to and egress from the crime scene

The offender would have driven to the vicinity of the Coleman residence where he would have had to park his vehicle. There was no way for the offender to control who would have seen the vehicle or him as he traveled to the residence. Once at the residence, the lack of a location to conceal himself would have significantly elevated his risk level by leaving him visible to neighbors. There was also no way for the offender, once he had made entry to the residence, to know how soon Coleman would be returning.

Coleman had installed two cameras to cover the front and back of his house. These were the only two sides of the house from which an offender could force entry. The cameras are plainly visible to anyone standing in front of the house or in the rear yard. The wiring that leads from the cameras to the house was easily accessible and plainly visible. The offender, if he had watched this residence as he claimed, would know about the cameras and the fact that the wiring was easy to access and disable with a pair of wire cutters. Rather than cut the wires to disable the cameras, the DVR is removed from the scene. Why would an offender choose to engage in behavior that has a greater risk, the removal of the DVR, rather than simply cutting the wires to the camera?

After the homicides, the offender would have had to egress from the residence with both a spray paint can and the digital video recorder that was missing from the office area. Walking to a vehicle with these items would elevate the offender's risk level and expose both he and his vehicle to being identified. A stranger would be recognized as not belonging to the neighborhood. Because someone walking in the neighborhood carrying electronic gear early in the morning would draw attention, there was no way for the offender to know whether someone has contacted law enforcement to report the suspicious circumstances. The whole process of ingress and egress to the Coleman residence presents a very high risk for the offender. There was no need to engage in such high risk when the ability to minimize that risk existed prior to the homicides.

Investigation determined that Coleman had only gone to the Gold's gym at this early time of the morning on three prior occasions since joining Gold's gym on 6/17/2007, nearly a two year period. If that is accurate then why would the offender be waiting outside for an opportunity to enter the house when Coleman's past behavior would indicate that he would not leave the house until 1) it was light outside and 2) Sheri and the boys would have already gotten up for the morning. The appearance of such a opportunistic time frame is problematic.

During a nighttime walkthrough of the residence on 2/25/2010, it was not possible to see where you were going without an additional light source (flashlight). Using a light to illuminate your path as you moved from the basement to each bedroom was very risky. The light could have been seen by Sheri in her bedroom and would have allowed her time to arm herself with a nearby loaded handgun. The offender would have needed the light to not only identify where in the room Sheri was located but to put himself in a position to effect the strangulation. The same scenario would have to have occurred with the boys but due to their size and age the risk would have been minimal to the offender.

The offender would have needed to turn on the lights in the kitchen, living room, and stairwell in order to see what he was doing when spray painting. Spray painting in both the living room and stairway would have exposed him to being seen through the exposed glass at the front door by anyone walking or driving by the residence. This activity would have also elevated his risk for being identified.

The Coleman residence is located in a residential neighborhood and the residence is located midblock. It does not stand out from the surrounding residences.

The victims were attacked and murdered in the privacy of their home, despite the higher risk associated with accessing them there. The offender had multiple opportunities to access them at a time and location that would have greatly minimized his risk. This indicates the offender's need to commit the homicides at the house outweighed the elevated risk to his safety.

The offender was committed to his plan to annihilate **Sheri, Garrett, and Gavin**. His level of commitment indicates a very mission-oriented offender. These victims were targeted and the offender engaged in this behavior because he knew he could access them there on that day and at that time.

The offender acted alone. There is nothing identified in the behavior at the scene to indicate that more than one offender was involved. The observation that all the victims were killed as they slept indicates there was no escalation of violence (a point which will be addressed in more detail in the **MEDICAL EXAMINER'S REPORT** section of this report).

MEDICAL EXAMINER'S REPORTS

The medical examination of the victims is complete and specific details are retrievable from those reports. The purpose of this section is to discuss the significant findings of the Medical Examiner and to address the significance of both the victims' injuries and other activity by the offender. Analysis specific to

the three victims in this case follows. The victims are listed in order by age.

Sheri Coleman

The cause of death is listed as, "Ligature strangulation". The Medical Examiner noted, "This ligature mark was noted on the front and sides of the neck with a break in the furrow in the posterior neck" (photo-10057.jpg). This indicates that the offender strangled her from a position behind her. This would be the most commonly observed position in ligature strangulations. The use of a ligature indicates a level of planning beyond the use of one's hands in the case of manual strangulation¹. The ligature was not located indicating that the offender removed the ligature from the scene.

A review of the crime scene and autopsy photographs revealed that the victim was found nude lying on her bed face down. According to Coleman, **Sheri** slept nude most of the time and had been sleeping nude that night. She was positioned such that she is lying on top of both the comforter and multi-colored blanket. She is also lying perpendicular to the location of the pillows at the head of the bed. Her location on top of the covers and lying crosswise on the bed (10051.jpg) is inconsistent with the position that Coleman reported last seeing **Sheri** in when he left that morning. He said that when he got up **Sheri** was lying next to him in bed asleep. If she had been attacked while she slept she would have struggled. Even in struggling she would have remained both under the covers and in relatively the same position as she slept because the offender would have been on top straddling her so he could control her movement and effect the strangulation. With the offender strangling her from behind and sitting astride her, **Sheri**, at 95 pounds, would have had little to no leverage to move.

Her position is inconsistent with having been killed while she slept, but is consistent with having been placed there after death. **Sheri** had long dark hair and when she was found her hair was covering her face preventing it from being seen. While this may have occurred as a result of the struggle during the homicide, intentionally covering her face with her hair is consistent with the fact that both **Garett** and **Gavin** are also in positions where their faces are not visible from the doorways to their rooms. If **Sheri** had been the only victim whose face was not visible, explaining this as an artifact

¹ Manual strangulation is most often observed in homicides where an escalation of violence has occurred. The offender uses his hands because the impulsive nature of the crime precludes having prepared himself by securing a weapon and his hands are the only weapons available at the time he assaults.

of the homicide may have been plausible. However, observing this crime scene attribute in all three victims is more consistent with conscious behavior by the offender to depersonalize the victims (a point that will be addressed in the **Crime Analysis** section of this report). There is nothing noted in the autopsy protocol that addresses what appears to be a blunt force injury to her left eye (2838.jpg and 2839.jpg). Such an injury would likely result from being punched. The offender could have initially stunned Sheri with a punch to the face. If Sheri had been asleep it is unlikely the offender would need to inflict such an injury as control would not have been a problem. There was nothing observed either forensically or behaviorally to indicate that she was sexually assaulted.

