

MEDIA RELEASE

Cold Case Solved: Man Arrested for 1974 Murders of Two Teenagers

November 4, 2022

On October 3, 1974, 16-year-old Donald Bartron and 18-year-old Peter Zito, Jr., were murdered in the parking lot of the Oak Hills Recreation Center. Both Bartron and Zito Jr. had been shot multiple times in the head with a .22 caliber gun. On Wednesday, November 2, 2022, just over 48 years later, detectives arrested 65-year-old Steven Paul Criss for those murders. Criss lived in Aloha and was arrested near his home.

Detectives assigned to the Violent Crimes Unit also handle cold case investigations and over the past several months they developed multiple new leads in this case.

By way of background, Criss was identified as a potential suspect shortly after the murders. In December 1974, then-Deputy Jim Spinden arrested Criss for theft. Spinden, who later became the elected Sheriff of Washington County, also found Criss had an illegally concealed .22 caliber handgun in his car. The gun was returned to Criss after the theft case was concluded. At the time, no ballistic match could be made between that gun and the murders in Oak Hills.

Criss joined the U.S. Army and was assigned to Ft. Lewis in Washington. In 1976, he used that same gun to murder his commanding officer, Sgt. Jacob “Kim” Brown. Criss also shot Sgt. Brown multiple times in the head. That murder was investigated first by the Pierce County (WA) Sheriff’s Department and then by the Department of the Army Criminal Investigation Division (CID). Criss ultimately pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 35 years in Fort Leavenworth, although he was paroled and released in 1988.

In 2022, detectives submitted ballistic evidence to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). The ATF reported a presumptive match between evidence from the 1976 murder in Washington and the 1974 murders in Oak Hills. To date, the ATF reported this is the oldest known comparison and match on a prosecutable case. The Oregon State Police Crime Lab was able to confirm that match.

In November 2022, a Washington County grand jury indicted Criss for two counts of murder in the second degree. Criss is currently being held in the Washington County Jail.

The Sheriff’s Office has notified the families of both victims and wants to recognize their unwavering devotion to seeing justice for their loved ones. The Sheriff’s Office was assisted by multiple agencies, including the Oregon State Crime Lab, the Pierce County (WA) Sheriff’s Department, the ATF, and the CID.

The Sheriff’s Office also wishes to formally apologize to any relatives of Joseph Amir Wilson, who was arrested and charged for these murders just a few hours after they happened. Although the charges against Wilson were dropped in January 1975, it is clear Wilson was innocent and should never have



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been arrested. Wilson passed away in 2000 and to this point the Sheriff's Office has not been able to identify or locate any surviving family members to make a personal, direct apology.

Detectives would like to speak with anyone who has information about these murders or Criss' activities since his release from prison in 1988. Detectives are also investigating the possibility Criss was responsible for additional homicides. Please call the Sheriff's Office at 503-846-2700 with any information. If you wish to make an anonymous tip, please notify Crime Stoppers of Oregon at www.crimestoppersoforegon.com.



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