

Police suspect robbery motive in Livonia deaths

Trio arrested, charges could come today

BY JEFF COUNTS, STEPHANIE ANGELYN CASOLA AND MATT JACHIMAN STAFF WRITERS

Three men are in police custody in the weekend slayings of a Livonia jeweler, his three children and his mother, who was visiting from Italy.

The arrests, following a massive investigation by dozens of detectives and police officers, came on Christmas Eve, two days after officers found the bodies of the five victims at a home on St. Martins Street.

Marco Pesce, 38, his mother, Maria Vergati, 68, and his children, Carlo, 12, Sabrina, 9, and Melissa, 6, had all been shot, and "there was no sign of resistance," said Police Chief Peter Kunst. Pesce was the owner of Italia Jewelry on Seven Mile.

"The house had been ransacked, and we suspect robbery was the motive," Kunst said.

Police made two arrests in Detroit and one in the Flint area, Kunst said at a Tuesday night press conference. A search warrant was executed, and items from the Pesce home were recovered, he said.

Kunst said he hoped the arrests would bring some relief to the victims' family and the community.

During a Monday press conference, Kunst said, "It's the most devastating and tragic crime I've seen in 27 years with the Livonia police."

Special prosecutors from the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office are working with detectives on the case.

Charges could come as early as today. "I'm confident that we have a strong case," Kunst said. "We are still building that case. It's in full throttle right now."

Kunst would not comment on what was recovered, nor on whether the case was linked to drugs.

Pesce's former wife, Diane, 36, was previously convicted in Livonia's 16th District Court for possession of narcotics paraphernalia, according to published reports. She has been ordered by a Wayne County Circuit Court judge to seek treatment for drug use, reports said.

Although the couple was divorced, they had lived together recently, but she wasn't living at the home in northwest Livonia at the time of the shooting, Kunst said. Diane Pesce has been interviewed by detectives.

Franco Petrucci, a cousin of Marco Pesce, said Monday: "His wife has

been in a rehabilitation center somewhere in Ann Arbor."

"It's tragic," said Petrucci before the arrests. "It's really a shock. I feel numb right now."

Given the complexity of the case, Kunst said, detectives, who were led by Lt. Ben McDermott, exceeded his expectations with the quick arrests. "I'm extremely proud of them," Kunst said.

"I have never felt more proud, felt safer in this community," said county prosecutor Michael Duggan of the police work.

Duggan said the killings touched his family in a personal way. His son, Patrick, has been a classmate of victim Sabrina Pesce since kindergarten, he said.

"I had to explain to my son that he lost one of his classmates," Duggan said.

The incident unfolded Saturday afternoon. Pesce was at his business when he received a call from his neighbor. He left the store to go home.

Police don't know exactly what happened next, but they said that between 5 and 7 p.m. someone entered the home, shot the victims and rummaged the home looking for things.

"They were possibly looking for jewelry," Kunst said.

The slayings are thought to be the largest mass killing in Livonia's history, police said. The community records about one or two homicides a year.

Earlier this year, there was a double homicide during a robbery at a restaurant at Middlebelt and Schoolcraft Road.

Police canceled the vacations of many officers and employees and had 24 detectives, plus identification bureau and surveillance officers, working on the case.

Pesce was a Livonia businessman of long standing. The jewelry store was opened in 1984.

Visitation for the Pesce family will be 4-9 p.m. Saturday and noon to 9 p.m. Sunday at the Harry J. Will Funeral Home, 3700 Six Mile, Livonia. A rosary will be said at 7 p.m. Sunday at the funeral home.

Funeral services will be 11 a.m. Monday at NorthRidge Church, 4955 N. Territorial, Plymouth Township.

Burial will be in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Southfield.



A lone police cruiser sits in the driveway of home at 37534 St. Martins where Marco Pesce and members of his family were murdered on Saturday. In the background is a police crime investigation van parked near the garage.

'He loved his kids; he loved his family'

BY STEPHANIE ANGELYN CASOLA STAFF WRITER

Time stood still at the Pesce home on Christmas Day. Gifts were unopened, the Livonia home undecorated with outdoor decorations.

And family and friends mourned the death of five people: Marco Pesce, 38; his young children Carlo, Sabrina and Melissa; and his mother, Maria Vergati, age 68.

For those who saw Pesce on a regular basis, and those closest to the family, the news came as a shock last weekend. The five family members were shot Saturday, police said, in a suspected robbery at their home.

Franco Petrucci will remember his first cousin, Marco Pesce, fondly — as a devoted father, proud businessman and sports car enthusiast.

"I feel for him because I knew he was an extremely fine person," Petrucci said Monday. "He loved his kids; he loved his family."

Pesce owned Italia Jewelry on Seven Mile and operated Pesce Properties. "He was obviously a jewelry dealer and always did well," Petrucci said.

Pesce and his wife, Diane, were divorced. "The couple had experienced domestic problems, a family member said. And Pesce had called upon his mother for help.

"His mother was visiting from Italy



Marco Pesce, Maria Vergati, Carlo Pesce, Melissa Pesce, Sabrina Pesce

on a three-month visa," Petrucci said. "She was here to help him through the holidays and to watch the kids."

All three children had just begun holiday break from their classes at St. Michael School in Livonia. "They were wonderful kids. All of them were well-liked," school counselor Cindy Stempin said.

Carlo Pesce, 12, was "very bright and had a very, very good sense of humor," she said. "He was real witty."

Nine-year-old Sabrina Pesce excelled in the arts. "Sabrina was just outstanding," said Stempin. "She was very artistic and creative."

And the youngest daughter was 6-year-old Melissa. "The little first-grader was really bubbly and really nice," she added.

When confronted with the news, Stempin organized special meetings and prayer services Monday for the fourth- and seventh-grade students who wanted to come. She anticipated

how classmates of the Pesce children might react to the news — with regressive behavior and fear.

"Children need to feel they're safe, and protected," Stempin said.

Cathy Gilson, a neighbor of the Pesce family, said feeling safe is rather difficult in a time like this.

"My daughter is pretty upset," Gilson said. "She's 9, and she used to play with their children. So it's pretty rough."

Once school resumes at St. Michael, additional counseling will be offered, as students continue through the grieving process.

"It's just good for kids to talk a lot about it to be with their friends, and to have support," Stempin said. "Kids are very resilient. They will get through this. They will have a lot of support."

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