A review of the coroner's photographs taken at the scene reveals that there was prominent fixed lividity and an advanced state of rigor mortis. There were no injuries that would be characterized as defensive in nature.

Garett Coleman

Garett was 4 feet 5 inches tall and weighed 70-80 pounds. He was located lying on his left side facing away from the doorway to his bedroom. He was mostly covered with a comforter. The cause of death is noted as, "Ligature strangulation". The ligature marks are consistent in dimensions to those found on **Sheri** and **Gavin**. The absence of other significant injuries is consistent with the attack having begun while he was sleeping. As noted earlier **Garett's** body was left such that he is facing away from the doorway to his room. His position and the position of the comforter on him preclude seeing his face when standing in the doorway.

There is a minimal amount of red spray paint covering both the comforter and exposed skin. It is clear that the spray paint was applied post mortem. The red spray paint is consistent with red spray paint that was identified in other locations in the house. It should be noted that although the offender attempted to write something as he had done on **Gavin's** bed, he ran out of spray paint, and no lettering could be discerned.

There was nothing observed either forensically or behaviorally to indicate that he was sexually assaulted. A review of the coroner's photographs taken at the scene reveals that there was prominent fixed lividity and an advanced state of rigor mortis. There were no injuries that would be characterized as defensive in nature.

Gavin Coleman

Gavin was 4 feet tall and weighed 55-60 pounds. He was located lying face down with his face turned towards the west facing away from the doorway to his bedroom. He was mostly covered with a comforter. The cause of death was, "ligature strangulation". The ligature marks are consistent in dimensions to those found on **Sheri**

and **Garett**. The Medical Examiner noted a slight break in the ligature furrow in the vertebral area on the back of the neck indicating strangulation from behind **Gavin**. The absence of other significant injuries is consistent with the attack having begun while he was sleeping. **Gavin's** body was left such that he is facing away from the doorway to his room. His position precludes seeing his face when standing in the doorway.

As with **Garett**, the offender used red spray paint to write the words "FUCK YOU" on the east side of the bed.

A small amount of long dark hair, subsequently identified as belonging to **Sheri**, was located in the area of **Gavin's** right posterior axilla. When first observed it appears oddly located, but its location is consistent with having been deposited during the strangulation. This is an artifact, left unintentionally by the offender as he moved from the first victim, **Sheri** to **Gavin**. The hair was temporarily entangled in the ligature when **Sheri** was strangled and became dislodged during her struggle and eventually deposited in the neck area of **Gavin**. It would be consistent if the offender left the light off as he moved from room to room and simply was not aware that some of **Sheri's** hair was attached to the ligature. It's presence on **Gavin** is an artifact of the crime without special significance.

As with **Garett** there was nothing observed either forensically or behaviorally to indicate that he was sexually assaulted. A review of the coroner's photographs taken at the scene reveals prominent fixed lividity and an advanced state of rigor mortis. There were no injuries that would be characterized as defensive in nature.

Unlike **Garett** or **Sheri**, **Gavin** sustained a fracture to the larynx. Fractures in ligature strangulation are less common because the applied force is evenly distributed over the entire neck. The observation of fracture is even more unique because the laryngeal structures of children are much more pliable and flexible than those of adults and tend to flex rather than break or fracture. Additionally, much less force is required to strangle a child than an adult. The injury to **Gavin's** neck structures indicates that the offender exerted considerably more force than was necessary to kill him.

The process of strangling someone to death is not quick and certainly not as easy as it is portrayed in the film media. Although occlusion of the carotid arteries for 10-15 seconds can result in the victim lapsing into unconsciousness, death does not immediately follow. In order to cause death, the pressure of the ligature must be maintained for at least two minutes without release and often longer. The time it took to murder these three victims could have taken as long as 7-10 minutes as the offender moved from room to room in order to interact with each victim.

The focus by the offender on causing the deaths of these three victims by strangulation indicates how committed he was to ensuring that they would not survive the attack. There was nothing about the cause or mechanism of death that would indicate that more than one offender was involved.

Report of Dr. Michael Baden

Columbia Police submitted a number of documents to Dr. Michael Baden, a board certified forensic pathologist for review in order to establish an opinion as to time of death. On 10-19-09 Dr. Baden issued a two page report. Based on his expert opinion regarding the body temperature of **Garett**, the fixed livor mortis (lividity), and rigor mortis he said that the homicides of the three victims occurred before 3:00 AM.

In my experience, the advanced stage of lividity and rigor mortis as identified in the verbal report by first responding officers Barlow and Donjon and Emergency Medical Services personal who arrived approximately 8 minutes later is inconsistent with the short time frame that elapsed between Coleman leaving the residence (5:43 AM) and the first discovery of the bodies (approximately 6:52 AM) and consistent with Dr Baden's estimate.

CRIME ANALYSIS

One of the fundamental tenants of crime scene analysis is the unbiased evaluation of forensic and behavioral attributes in order to provide a reasonable explanation for why and how, as in this case, **Sheri, Garett, and Gavin** became the victims of homicide. When conducting an analysis of the behavior that is manifested at violent crime scenes, it is important to avoid becoming too focused on any one aspect of the crime scene and ascribing singular importance to it. There was no effort made to reconstruct the exact sequence of events. Such an attempt is impractical due to the innumerable possible interactions which could occur between the victims and offender. It is the totality of the circumstances rather than a single crime scene variable that is important in assessing not only what happened but why and how it happened.

The most accurate way of assessing the overall victim-offender interaction is to consider the occurrence of various behavioral attributes in conjunction with one another. Certain observations about the crime scene, how **Sheri, Garett, and Gavin** were killed, and their possible significance as they relate to the offender will be described. To explain the murder of the Coleman family members, it is not only important to analyze the crime with respect to what is seen behaviorally, but to integrate that analysis with what is

factually known through investigation, witness interviews, and forensic evaluation of the evidence.

Ultimately, assessing the offender's motive for murdering **Sheri** and her sons and evaluating his actions before, during, and after the homicide both chronologically and temporally is paramount to establishing a framework for understanding the dynamics of this crime.

