

COLD CASE CONFESSION

By MARGARET BAKER

Michael David Lamb told authorities he shot and killed former girlfriend Genevieve "Nicole" Munoz in 1994 after the two had argued at his mother's home, the same day she vanished without a trace, records show.

Biloxi police reopened the Munoz case after it was featured earlier this year in the Sun Herald's cold case series. And court records related to the case provide many details about how investigators made an arrest - some 14 years after Munoz disappeared.

Lamb told police he couldn't remember what he had argued with Nicole about before the shooting, but said they were planning to spend the day shopping for their son, then 3 months old.

He said he and Nicole, their son and his mother, the late Dianne Lamb, sat down at a kitchen table, where a .38-caliber pistol his mother had just cleaned was sitting. He said he picked up the gun and "it just went off, shooting Nicole in the shoulder."

Lamb told a different story later to another of his girlfriends, though the end result was the same. He claimed to that woman, mother of two of his other children, he had stabbed Nicole and later disposed of her body, the records said. When contacted this year the woman told police she had been afraid to tell her story, saying she had been a victim of physical abuse in the past.

In early September investigators got the confession and other evidence they needed to make an arrest. Lamb, now 32, is in the Harrison County jail, charged with murder and held without bond.

In his confession Lamb told authorities that after he shot the 18-year-old Biloxi High School senior, she fell to the floor, bleeding profusely.

He said he attempted to revive her, but she died and in a panic, he and his mother grabbed some towels to wipe up the blood and placed her body in two large garbage bags bound together with duct tape. Then, he said, he placed Nicole's body in the trunk of his mother's 1993 Chevy Beretta, and the two drove around until they dumped her body in a Dumpster near the ballfields at Hiller Park.

From there, he said his mother went back to their home, and she drove Nicole's 1993 Plymouth Reliant to the then-Gulfport-Biloxi Regional Airport, where Nicole's family found it the following day abandoned in a distant parking lot out of the view of airport security cameras.

All the while, the mother and son had the couple's 3-month-old son, though it's unclear in court records whether the infant was with his father and grandmother when his mother's body was disposed of. Lamb said he didn't know what happened to the pistol because his mother disposed of it. Nicole's parents picked up the child that evening after calling to find out where their daughter was.

In the other account listed in court records, Lamb's former girlfriend Jenneffer Hamilton said he'd actually stabbed Nicole in the stomach, causing her death. He told her they'd gotten into an argument before a planned shopping trip and Munoz grabbed a knife at one point. Lamb said the two struggled over the knife until he got it and stabbed her in the stomach.

Lamb told Hamilton Nicole fell to the ground, bled and died and he cut up her body and placed it into garbage bags. Like his own statement to police, court records show, Lamb claimed to have dumped Nicole's remains in a Dumpster near a ballfield.

Nicole's father, Vicente Munoz, said Lamb told him on the day of her disappearance that she'd just walked out of the Lakewood Place home around 12:30 p.m., leaving the couple's child behind. From the beginning Vicente and Victoria Lynn Munoz thought Lamb had done something to harm their daughter.

"Nicole would've never left her child," Vicente Munoz said. "She had no plans to go anywhere."

Not enough action

Like many in Nicole's friends and family, Vicente Munoz and Nicole's best friend, Vera Lewis, thought Biloxi police in 1994 simply thought Nicole had run away and would turn up again.

In the initial report, taken after 10 p.m. on June 11, 1994, police listed the case as a missing person/runaway. The report said Nicole had fought with her father the night before her disappearance, but they had made up, something Vicente Munoz denies.

Nicole's brother, Nicholas Munoz, said there was a fight, but it was between his sister and Lamb.

Lewis learned Nicole was missing when authorities met her at the airport after her family returned from a month-long trip to Italy. Immediately authorities asked if she and her family had taken Nicole with them.

Lewis said she assured authorities Nicole had not been with them. She also told Biloxi police and FBI agents she'd witnessed Lamb hitting Nicole in the past.

"They asked if we thought she ran away, if she'd ever talked about leaving," Lewis said. "She never did. I knew what had happened. I knew Nicole was gone. She wouldn't have just left. Then, it just seemed like they (authorities) were focused on finding out that she'd just run away. But I knew. I knew."

