

On August 15th 1975, Gretchen Harrington was walking towards Bible School less than a mile away from her home. Unfortunately though, 8 Year old Gretchen would never make it to the Bible School and would go missing. Nearly two months later Gretchen would be discovered dead in Ridley Creek State Park. But how did this happen?

Gretchen Harrington was born on June 13th 1967 into a religious family. Gretchen's father Harold Harrington was a preacher at a local Presbyterian church. When Gretchen was only 8 years old she walked to her bible school every day with her older sisters however on this day Gretchen would walk to Bible School all on her own. Several Witnesses remarked seeing Gretchen as she walked towards the school and thought nothing of it since it was only a 10 minute walk from her house to the Bible School.

Around 11am on August 15th 1975, Gretchen's parents were informed that she had never made it to Trinity Chapel, the location of her Bible School, and so immediately Gretchen's father contacted the Marple Township Police Department and reported her missing. Due to Gretchen only being 8 Years old, police treated the case very seriously and put out a call asking for volunteers to help with the search. Within a few hours 300 volunteers had signed up to comb through the neighborhood looking for Gretchen.

Gretchen's House and Trinity chapel were both located on Lawrence Road and next to an often busy four lane highway that was regularly backed up by traffic. Gretchen would normally walk two blocks up a hill before crossing to the opposite side of Lawrence Road. Along the way she would pass by a Supermarket and a townhome development. One of the Family's neighbors would recount seeing Gretchen walking up this hill around 9:25 in the morning and this was the last time that anyone would see Gretchen alive.

The next morning over 400 volunteers would turn out to help in the search of Gretchen. They searched through the areas around the supermarket and the adjacent woods, searching for any indication of what happened to Gretchen. Although after the first day, they had only managed to cover 5 Square miles due to the Underbrush of the woods being almost two feet thick. However, they would not find anything to indicate what happened to Gretchen.

Police brought out Tracking Dogs who were able to follow Gretchen's scent from her home to halfway up the steep hill where her trail would abruptly end. There were no indications of

struggle at the location which lead investigators to believe that Gretchen must have got into a passing vehicle and been abducted.

The community rallied behind Gretchen's parents, offering support and prayers to the family. Gretchen's father was a well respected Minister and her mother a stay at home mum with four daughters. They were a strict family but they were very close-knit and happy with people remarking that they could not possibly have had any enemies.

Gretchen was known for being shy around strangers but she was friendly and outgoing once she had gotten comfortable with the people surrounding her. She had a wide circle of friends that included classmates and neighbors. She was very athletic and loved both baseball and kickball.

8 Days before her disappearance Gretchen had become a big sister and even said she would run away if she had another sister, as she longed for a brother at this point. However when her new baby sister came along she was excited to fulfill her role as the big sister.

Gretchen's parents told investigators that there was no chance that Gretchen would have gotten into a car with a stranger since they had raised all of their children to be hesitant and cautious around people that they did not know but Gretchen in particular was very uncomfortable around people she did not know, often deliberately avoiding people she did not know.

Detectives started canvassing the neighborhood. Handing out fliers and opening an emergency 24 hour hotline urging people to call them with any information that they might have regarding Gretchen's disappearance. More than 200 people called this hotline in the first few days and investigators followed up on as many of the leads as they could but yet they found nothing.

After two weeks, detectives were no closer to finding Gretchen. Although they thought initially that she was kidnapped there was no ransom coming in. There was no indication that this was a kidnapping for monetary gain and as such the Police said that Gretchen was most likely a victim of foul play. Police stepped up a gear, handing out fliers throughout Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey. Several potential sightings came into the hotline after this but Police were unable to confirm any of them.

A truck driver who had been driving on Lawrence Road when Gretchen disappeared said that she saw a girl who matched Gretchen's description near a green pickup truck about halfway up the hill of Lawrence Road, around the same spot where Gretchen went missing, however, the truck driver was unable to provide a description of the man instead stating that the truck was very old and in a bad shape.

Police at this point still had no confirmed suspects and by September tips had stopped coming in and the case was starting to grow very cold. Although the police did find Persons of Interest they were unable to connect any of them to Gretchen's disappearance. Investigators grew more and more frustrated as they could not find anything about what happened to the missing Girl.

Until October 14th 1975 when a sailor from the Philadelphia Naval Yard stumbled upon human remains while jogging through Ridley Creek State Park in Delaware county. Although the remains were in an advanced state of decomposition, investigators were certain that this body was in fact Gretchen. Dental records would confirm this later.