After a careful and detailed review of the crime scene and known facts, the following information was identified as important in reconstructing the scenario of events that lead to the murders of **Sheri, Garrett, and Gavin.**

Coleman was interviewed as a witness on 05-05-09 at 11:10 AM regarding the events of the preceding night as well as what transpired on that morning. Coleman said that on 05-04-09 he picked up his kids from school. **Sheri** got off work around 4:00 PM and they ate dinner around 5:00 PM. The four of them then went to the Snow cone shop after dinner and then returned home. Coleman said he went to the Pound 4 Pound gym to work out and returned just before 9 PM. The ID card system login revealed that Coleman had swiped his card on 05-04-09 at 8:25 PM. (Z. Engel).

Coleman said that **Sheri** put the boys to bed and went downstairs to watch TV. He took a shower and then joined **Sheri** where they watched a show "People do stupid things". He also reported flipping back and forth between watching a basketball game and "Batman Returns".

Coleman said that **Sheri** fell asleep on the couch and he woke her up to go to bed. He said that both he and **Sheri** sleep in the nude. At 10:00 PM he checked all the doors and windows in the house before going to sleep. He said he set his phone alarm for 5:30 AM so he could get up to work out at his gym.

Coleman said he got up at 5:30 AM and put on his gym clothes. He left the house at 5:43 AM for the Gold's gym in South County. A camera set up to capture the front of the Coleman residence revealed that he left the residence at 5:43 AM. When he left he said that **Sheri** was alive and sleeping in the bed next to him. Although he did not check on his boys he assumed that they were fine as well. According to Coleman **Sheri** normally gets up at 5:45 AM. **Sheri's** friend Riegerix said that **Sheri** normally got up between 5:00 and 5:30 AM. She was used to this because of her time in the military. The alarm on the clock in the bedroom was set to 7:00 AM. It is not known whether **Sheri** used the alarm on her cell phone to get up or woke up on her own as her friend Riegerix claimed. Coleman said that as he left his house he called **Sheri** to make sure she was up and left a voice message. A review of **Sheri's** phone revealed a call to her phone from Coleman at 5:43 AM although no messages could be retrieved. If Coleman was going to call her to wake her up why did he not wake her

up before he left since the call was at exactly the same time as he left?

Coleman said that he sent additional text messages to **Sheri's** phone while he was at Gold's Gym. He showed his phone to Sergeant Barlow who confirmed that the following text messages were sent.

- ❑ 6:23 AM - "**Hey babe, you awake?**"
This is an odd message to send in light of the fact that **Sheri** should have been up at 5:45 AM and that Coleman had already called without getting a response. 40 minutes have elapsed since his first call. Why text? If in fact **Sheri** were still sleeping this message makes no sense because she would not have been awake. If you were concerned because you had not yet gotten a response, calling **Sheri** would have been more appropriate especially in light of the fact that you had received threats to kill your family. This message does not connote concern.
- ❑ 6:23 AM - "**I know you was tired last night.**"
This message also makes no sense. It is simply a statement. This statement may have been appropriate if it were part of a conversation but standing alone without further inquiry it is awkward. It seems to be stated as a justification for not being able to reach her. A derivative of this statement would be an appropriate response coming from **Sheri** explaining why she overslept.
- ❑ 6:23 AM - "**I have 5 minutes left on cardio, then I'll be home.**"
This is another problematic text. Coleman has now sent three texts in the span of 1 minute. If he is texting then it is unlikely that he is doing a cardio workout. If the texts are sent because he is concerned that he has not been able to reach her then the language used does not suggest concern. If he was concerned he would have already have left and at the very least would be calling the phone to get her to answer.
- ❑ 6:27 AM - "**Hello! You up?**"
It is unclear what the point of the texting is. This text is essentially the same as the first 6:23 AM text. It is not a text that expresses concern. It is now 44 minutes since his first call. If he were concerned that **Sheri** was not up then he would have been calling not texting. This message does not connote concern.
- ❑ 6:27 AM - "**Time to get the kids up**"
This is another problematic text. This is a message you would send during a conversation to remind the person to whom you were talking to take action. However as a

standalone text it is awkward and makes no sense. In addition since **Sheri** was the one to get the kids ready for school, it is unlikely that you would actually have to tell her to get the kids up.

- ❑ 6:35 AM - It is now 52 minutes from his first call and this is the first call to her phone since the first one. Coleman said that he did not leave a message. If one were concerned then it would be reasonable and appropriate to leave a message indicating your concern about the inability to reach her and that she should call immediately upon listening to the message.
- ❑ 6:43 AM - It is now 59 minutes after first call. Does not leave message. Why does he not leave a message if he is concerned?
- ❑ 6:48 AM - One hour and 4 minutes after the first call Coleman calls neighbor Sergeant Barlow because he cannot reach **Sheri** and thinks something might be wrong. He asks Barlow to do a welfare check. He advises that he is on his way home from the gym and 5 minutes away.
- ❑ 6:52 AM - It is now 1 hour and 8 minutes after the first call. Does not leave message.

When reviewing the group of texts and phone calls as a whole, there are several problems. From 5:43 AM when he made the first call to 6:52 AM when he made the last call one hour and nine minutes have elapsed. In this time frame he has made 10 calls or texts. From 6:23 AM until 6:52 AM he made nine of those calls in a span of 29 minutes. His concern should have been raised when he could not reach **Sheri** at 5:43 AM. When he still cannot reach her 44 minutes later and with the prior threats, it is problematic that there was no behavior or actions that reflected that concern. The messages to her do not reflect concern despite the excessively large number of calls and texts. It is only when Coleman is less than 5 minutes away from his residence that he calls his neighbor (Sgt. Barlow) to check the status of his family. Despite the large number of calls and texts, there is an apparent lack of concern based on the content and failure to follow through with the concern. The number of contacts with **Sheri's** phone is excessive.

Coleman arrived at the residence and parked his vehicle in the driveway. Both Sgt. Barlow and Officer Donjon were inside the residence searching. Sgt. Barlow, aware of Coleman's arrival, went to the garage door in the house and spoke to Coleman telling him not to enter the house as they had not finished their search. Coleman remained outside. Sgt. Barlow reported that he found all windows

and doors on the main level of the residence unlocked but closed. This observation conflicts with what Coleman reported in his interview, that he had locked all doors and windows in the residence before going to bed the night before. That discrepancy was not resolved.

