A COLD CASE COMES TO LIFE

The murder 28 years ago of Joyce McLain changed the life of one 8-year-old boy; now 37, he is working tirelessly to help solve the crime  

BY ANNE DRISCOLL

On the last night of her life, 16-year-old Joyce McLain laced up her running shoes, jogged past her mother, Pam, sitting on the front steps, and said, “See you later, Ma.” But Joyce never returned. Two days later, on Aug. 10, 1980, her partially clad and bludgeoned body was found in the woods behind the high school in East Millinocket, Maine, where she was last seen jogging. Her murder was never solved, but her mother vowed to keep an electric candle burning in the front porch window until the day that Joyce’s killer was brought to justice. “I feel it was some of her spirit pulling me to do this,” says Pam, 62. “I couldn’t let her down.”
Against great odds, that day might soon be here. And if it is, it will be with no small thanks to Dr. Peter Cummings, 37, now a neuropathologist for the Massachusetts Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. In a remarkable twist of fate, Cummings was an 8-year-old living in the area at the time of Joyce’s murder. The precocious youngster was so haunted by the crime he dreamed of someday helping to crack the case. Thanks in part to his support, this past August Joyce’s body was exhumed and another autopsy was conducted, which yielded promising DNA and forensic evidence. For Cummings, there is a sense of elation that his childhood ambition could soon be realized. “Something then clicked, and I remember knowing, just knowing, that was what I was going to do,” he says. “I was going to solve Joyce’s murder.”

Everyone in the tight-knit paper mill town of East Millinocket knew Joyce and her younger sister Wendy McLain. But Joyce, a popular blonde honors student, talented musician, cheerleader and accomplished athlete, really stood out among the 2,000 residents. “She was very, very driven. She wanted to be the best in whatever she tried,” says Laura Merrill, one of her best friends. “She was a leader.” Her murder left the town deeply shaken. Initially, the police focused on outsiders, including the 700 temporary workers building a new boiler at the mill and 300 visitors in town for a statewide softball tournament. When nothing came of those investigations, some residents began to suspect one another. “A lot of people who did a lot of walking didn’t walk at night anymore,” says John Rhoda, a high school science teacher. “There was all kinds of speculation and rumors about who might have done it.”

The devastation to Joyce’s immediate family is still fresh in their memories. Pam recalls the horror of having to wake up Wendy, then 14, to tell her Joyce was dead. “She made these horrible, horrible wailing sounds,” says Pam. “It was like the sounds of some wounded animal.”

To escape her nightmares about her sister’s murder, Wendy eventually moved out of town.

Cummings, who spent summers in the area, vividly recalls the turmoil caused by Joyce’s death. “I remember how protective people became and the fear it invoked because there were so many stories going around about what happened. My sister couldn’t go out. I couldn’t go out,” he says. “It was a very safe place, and it became very scary overnight.” By age 5, he’d already decided to become a doctor after watching his 10-year-old sister’s chin get stitched up. But Joyce’s murder prompted the young boy to focus on pathology. “My mom would always say to me at the end of the show Quincy that I should be a medical examiner, that I would be great at it,” says Cummings.

Though the investigation stalled early on, Pam McLain never gave up hope. She wrote countless letters to investigators and followed up leads. In 1988, frustrated by the lack of progress, 150 local residents banded together as Justice for Joyce and raised money, sent letters and canvassed malls, collecting 6,000 signatures—enough to persuade Unsolved Mysteries to come and film a segment. But no arrests were ever made, and with no clear idea how to proceed, the group disbanded after the show aired in 1989.

Meanwhile, Cummings had enrolled in graduate school, where he took part in the pioneering use of DNA to identify the 229 victims of a Swissair crash off the coast of Halifax, N.S. After medical school in Ireland, he finished his residency and enrolled in a fellowship in neuropathology—the study of diseases of the nervous system—at the University of Virginia. But he had grown...
frustrated and was considering quitting UVA—until he happened to spot an online article in the Bangor Daily News last year about Pam’s efforts to have Joyce’s remains exhumed. The state had rejected the request on the grounds that the body would be too decomposed to yield any useful samples. “I knew if I quit my fellowship, I would never be in a position to solve this crime,” says Cummings. He immediately wrote an e-mail to his aunt to hand-deliver to Pam, whom he had never met. He encouraged Pam to keep pressing the state, arguing that there was a good chance that evidence could be recovered. “I was quite psyched, and when we started e-mailing, I felt like we knew each other forever,” says Pam.

When the rest of the community heard the news that Pam’s request for an exhumation and autopsy had been turned down, they too pitched in to help. Organizers revived Justice for Joyce and within weeks raised $20,000—enough to hire renowned forensics experts Dr. Michael Baden to conduct a private autopsy and Dr. Henry Lee to analyze evidence. Cummings, who had attended an annual pathology conference Dr. Baden hosted at Colby College in Maine, contacted Baden, explaining his connection to the case and his desire to help. “He told me the story of how he’d grown up there and been there at the same time [as the murder],” says Baden. “I was very impressed with that.”

Baden invited Cummings to join the team. Once Joyce’s body had been exhumed, it was found to be remarkably intact, just as Cummings

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had hoped. “It’s almost like some-
how God wanted to keep everything
there so that the perpetrator could
be found,” says Baden. “I think it’s
a solvable case.” Investigators have
deployed to disclose what evidence
was recovered—but now echo that
sentiment. “I think all of us are hope-
ful and optimistic that this case will
be solved,” says deputy attorney
general William Stokes, whose office
turned down the original request for
an autopsy. “I can’t tell you when
and I can’t tell you how, but we were
very pleased with the way everyone
worked together.”

Meanwhile, Cummings now has a
new door to knock on whenever he’s
in East Millinocket and is amazed by
how things turned out. He purposely
never went to the site where Joyce
was found because he didn’t want to
be biased in any way should he get to
help solve her case. “I’ve had a few
moments like, ‘I can’t believe I’m part
of this after 26 years with Henry Lee
and Mike Baden by my side,’” says
Cummings. “I wish I could have gone
back to my 10-year-old self and said,
‘Guess what you’re doing right now.
You’re sitting at this table, and you’re
really going to be a part of it.’”

These days Pam is grateful for a
community that raised the money she
needed (she wrote personal thank-
you notes to every donor), for the
expertise of Baden and Lee and for
the assistance—and persistence—of
Cummings, whom she fondly calls
“Dr. Pete.” “Dr. Pete and I keep in
contact all the time,” she says. “If I’m
down, he’s there for me. He’s a big part
of my life now, and I know he feels
the same.” Indeed, she sees in him
the qualities that she so treasured in
Joyce. “She was very strong-willed
determined,” says Pam. “She set
her mind to do something and she fol-
lowed through.”

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