

Pesce children expected grandma at the front door

BY JEFF COUNTS
STAFF WRITER

When the three Pesce children walked into their Livonia home on their last day alive, they expected to see their grandmother who was visiting from Italy. Instead, they faced their killers.

The children, Carlo, 12, Sabrina, 9, and Melissa, 6, had been with their father, Marco, visiting their mother, Diane Jameel, in a drug rehabilitation center in Ann Arbor on Saturday, Dec. 21. Their parents were divorced.

When they returned at about 6 p.m., Marco pulled into the driveway of the home on St. Martins Street, let the kids out of the car, and went back to his jewelry store, Italia, not far away at Seven Mile and Farmington, according to Mike Duggan, Wayne County prosecutor.

Back at the store, Pesce received a telephone call from his son, Carlo, to return home. "He was lured back home," Duggan said.

There, two men who had been let into the house by Pesce's mother, Maria Vergati, 68, were lying in wait for the jeweler, Duggan said. They wanted the combination to a 3,000-pound safe in the home and Pesce was the only one who had it, he said.

Upon returning home, Pesce apparently provided the safe's combination. The thieves opened it, took jewelry and then killed the family execution-style, Duggan said. "They were shot in the back."

"It's been a bad year in Wayne County for children being murdered," said Duggan, a Livonia resident. "But I've never seen a case where a criminal targeted them."

Police have recovered a handgun allegedly used in the shootings. They wouldn't say where it was found.

MEN ARRAIGNED

Two men with long criminal records were arraigned Thursday on five counts of first-degree murder in the slayings.

John Wolfenbarger, 31, of Detroit and Dennis Lincoln, 27, of Flint stood mute at arraignment on the charges and not guilty pleas were entered on their behalf. They were ordered to be held without bond in the Wayne County Jail by 16th District Court Judge Robert B. Brzezinski.

At a Friday night press conference, Livonia Police Chief Peter Kunst said the suspects were allegedly targeting jewelry stores in Livonia and Dearborn Heights prior to the robbery. There are about 40 or 50 such stores, he said. "This was something that unfolded for several days prior to the robbery," he said.

He said the suspects not only targeted the home, but also used a special vehicle in the robbery, and that a package was possibly used as a ruse. Asked if it was a normally recognized delivery truck, the police chief said he wouldn't comment.

However, he did say that the suspects allegedly were scoping out the home at least "a day or two" before the robbery.

"There's a sense of anxiety in the community that this was a random act," the chief said, adding that the Livonia police are trying to explain that it wasn't. He said the Pesce store was targeted.

He also added that the amount of evidence is mounting up, noting that police are discovering more cash and stolen items.

Also, he said there may be more warrants issued and more persons charged in the slayings. He said there have been similar robberies in New York and Miami.

Duggan at an early press conference at Livonia police headquarters was critical of speculation that Pesce's ex-wife was linked to the slayings.

"She's in a rehab house in Ann Arbor and can't even telephone," he said.

Duggan lauded the Livonia police for their work on the case. "It was amazing. It took 48 hours to make the arrests."

Kunst canceled vacation and leave time for officers and put 24 detectives on the case. Many

worked around the clock.

He said pictures of the slain children helped inspire officers to keep working to solve what he characterized as "brutal murders."

He said the arrests were made because of "old-fashioned detective work," but he wouldn't say what information led officers to the suspects.

There are at least three other persons being held in the case as material witnesses. Neither Kunst nor Duggan would say if they would be charged. Duggan said they are witnesses, and there's a fear they would flee.

Wolfenbarger was arrested on Dec. 24 in Livonia, and Lincoln on the same day in Mt. Morris, a suburb of Flint, Duggan said. He added that witnesses saw the pair at a Detroit home shortly after the murders with bags of items allegedly stolen from the home.

ITEMS RECOVERED

Armed with a search warrant, Livonia police recovered numerous items stolen from



Wolfenbarger

Lincoln

the Pesce home at a Detroit home, he said.

Items included watches belonging to Marco and Diane Pesce, diamonds and melted gold. Police alleged that when arrested, Wolfenbarger had metal snips used to remove jewelry from settings and a jeweler's gas torch to melt gold.

The two men were cell mates at the Boyer Road Correctional Facility in Carson City, serving time until this year. Lincoln was paroled in February after serving nine years on an armed robbery charge and Wolfenbarger in August after eight years for a series of burglaries. Wolfenbarger's first criminal conviction came in 1989 in Wayne County for breaking and entering.

Reward helped collar suspects

BY STEPHANIE ANGELVIN CASOLA
STAFF WRITER

When police on Christmas Eve arrested two men who are now charged with the execution-style shooting deaths of five members of a Livonia family, residents who contributed to a reward fund had an unseen hand in collaring the murder suspects.

"The reward was a factor in some of the information," said Peter Kunst, Livonia police chief, during a press conference Thursday.