In response to the call from Coleman, Barlow immediately contacted Columbia Police dispatch and asked for a patrol officer to assist in investigating the Coleman residence. Barlow arrived at the residence approximately 5 minutes after receiving Coleman's call. He was met at the residence by Officer Donjon. Donjon discovered an open window at the rear of the house. The screen to that window was lying against a lawn chair adjacent to the window. Barlow was standing on the grass which he described as wet. Prior to entering he searched the floor just inside the window looking for potential evidence of entry. He noted that there was no debris on the floor to include wet grass or any type of vegetative matter. The floor showed no evidence of having been wet or shoe prints. This was problematic for Barlow after climbing through the window as he observed that they tracked in wet lawn debris on the bottom of their shoes.

Once inside the residence, they began a search of the basement level eventually progressing to the first floor. On the first floor they located red spray paint on several of the downstairs walls.

Writing in red spray paint

North wall of living room

On the north wall of the living room the offender wrote, "*Fuck you Bitch Punished*". The letters F, B, and P were capitalized. This writing indicates that the offender is angry with **Sheri** (the only female in the residence). The offender refers to her as a "*Bitch*", a pejorative term for a female, and writes "*Fuck you*", a very profane and derogatory statement. This statement is problematic since there is no indication that the offender knew anyone in the family. Since the implication is that **Sheri** was killed as she slept, the angry tone cannot arise from a verbal confrontation that escalated into murder. In addition the offender wrote "*Punished.*" Why is the offender punishing **Sheri**? Again, there is no information provided in the threats received on the website prayer line or the two received in Coleman's mailbox that indicates the offender knew anyone in the family. There was also no vitriolic verbiage directed to **Sheri** or her sons.

West and South kitchen walls

On the west wall of the dining area of the kitchen the offender wrote, "*Fuck You I am always Watching.*" On the south wall of the dining area and directly adjacent to the west wall the offender wrote,

"I saw you Leave." This writing is separate and distinct in thought from the west wall verbiage. Neither of these writings makes sense in the context of the murders. What is the offender trying to say by indicating that he is always watching? Why would he watch now that he has acted out? The words, I saw you leave are redundant. It would be obvious that he saw him leave since he committed the murders so that is not the point of writing that message. The writing is meant to convey the message that there was an offender and he was waiting until Coleman left to commit these homicides. The writings are also meant to connect the offender to the prior threats in case this might be lost on the police. Neither of these written statements means anything in the context of the homicides having already occurred. They are excessive, unnecessary, and serve to reinforce the observation that Coleman was not at home when his family was killed.

North wall of stairs to bedroom level

On the north wall of the stairs leading up to the bedroom level the offender wrote, "U have PAID." What is the point of this writing? It is clear that in murdering Coleman's family that he [Coleman] had paid. However, this writing suggests finality, that the debt has been paid. Who is the author referring to? If the author is referring to **Sheri**, then she clearly has paid with the murder of her sons and the writing makes more sense. This writing can then be linked to the writing on North wall of the living room because this is the only writing that indicates anger and that anger is directed at **Sheri**. As the author has stated she has in fact been "punished." If reference is made back to the written threats received by Coleman it is clear that in fact the offender has accomplished nothing since Joyce Meyer is still preaching and Coleman is still working for her. The threats to kill the family were meant to cause an action. In the six months between the first threat received in November and the homicides there was no overt action to indicate even a modicum of compliance with the threat writer's request.

Gavin's Bed

On the bed sheets of **Gavin's** bed and after the murder of **Gavin**, the offender wrote "Fuck you" in red spray paint. This behavior is excessive. **Gavin** had nothing to do with Joyce Meyer ministries or the fact that his father worked there. The writing serves no purpose. The writing is gratuitous and serves only to link to the previous threats received by Coleman. Such writings have not been seen in the BAU.

Garett's Bed

The offender tried to write something on **Garett's** bed with red spray paint but ran out before he could form any words.

Taken as a constellation of behavior the spray painting serves no purpose. It does not inform, or resolve anything. For the

author's purported focus on Joyce Meyer and her preaching there is the unusual subtext of anger directed at **Sheri** which seems out-of-place considering there was nothing provided in any communications that the offender knew **Sheri** or the children. Such writings are rarely seen in homicide cases. No spray can of paint was located at the scene so the offender removed it when he left. He removed it because he perceived that law enforcement could identify where it was purchased and may link it to him.

This analysis must also consider the threats that were received by Joyce Meyer Ministries through the prayer line on 11-14-2008 as well as the two that were reported by Coleman to have been left in his mailbox at the residence. The writings in spray paint would be considered an extension of the earlier reported threats and must be evaluated in light of what was written earlier.

Threatening Communications

November 14, 2008 - First communication

The first threat that Coleman became aware of was received anonymously on the online prayer line for Joyce Meyer Ministries. There are inconsistencies noted within the threat. The first is that in the location where someone could provide their identifying information, the author has written "Fuck Chris Coleman" in the name place holder, "Fuck him" in the City place holder, and "destroychris@gmail.com" in the email place holder. This would strongly indicate that the author has a problem with Chris Coleman. This invites the question, how does the author know who Chris Coleman is and how he is related to Joyce Meyer ministries? There was nothing in the investigation that indicated that any of the security personnel were identified on the website or by name in any public venue. The author addresses Coleman with the familiar and personal "Chris" rather the more formal Mr. Coleman as would be appropriate for someone who did not know Coleman. The author provides no information to verify that he knows anything about Coleman.

In reviewing the body of the threatening communication the overriding point of concern identified by the author focused on Joyce Meyer's preaching. The author writes the following, "**Tell Joyce to stop preaching bullshit...**"; "**If I can't get to Joyce...**"; "**I know Joyce's schedule...**"; "**If Joyce doesn't quit preaching the bullshit...**" Each of those references to Joyce indicates that the author is upset with Joyce's preaching. However, despite being upset with Joyce he does not threaten her. Instead, he threatens "Chris" with killing his family. The author writes, "**Tell Joyce to...or Chris's family will die.**" Here the author skips over Chris and moves directly to threatening to kill the family. Why does the author not threaten Chris first since he is directly related to Joyce? The author then backs down on his level of commitment to the threat. He writes, "If I can't get to Joyce then I will get to someone close to her..." It

is interesting to note that he does not say if I can't kill Joyce then I will kill someone...' This verbiage indicates a complete lack of commitment to harming Joyce or someone close to her. However, the author does not finish the sentence in the same context as he started, that is by saying, and if I can't get to him then I will get to his wife and kids, which would be consistent; he changes intensity and says instead, "**I will kill his wife and kids**". This statement is very revealing because it indicates that the focus for the author is killing the wife and kids.