An autopsy on Gretchen's remains would confirm that Gretchen had died from a blow to her head that had fractured her skull. Due to the state of her remains the coroner could not determine whether Gretchen had been a victim of SA, however investigators believed it to be a possibility. Her killer had undressed her and laid her clothing in a neat pile next to her body, her underwear also nearby was hanging from a tree branch.

Gretchen's body being in Ridley State Park brought Pennsylvania State Police into the investigation. Officials noted that Gretchen would not have been able to walk to the park alone since it was over 7 miles away from her last known location, meaning Investigators could not provide more evidence that Gretchen was in fact abducted. They believed that she was most likely killed in Ridley Creek State Park.

State troopers spent several days searching the park with Metal Detectors, hoping to find anything that might lead them to Gretchen's killer. They interviewed dozens of people and interrogated Sex offenders who lived nearby but they were unable to get any concrete leads.

Some investigators believed they had discovered who the murderer was, however they were unable to find any evidence to back up their theory and as the tips began to dry up from the hotline, the case was declared a cold case.

The case would make headlines again in November of 1983 when a Marple Township detective would receive a letter claiming to have information about the case. The letter was anonymous and as such the detective had no way of contacting the person for more details. The detective made a public appeal for whoever sent the letter in to contact the police, but the case went cold once again.

Until 50 years later.

Gretchen would never get into a vehicle with someone who she did not recognise or trust and this had been stated by Gretchen's parents numerous times. So we know that Gretchen would have only gotten into a car with someone she had recognised. Perhaps a neighborhood friend, someone from her school or perhaps someone who had a bit more of a discrete connection to Gretchen.

This is where two authors and internet sleuths come in, Mike Mathis and Joanna Falcone Sullivan who produced a book that would bring the case back into the limelight and eventually discover the killer.

Sullivan and Mathis were given access to the cold case files kept by Chief Brandon Graef of the Marple Township Police who had never given up on this unsolved case. In January 2023 an alleged victim of Child SA came forward to write a criminal complaint about the man indicating that they were a victim at the hands of him.

The complaint outlined terrifying details from the victim. Including Journal entries that highlighted the abuse and also a more shocking story. Another classmate was nearly kidnapped days before Gretchen went missing.

In the complaint the victim wrote:

"I think he might be the one who kidnapped Gretchen. I think it was Mr Z"

But who is this elusive Mister Z. After all it has to be someone Gretchen felt safe around and trusted. Well let me introduce you to the man who slaughtered Gretchen Harrington in cold blood. Reverend David Zanstra.

David Zanstra was a pastor at the Trinity Chapel where Gretchen took Bible Lessons. Shortly after the murder of Gretchen Harrington Zanstra would move a number of times, living in California, Texas and Georgia, where he was residing earlier this year.

Zanstra has since been charged with criminal homicide, murder of the first, second and third degree as well as kidnapping of a minor and the possession of an instrument of crime.

On Monday 14th July 2023, Zanstra's neighbors learned of his crimes and they had this to say:

"It is shocking. I had no idea. They've just always been very nice People"

"Friendly Guy. I talked to him a few times. I see him walking around with his cane"

Following the charges being laid against Zanstra, Gretchen's family released a statement surrounding the incident.

*"With today's announcement of an arrest, we are extremely hopeful that the person who is responsible for the heinous crime that was committed against our Gretchen will be held accountable. It's difficult to express the emotions that we are feeling as we take one step closer to justice. Gretchen was only 8 years-old when she was suddenly taken away from us on her way to church on Friday, August 15, 1975. If you met Gretchen, you were instantly her friend. She exuded kindness to all and was sweet and gentle. Even now, when people share their memories of her, the first thing they talk about is how amazing she was and still is...at just 8 years old, she had a lifelong impact on those around her. The abduction and murder of Gretchen has forever altered our family and we miss her every single day. We are grateful for the continual pursuit of justice by law enforcement and we want to thank the Pennsylvania State Police for never stopping in their constant search for answers. We would not be here today if it was not for them. As a family we ask for privacy at this time as we continue to digest this information. Thank you for your understanding, love, and continued support. It means the world to us."*

Investigators are concerned that there may be more victims out there even to this day. DA Stollsteimer had this to say about Zanstra:

“We are going to convict him. He is going to die in Jail. Then he is going to have to find out what the god he professes to believe in holds for people who are this evil to our children.”

That is how a 50 year cold case was finally solved. Thanks for watching.

SailorsBounty