Contributions from friends, relatives and Livonia business owners brought the reward up to more than \$65,000. "I hope it helped," said Charles G. Tangora, an attorney who helped collect pledges for the reward fund. Many who contributed to it were, like Tangora, members of Livonia's Italian-American Club.

"Of course everyone wanted to make pledges," said Tangora, who lives in Farmington. He said the tragedy has touched everyone, Italian-American or not.

"It's just a shock, and the club

members obviously all know — some are even related to — the Pesces," Tangora said. "It spread the information like wildfire."

Meanwhile, friends and relatives have been busy ensuring that the Pesce family will be remembered during the holidays. Piles of stuffed teddy bears laid solemnly outside the family's St. Martins Street home and Marco Pesce's store, Italia Jewelry.

"The community especially wants to reach out to the family now," Livonia Mayor Jack Kirksey said. Livonia has consistently been rated as one of the safest communities in the nation among those with a population of more than 100,000.

And Kirksey said that image hasn't been tarnished. "I don't believe in any way our general level of safety has been compromised. It was a calculated target because of what they thought was wealth in the home. Little or nothing could be done to prevent the evil act."

He lauded the police department for working hard on the case. Leaves and Christmas vacation time were canceled as

police worked through the holiday, arresting two men on Christmas Eve. The men were charged Thursday. (See related story.)

"I just have a deep appreciation for the police department," Kirksey said. "I've always been proud of the very fine work they do. But in this instance, they have just done a job second to none."

He commended Lt. Ben McDermott, who headed the investigation and worked more than 50 hours without sleep last week, and everyone investigating the case.

"In the squad room, they had pictures of the three children to keep them focused," Kirksey said.

Visitation continues 9 a.m. to noon today at Harry J. Will Funeral Home, 9700 Six Mile in Livonia. Services are scheduled for 11 a.m. Monday at Northridge Church, 49555 N. Territorial Road, Plymouth Township. Burial will follow at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

Members of the Italian-American Club are planning a memorial for the family.

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OBITUARIES

Archie T. Patterson

Private services will be held for Archie T. Patterson, 83, formerly of Farmington.

Mr. Patterson was born Aug. 26, 1919, in Ingersoll, Canada, and died Dec. 25, 2002, in South Lyon. He worked as a truck driver and was a World War II Army veteran. Mr. Patterson was a member of Teamsters Local #299.

He is survived by his sons, Gary (Ann) Schniers and Patrick Patterson; sisters, Dorothy Patterson and Gladys Williams; grandchildren, Kimberly, Kevin, Karise, Shannon (Matt), Ryan (Jessica) and Jennifer; and great-grandchildren, Emma and Ian. He is preceded in death by his wife, Jessie; daughter, Barbara Yost; brothers, Howard and Gordon Patterson; and sister, Isabel Bottrell.

Memorial contributions may be made to Hospice of Michigan, 400 Mack Ave., Detroit, MI 48201. Arrangements made by Thayer-Rock Funeral Home.

Farmington.

Services for Ann Walton, 89, of Birmingham, will be held at 5 p.m. today, Dec. 29, at Heeney-Sundquist Funeral Home in Farmington with the Rev. Daniel Rolik officiating. Burial will follow at Glen Eden Memorial Park in Livonia.

Ms. Walton was born July 26, 1910, and died Dec. 26, 2002.

She is survived by her sons, Jerry (Jeanene) McKenzie and Melvin (Linda) Lestock; brothers, John Molnar; sister, Kate Oliver; eight grandchildren; and 12 great-grandchildren. Memorial contributions may be made to the Karmanos Cancer Institute.

Quincy Y. Dong

Services for Quincy Dong, 80, of Farmington, were held Dec. 27 at John N. Santeu & Son Funeral Home in Garden City with the Rev. Kurt Radke officiating. Burial followed at Mt. Hope Memorial Gardens in Livonia.

Mr. Dong was born May 1, 1922, in China and died Dec. 23, 2002, in Farmington Hills. He is survived by his wife, Susie; sons, Henry, Dale, Steven and Tony Dong; and three grandchildren.

Mattie Walter

Services for Mattie "Betty" Walter, 93, of Farmington Hills were held Dec. 27 at Thayer-Rock Funeral Home in Farmington with the Rev. Calvin Ratz officiating.

Mrs. Walter was born Oct. 23, 1909, in Craigs, Ill., and died Dec. 25, 2002, at Botsford Continuing Health Center in Farmington Hills. She worked as a self-employed hairdresser and enjoyed gardening.

She is survived by her husband, James; daughter, Dolores (Dr. Fred) Grose; brothers, Charles Nelson and Robert Barber; sisters, Molly Tunner, Iva Huston and Dolly; three grandchildren; and eight great-grandchildren. She is preceded in death by her first husband, Carl Leflar.

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