The author continues by writing, "**I know Joyce's schedule so then I know Chris's schedule**". The author does not bother to explain what this means. What is clear is that in this line of the communication there is no threat to Joyce or Chris.

The next line is also problematic. The author writes, "**If Joyce doesn't quit preaching the bullshit then they will die.**" The author is not even committed enough to this statement to let Joyce own the "bullshit". He writes, "the bullshit" rather than her "bullshit". Even though the apparent focus is on Joyce and what she is preaching he cannot bring himself to threaten her with death. Instead in an incomprehensible segue he says "they [wife and kids] will die." Again, the author has refocused the energy for someone dying back to the wife and kids, the people who have absolutely nothing to do with Joyce's preaching.

The author now writes, "**During the Houston conference I will kill them all as they sleep.**" Rather than even suggest that he will take that opportunity to strike out against Joyce he fails to mention either of his original targets Joyce and Coleman, but transitions directly to killing the family as they sleep. As a threat against Joyce or Coleman this communication makes no sense. Considering the fact that the first information provided in the communication (in the previously mentioned placeholders) focused solely on degrading verbiage about Chris, it is completely out of character for that focus on Chris to disappear in the body of the threat.

The author then writes, "**If I don't hit there then i will kill them during the book tour or the trip to India.**" Again, there is no mention of killing Joyce or Chris only killing the family. The author is showing less commitment by vacillating on when he would kill the family. There is no reason for the author to tell the reader when he will strike. This would raise his risk level to act out.

Finally, the author concludes the threat with, "**I know where he lives and I know they are alone. Fuck them all and they will die soon!**" It is interesting to note that any mention of either Joyce or Chris has ceased. Despite how the threat was written to appear, the author has no interest or commitment to transgressions by Joyce or Chris. The author's sole focus is making sure the reader knows that he intends to kill the family. This is problematic because there is nothing provided by the author to connect him to the family

so why is the author so committed to the family's destruction? It does not appear to be supported by anything Joyce or Chris have done. Even though the author states that he knows where they live and that they are alone, there is no veracity to his claim as he provides nothing to identify that he has such information. When threat writers want to be taken seriously they provide information that verifies that they have accurate and valid information. No such information was provided.

November 14, 2008 - second communication

"Tell Chris his family is dead. They don't deserve to live with someone that protects the SOB Joyce"

The subject of this email is "*Chris's family will die*". There are commonalities noted in this threat as in the previous one. The subject of the attention in this email again focuses on killing Coleman's family even though the author wants us to believe he is upset with Joyce. There is a lack of commitment to Joyce. The author writes "**...the SOB Joyce**". The author is not even committed enough to write out son-of-a-bitch but abbreviates it instead.

In its totality it does not make much sense. The family is going to die because they live with Chris who happens to work for Joyce. I fail to see the logic in the threat. Threats can lack logic suggesting mental illness but there is nothing in these threats that indicates a mental health problem. The author bypasses both the supposed target of his rancor (Joyce) as well as the man who protects her (Chris) to threaten the wife and children with death. The author has used Joyce and her preaching and then Chris and his connection to Joyce as the foil to connect to what he really wants. The author has no interest in Joyce or Chris or what they do. The threats are a ruse meant to serve as a way to do what he really wants and that is to kill **Sheri, Garrett, and Gavin**.

Written communication received in mailbox - 01/02/2009

On 01/02/2009, Coleman reported received a threatening communication in his mailbox. This was the first time it was placed in the mailbox.

The communication was folded in the mailbox and not in an envelope indicating that it had been placed into the mailbox by hand. Such a delivery method is problematic for the following:

- The author knows where Coleman lives. How does he acquire such information?
- The risk is very high considering the emails in November. The author must now physically walk up to the mail box and place a letter inside.
- The author could be photographed or seen by neighbors making this delivery.

- This is very high risk. Why not mail it if the author lives nearby?

The communication instructs Coleman to deny his God publically or else. There is no mention of Joyce Meyer or her ministry. This is the first reference to a new request, denying his God publically. There is no apparent link between this request and the prior threats. The author is less committed in this threat saying, "or else!" What does or else mean? The author does not tell us what that means. It may be implied to mean the death of the family but he does not say it. The author tells Coleman that he knows he is going to India. Despite the fact that over a month and a half has elapsed since the first threats, nothing has changed in terms of Joyce Meyer's activities yet the author does not seem perturbed and does not address the lack of action for either Joyce or Chris.

Written communication received in mailbox - 04/27/2009

A second letter was hand delivered to the mailbox of Coleman. The same risk parameters exist for this letter as for the first except they would be elevated since this delivery method had already been used. It has been four months since the last communication was placed in the mailbox and 5.5 months since the first threatening email. This is a very long time for the author to wait while his threats go unaddressed.

This letter was reportedly received without an envelope and folded in the residential mailbox. The author again only briefly mentions Joyce Meyer or her ministry and that is only indirectly. The author says he has warned Coleman to "stop traveling". There has been no prior warning issued that warned him to stop traveling. This threat takes on a different tone. There are no direct threats to the family. In fact, the only threats are indirect. The author does not use active voice saying "I will..." Although the author used that voice when speaking about the family, he never used it when referring to Joyce or Coleman.

In this communication, the author reports that he is always watching Coleman and that he knows his schedule. The overall tone of this letter seems to be that Coleman better stop traveling. There are no references to the earlier threats by this author. The constant changing of demands minimizes the author's commitment to any one issue.

In addition, the author did not act on multiple opportunities that he was not only aware of but addressed in his communications. The conference in Houston and the trip to India would have provided a much lower risk to his safety and identity because the family would have been alone. Instead, the parameters under which the family was killed greatly elevated the risk of committing multiple murders. Those factors are as follows:

- Coleman was home rather than on the road

- ❑ Although Coleman left the residence the offender would not have known how long he would be gone or when he would return.
- ❑ Coleman's return while the offender was upstairs would have created enormous problems as it would potentially trap him with no means of escape.
- ❑ The time of the morning when Coleman left the residence should have had **Sheri** getting up. This would have created enormous problems for the offender to gain entry through a locked window and initiate an assault.

