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## **Unsolved 1979 murder haunts family, friends**

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CEDAR RAPIDS -- Every year, Christmas brings it all back for Janelle Stonebraker. And it's been 30 years.

About 4 a.m. Dec. 20, 1979, police discovered the body of Michelle Martinko in the parking lot at Westdale Mall. Beautiful and musical, the Kennedy High School senior had been stabbed to death in the family Buick. The case shook Cedar Rapids, and never has been solved.

"I think more of the season than the exact date," said Stonebraker, Martinko's sister. "But it's always with us."

Stonebraker, 60, was 12 years older than her sister and lived in the Quad Cities with her husband, John. Michelle had been the flower girl in their wedding.

Martinko, 18, had driven to the newly opened mall the night of Dec. 19, 1979, to shop for a winter coat after a school choir banquet. Her body was found early the next morning with multiple stab wounds to her face and chest. Wounds on her hands showed she had fought her killer, but she was not sexually assaulted or robbed. Detectives found no weapon, fingerprints or anything else to identify the killer, and the investigation stalled.

Her parents, Janet and Albert Martinko of Cedar Rapids, never recovered from their younger daughter's death, Stonebraker said.

"My mother was a very emotional person, she felt everything deeply, and it destroyed her," Stonebraker said. "My father was consumed with anger, wanted to get the person. My mother just missed Michelle. It absolutely destroyed their lives."

Michelle was born when her mother was 44. She was a "gift" to the family, Stonebraker said, after her parents had spent years trying to have a second child.

Before the murder, Janet Martinko had been a lively, outgoing woman. Afterward, she didn't want to be seen in public. She was reluctant even to go to the grocery store. Both Martinkos plunged themselves into painful seclusion and suffered from health problems until their deaths -- Al in 1995, Janet in 1998. They went to their graves believing an ex-boyfriend of Michelle's had killed her, Stonebraker said.

It turned out they were wrong.

In 2006, Doug Larison was the cold case detective for the Cedar Rapids Police Department. He got a tip about a suspicious person connected to the 27-year-old case. Though the tip didn't produce any solid leads, it gave Larison the chance to take another look at the case file.

He found something no one else had found: The killer's blood. Though he won't say where he found it, or how he knows it belongs to the killer, Larison is certain the blood came from a cut on the killer's hand, and that the killer was a man. Police had the state crime lab extract DNA from the blood and file it in the national computer database of DNA profiles. Of 80 suspects, 60 have been tested and none has been a DNA match. The ex-boyfriend was exonerated.

"It's not hopeless," Larison said. "Having the killer's DNA, having the killer's blood, is like having the killer himself."

The best hope for justice is that the Iowa Criminalistics Laboratory in Ankeny will get word of a DNA match between the blood and someone who is arrested in the future. The national database has 5 million DNA profiles on file, but more are added every day.

"I would love to make that call," Bruce Reeve, administrator of the state crime lab, said.

Martinko was a tall, willowy girl with definite plans to attend Iowa State University and study fashion design, her sister said. She worked at a clothing store in Westdale, sang in the choir, acted in plays and performed in musicals. She was popular with boys but had "kind of a rough time with girls" over one

of the boys she started dating in the months before she died, her sister said.

Elizabeth Nemeth of Fairfax, whose maiden name was Laymon, was a year behind Martinko in school but performed with her in choir and drama. The two sometimes drove together to Hardee's on Center Point Road NE for lunch. She said Martinko didn't play sports and wasn't a cheerleader. She had a great sense of humor and was well-liked.

"She was just an ordinary, very pretty, funny girl," Nemeth, 46, said.

Nemeth remembers the way the media descended on Kennedy High School the day Martinko's body was discovered, and said she didn't find out what happened until choir class when Martinko didn't show up.

Even though they weren't best friends, Nemeth said Martinko's death was life-changing for her. Partly it was the brutality. Partly it was that the murderer seemed to have been so dispassionate. He or she just killed. Nothing else.

Nemeth said she became a stickler for meeting her parents' curfews after the murder. She stopped complaining about her father's rules. She has told her four children about the murder to show them these things don't just happen in movies, or big cities, or to bad people.

"It made a difference in how I parented my children. It made a difference in me as a teenager," Nemeth said. "I can't fathom it, still."