Subsequent to the murders, Joyce was still preaching and Coleman was still employed by Joyce Meyer Ministries so what was accomplished? What did the offender gain from murdering three people? The author did not reissue new threats validating his old threats with the fact that he did what he said he would do. This would have been the next logical progression because the original reasons for threatening still exist. There were no communications after the homicides.

R. LaPlante, in an interview dated 11/30/2009, stated that when he and his wife visited with the Coleman's on 5/1/2009, Coleman informed him that he had captured someone leaving a note in his residential mailbox approximately a week or two earlier. This time frame is problematic as Coleman had informed Detective Barlow that he did not receive a power supply for the DVR until 4/29/2009. If that is true, then the DVR was not operational one to two weeks earlier. In addition, the threatening communication was received on 4/27/2009, four days before the visit by the LaPlantes.

It is my opinion that the threatening communications were inconsistent as to the targets, threats made, time frame, and follow through. This inconsistency continues with the writing in spray paint. The communications beginning in November 2008 and culminating with the spray painting at the scene of the murders are identified as part of the *staging* behavior that is attendant to this crime scene (a point which will be addressed in the **Staging** section of this report).

This offender was mission oriented. The mission for this offender was the obliteration of the **Coleman** family, the adult female with whom he may have developed serious personal conflicts and with the two young children. It would be very unlikely that the mission oriented multiple murder of a single family would be at the hands

of a stranger². Such goal directed behavior usually indicates the existence of a level of familiarity or relationship between the offender and victims.

The offender's sole purpose was to kill **Sheri**, **Garett**, and **Gavin**. He prepared himself with a ligature which he removed from the scene. To kill someone who is sleeping or unaware of the threat to their safety suggests that a significant personal conflict already existed between them to the extent the offender felt that the only way to resolve the problem was through the victims' deaths. He had a plan to deal with this conflict and he executed that plan.

The execution of the children occurred while they slept. This analyst, as a member of the BAU, has experience with other cases in which child witnesses are killed because they can identify the offender. That argument cannot be made in this case as forensically and behaviorally both **Garett** and **Gavin** were asleep and unaware that their mother had been killed. The homicides of the children served no practical purpose. If the offender were a stranger and the author of the threatening communications, the murder of **Sheri** would have validated his ability to follow through on his threat. Killing the children would not have made the point anymore valid.

As noted earlier, the victims in this case are all positioned in a way that prevents a viewing of their facial features from their respective doorways. Because all three victims are found this way, it is most consistent with *depersonalization*. *Depersonalization* of a victim at a homicide is identified as activity by the offender that attempts to depersonalize or objectify the victim. Objectifying a victim is an attempt to take away their identity and personality. An offender may depersonalize the victim because he is uncomfortable with the enormity and implications of what he has done. *Depersonalization* may occur prior to or after death and is intended to obscure the identity of the victim (Ressler, Burgess, and Douglas, 1988; Holmes and Holmes, 1996) and make it easier to perpetrate the crime. This enables the offender to dehumanize the victim or view them more as an object. Objects are more disposable and thus easier to deal with than a person. The offender, because he intends to remain at the scene for a period of time may also cover his victims.

²Relationship classifications of stranger and acquaintance are particularly problematic. Stranger classifications are prevalent in widely-used national data sets like the UCR and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), but a gray area may exist between stranger and acquaintance classifications. Stronger findings in this particular analysis may have been found if not for a lingering difficulty defining relationships between offenders and their victims. Many offenders labeled as strangers may, in fact, be marginally acquainted with their victims. This acquaintance may have arisen out of a former service performed by the offender (gardening, lawn care, odd jobs, etc.), from common routine activities engaged in by the victim and offender (e.g. common bus stops, shopping areas, commuting patterns of the victim and offender), or other commonalities that brought them into visual contact, making them acquaintances by sight but more accurately classified as "apparent" strangers. (Safarik, Jarvis & Nussbaum, 2002)

He engages in this behavior to create an emotional distance from what he has done. In homicides where the offender and victim are complete strangers and no such "relationship" exists, it is much less likely to see this behavior and the offender is generally unconcerned about how he leaves the body.

The positioning of the faces of these victims was unnecessary and served no practical purpose. Nevertheless, this behavior does serve a purpose for the offender. This purpose is identified as proprietary interest. A proprietary interest is exclusive to the offender and serves a personal need for him. It is consistent with other multiple murders reviewed by me that the children were murdered because the murder of **Sheri** alone would not have resolved all of the problems for this offender.

Crime scene search

If the motive for these homicides was financial gain, it is inconsistent with the level of violence, the lack of ransacking and theft. It is important to remember that if financial gain was the only motive, the offender did not need to kill **Sheri**, **Garett**, and **Gavin** in order to successfully rob them. In fact, there was nothing seen behaviorally to indicate a search of the residence or theft of property had occurred.

Classifying and categorizing criminal activity by law enforcement is derived by assessing the behaviors engaged in by the offender (e.g., theft of money, forensic identification of sexual assault, and adjustment or removal of clothing). Taking a broader view of criminal activity, may help clarify this point. When offenders engage in criminal activity, it is expected that any behavior that furthers the underlying goal of the crime is more likely to occur. The focus of the behavior would be directed by the primary criminal intent. For example, an offender who intends to commit a burglary (financial gain crime) at a residence would engage in behaviors that are characteristic of burglars. These would include breaking into the residence during hours when no one would be expected home and avoiding contact with the residents to prevent being identified. Depending on the level of criminal sophistication, a search for and subsequent theft of items of value, employing the use of tools that would facilitate entry into a locked residence, and using items that would protect the offender's identity would be typical observations for this type of crime. The key is that the bulk of the behavior would be directed toward activity that supports the burglary.

All of the behavior at this crime scene was directed towards killing **Sheri** and her children. Despite the presence of many valuables, no searching occurred and no property had been removed from the residence except for the digital video recorder that was recording the camera feeds from the front and rear of the house. This

items was not taken because of its intrinsic value but because it contained video evidence that could identify the offender.

The Weapon

A significant behavioral consideration is the location, nature, and severity of the injuries and their intended lethality.

The offender was methodical about the killings. He armed himself with a ligature with which to strangle the victims. He could not utilize a weapon that once used (firearm) would alert the others or the neighbors. The method the offender chose requires strength and persistence. The length of time to strangle to death requires both a time and effort commitment by the offender. He felt he could not take any chance the victims could escape or survive. Such goal directed behavior usually indicates the existence of a level of familiarity or relationship between the offender and victims.

Offenders make conscious decisions about the type of weapon they want to use when committing a violent assault. This is especially true when the crime is premeditated. Because the offender used a weapon that he believed could be linked to him, there was a need to remove it from the scene. Offenders who use weapons of opportunity they obtain from the scene often leave the weapon. They leave the weapon because it does not belong to them and they have no personal interest or attachment to it. Additionally, because they have no connection to the weapon there is no reason to believe law enforcement will link the weapon to them. Taking the weapon becomes a liability if it is discovered in their possession. In this case, the offender removed the weapon from the scene in order to prevent it from being linked to him.

Motive

What was the offender's motive for killing **Sheri, Garrett, and Gavin**? Motives commonly seen in violent homicides were considered in this case. Crimes with a sexual component were regularly seen and studied at the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit. There was nothing seen in this crime either forensically or behaviorally to indicate that sexual assault was a motive here.

Immediate financial gain is another common and readily identifiable motive. Offenders often kill in the course of financially motivated crimes (e.g. carjacking, home invasion robbery, and armed robbery). There was nothing observed at the scene that would indicate robbery was a motive. In fact, the absence of any search or removal of items of value indicates the opposite is the case. The removal of the video recorder has previously been addressed.

Criminal Enterprise and thrill homicide were considered but readily dismissed because there was nothing identified behaviorally or in the totality of the events that was consistent with either of those motives.

Another commonly identified motive in homicide is personal cause. In personal cause homicide, the act results from interpersonal aggression and results in death to persons who may not know each other. Homicide is the result of an underlying emotional conflict (Douglas, Burgess, Burgess, & Ressler, 2006). For the offender, the problem between them can only be resolved by the death of the victim. Some common underlying causes that lie at the root of the interpersonal conflict include jealousy, revenge, and the need to punish.

The totality of behavior and crime dynamics observed in this homicide supports a personal cause motive that resulted from interpersonal aggression. This conflict existed between the offender and **Sheri** prior to the interaction that night. The offender's actions indicate that this conflict could only be resolved by her death.

BEHAVIORAL MANIFESTATIONS AT A CRIME SCENE

The commission of a violent crime involves the attributes of what are recognized as an individual's "normal" behavior. Such "normal" behavior is unique to that individual. The ability to recognize and differentiate between different behavioral manifestations provides, among other information, the ability to assess the significance of the presence or absence of certain behaviors in relationship to one another. There are three primary manifestations of offender behavior at a crime scene that provide significant information: Modus Operandi (MO), Ritual, and Staging.

Modus Operandi (MO)

MO behaviors are actions perceived by the offender as necessary for the successful commission of a crime. There are three purposes for this type of behavior: first, it ensures the success of the crime; second, it protects the offender's identity; and third, it facilitates the offender's escape. *MO* is dynamic and can change over time for a variety of reasons. An offender develops a successful *MO* through trial and error and uses that *MO* over time because it works for him. An offender's *MO* changes based on, among other things, education, age, the development of criminal sophistication, and the experience of having had to deal with contingencies of the crime that were unanticipated or beyond his control. The *MO* may also change as the offender gains more experience and confidence. The offender's *MO* behaviors are more likely to be intentional and purposeful because they are goal driven.

Ritual

Ritual behaviors are unnecessary for the successful commission of a crime. These behaviors are need-driven and engaged in by the offender for a number of reasons. Generally though, in violent homicides, especially those with a sexual component, these behaviors result from psychological and emotional needs. They are both unique and repetitive in serial crimes. These behaviors are manifested through physical actions as well as verbal scripting. In serial offenses the core of the offender's *ritual* behavior does not change over time. It may however, evolve as the original *ritual* becomes more fully developed. Ritual behavior generally elevates the offender's risk of being identified and apprehended. When strangers commit homicides, one of the most important concerns is not being identified. This is accomplished by putting time and distance between themselves and the victim(s) and the crime scene(s). In most homicides involving strangers, the offender quickly leaves the area. When offenders choose to remain at the scene and engage with the victim(s) or scene, it usually means that the offender is seeking to satisfy an emotional need(s). The offender's *ritual* behavior is more likely to be subconscious.

Staging

Staging behavior is defined as the intentional and purposeful manipulation of the behavioral and/or forensic evidence found at the original crime scene. *Staging* at a crime scene is an effort by the offender to create a "new" or different scene and a "new" motive for the purpose of misdirecting the investigation away from himself. The offender attempts to overwhelm what would otherwise be a law enforcement investigator's logical inference regarding what occurred. The offender *stages* a crime scene because he perceives that without an attempt to redirect the investigation, law enforcement would quickly focus on him as a logical suspect due to a pre-existing relationship with the victim, the location, or both.

To determine if *staging* has occurred, the "totality of the circumstances" of the crime scene must be considered. In considering the "totality of the circumstances", every observable behavior is analyzed and reconciled with the logic of the available forensic evidence, crime scene reconstruction, and victimology. In addition, logical crime scene attributes, both forensic and behavioral, that are noticeably absent from the scene must also be considered. The key attribute to consider when identifying if staging has occurred is whether the offender has carried out each staged action to its logical conclusion. The failure to reproduce a 'seamless scenario' occurs because the actions by the offender are not reproduced in their exact temporal and sequential order and they are not carried out to their logical conclusions. In short, the story being told in the crime scene does not make sense.

When *staging* a crime scene the offender ultimately fails to carry out his actions to a logical conclusion, fails to understand the sequential and temporal aspects to the crime flow, and commonly engages in excessive and unnecessary behavior in an attempt to convince law enforcement that the actions being staged are legitimate. The following observations are noted:

- According to Coleman he checked all doors and windows and confirmed they were locked. There were no identifiable tool marks on the screen of the window or the window itself. How did a stranger gain entry to the residence without causing any damage?
- Before police entered the window to search the house, they carefully observed the floor under the window using their flashlights. Despite the fact that the grass was wet outside the window, there was no moisture or visible dried footprints. There was no debris (dirt, grass clippings, or other vegetative matter) on the floor. The officers noted that when they stepped onto the floor, their boots left wet stains and lawn debris that was clearly visible. The absence of wetness or debris left by the offender if this was the point of entry is problematic. If access to the residence was gained at some point other than the window, then the offender had access via a key and the window was opened in the basement to stage the scene in order to make it appear as if that was the point of entry for the offender. Such staging would make it look like the offender was a stranger rather than someone the victims knew.
- Video camera evidence revealed that Coleman left the residence at 5:43 AM. If a stranger began his attempt to gain entry to the residence at that time, several minutes would have to elapse in order to gain entry without damaging the window (although it is not known if the window, when locked, can be physically opened without being damaged). The offender would require several more minutes to travel to the upstairs bedroom of **Sheri**. By this time estimate, the actual strangulation of **Sheri** could have begun as early as 5:50 AM. Physical observation of the degree of fixed lividity and state of rigor (initial searching officer's observations, coroner description, and photographs) is inconsistent with the length of time required to reach those levels.
- Dr. Michael Baden's assessment of time of death based on factors identified in his report places the times of death for the three victims occurring earlier than 3:00 AM. This time frame is inconsistent with the event timeline as identified by Coleman. The temporal inconsistency is problematic.

- ❑ Coleman made a total of ten contacts with **Sheri's** phone. Some were phone calls and the rest were text messages. The large number of attempted contacts would seem to indicate that Coleman was concerned that he could not reach **Sheri**. However, the content of the messages to her do not reflect concern and this is problematic.
- ❑ In interviews with investigators Coleman does not indicate that he left the club because he was concerned about his wife despite his attention to trying to reach her. In fact, he reports that in one message he would be leaving after he finished his cardio workout.
- ❑ The spray paint writings on the walls and beds are inconsistent in theme, redundant, and rarely seen in homicides. The only anger detected is one of the writings directed at **Sheri**. Profane language is observed on **Gavin's** bed. The writing is excessive and unnecessary. The purpose of the writings in spray paint is to link the original threats received by Coleman to the homicides and is done to reinforce the connection for law enforcement.
- ❑ The written threats received by Coleman in his mailbox and through the Joyce Meyer Ministries' website focus on the killing of Coleman's family despite the fact that the original complaint by the author focused on Joyce Meyer and her preaching. The threats lack focus, are vague, and provide nothing to confirm the author knows anything about Coleman or his family.
- ❑ Despite identifying that the author would act out when Coleman was gone (certainly a much lower risk); he failed to act on repeated occasions when Coleman was out of state. Instead, the offender waits to commit the murders when Coleman is not only home but likely to return within a short timeframe. This behavior would be extremely risky and inconsistent with what the author threatened in the communications. Attributes of the communications are consistent with low threat and inconsistent with the homicide of Coleman's family.
- ❑ Despite the fact that the video camera captured Coleman departing his residence, no other activity in or around the residence was observed. A stranger would not have been aware of the camera's presence at Sgt. Barlow's residence.
- ❑ The postmortem adjustment of the faces of **Sheri, Garrett,** and **Gavin** so they could not be seen from the doorways of their respective bedrooms was unnecessary for the successful commission of these homicides and may represent the offender's attempt to *depersonalize* them. This reveals that the offender had some type of "relationship"

with the victims and needed to depersonalize them in order to emotionally cope with what he had done. Such actions by the offender indicate that he was not a stranger.

- The killing of the children indicates a proprietary interest on the part of the offender. That is the killings served a purpose in which the self interest of the offender took precedent. The children may have presented an obstacle. The killing of the children is another indicator that the offender is someone who not only had a relationship with **Sheri** but the children as well.
- The offender acted alone, that is, there was nothing observed at the murder scene to indicate that more than one offender was involved.

CONCLUSION

On the surface it appears that the written threats originally targeting Joyce Meyer then redirected to Christopher Coleman and ultimately redirected again to Coleman's wife and young sons tie into the spray paint writings left at the crime scene as they threaten the family and then confirm the carrying out of the threats respectively.

However, early in this assessment I indicated that the crime, in its totality, needs to make sense, the actions taken by the offender, his behavior, and the forensic evidence need to occur in both a chronological and temporal order that creates a seamless crime and crime scene scenario. Such a scenario does not exist in this crime. Events are out of place based on forensics. The written threats before the homicides are meant to provide the justification for the homicides and the spray painting at the scene after the homicides are meant to provide the continuity that links the threats to the homicides. The writings and spray painting when considered as part of the totality of the crime are inconsistent at best; redundant, rarely observed at homicide scenes and when writings are found they are not in the context presented in these homicides.

Finally, the writings are part of the overall *staging* of not only the crime but the crime scene. A review of the crime dynamics that occurred at the crime scene as well as the lack of expected activity supports the conclusion this crime scene was *staged* to make it appear the offender's motive for these homicides was the follow-through of his earlier threats to kill Coleman's family and that the killings resulted from the offender's anger with Coleman's relationship with Joyce Meyer rather than from a personal conflict he had with **Sheri**. The *staging* was designed to mislead police investigators. The offender wanted law enforcement to believe that the person who committed these three murders and wrote in red spray paint on the walls was the same person who started writing threatening

communications to Coleman some six months earlier and that more importantly; he is a stranger to Coleman and his family.

The behavior observed in this crime and at this crime scene indicates that the offender is someone who had a relationship on some level with **Sheri** and within that relationship conflict existed for the offender. From the offender's perspective, the conflict between them could only be resolved by **Sheri's** death. If the offender could have resolved the conflict between he and **Sheri** with her murder there would have been no need to kill the children. **Garett** and **Gavin** were asleep when they were killed and presented no threat either physically or through identification of the offender. The killing of the children represents another aspect to the offender's relationship dynamic and is seen as proprietary interest.

The offender did not commit these homicides because of some issue related to Joyce Meyer, her ministries or the fact the Coleman worked for her. The offender had a relationship with **Sheri, Garett,** and **Gavin**. The nature of that relationship resulted in a conflict that developed with Sheri that the offender believed could only be resolved by her death. The deaths of the children resulted from a personal need of the offender and are interrelated to the relationship dynamic that existed with **Sheri**.

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