When she disappeared, Lewis said Nicole was trying to get away from Lamb, though she did want him involved in their child's life.

"She didn't just want to be a high school dropout," Lewis said. "She wanted to get a career to be able to make a life for herself and her baby. He didn't want her to do anything. He was possessive. He just wanted to control everything. That's why when I got off the plane and the police approached, I already knew."

Lewis also found it suspicious that Nicole's vehicle showed up at the airport around the same time her family left for Italy.

"We'd gone overseas and he'd gotten word about it," she said.

The initial investigation was eventually suspended because of a lack of leads, though it was upgraded to a missing and endangered persons case. Agents with the FBI had gotten involved, but what happened to Nicole was a question that had never been answered until September.

A case revived

It wasn't until after a Sun Herald feature on the case ran in March that the case started to get some attention again.

The case was reopened shortly after Biloxi police cold case investigators Michael Brown, Capt. John Miller and Sgt. Christopher DeBack saw the article and felt it was a case they could possibly solve.

"We entered it with an open mind and decided we'd just follow all the leads," Miller said. "We interviewed the family, everybody we could find, including anyone who had anything to do with the victim or her family. We're still doing interviews."

With Biloxi Chief Bruce Dunagan's support, the team moved forward until their search led them to a Saturn car dealership in Peoria, Ill., where Lamb was working in parts and service.

Their ongoing investigation, they said, so far has included more than 25 interviews, with more pending. In addition, they've seized the 1993 Chevy Beretta that Nicole's body was allegedly placed in before it was dumped.

They've also learned of "possibly some physical abuse going on," Miller said, "Everybody seemed to know the couple didn't get along."

In addition, investigators said, Lamb has cooperated 100 percent. In fact, they said, when they first approached him, "we automatically told him that we were there to investigate this cold case and talking to different people. He knew right away who we were talking about. There was no question about that."

Cold case investigators are asking for anyone directly or indirectly involved with the couple to call them immediately.

Meanwhile, Vicente Munoz said he's glad someone has finally been arrested in connection with his daughter's death. However, he said, he's asked that no one share the details of his daughter's death with his family.

He said they plan to learn about what happened in their own time, but were thankful someone had finally realized their daughter hadn't just walked out of her child's life. He also thanked the Sun Herald for its report and said he plans to hold off on reading the latest information until he's ready. He asked that the public refrain for now from calling his family with the details.

"I do hope that if anyone else has anything to say, they will come forward to police," Munoz said. "Right now, I just can't go through it again. I can't worry about yesterday. My worry now is about the future, the future of my grandson."

Biloxi police Investigators Michael Brown, Michael Manna, John Miller and Christopher DeBack stand near an evidence box for Genevieve 'Nicole' Munoz. The Police Department reopened the Munoz cold case shortly after a story in the Sun Herald earlier this year.

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Biloxi woman's killer serves less than 4 years of 20-year sentence

Killer released from prison after serving less than 4 years of 20-year sentence

By MARGARET BAKER — mbbaker@sunherald.com

Vincente Muñoz spent Christmas Eve tending to the needs of his dying wife and listening to repeated automated phone messages informing him his daughter's killer had been freed, less than four years into a 20-year sentence for manslaughter.

"Here I was trying to take care of my wife, who was dying," Muñoz said. "And the phone is ringing every two hours well into Christmas Eve morning with an automated message telling us he was being released on such and such date, but the date had already passed. He was already out.

"This is the way my wife and I spent our last Christmas together -- listening to a voice telling us they were letting the murderer of our daughter go. This wasn't justice for Nicole. This wasn't justice at all."

Victoria Lynn Muñoz died not long after learning her daughter's killer had been freed.

The Muñoz family had waited for 14 years to learn what had happened to their daughter, Biloxi High School senior Genevieve "Nicole" Muñoz, who disappeared at age 18 shortly after her parents last saw her buckling her son into a car seat the morning of June 11, 1994.

Nicole, they've said, was in good spirits that day, having persuaded the father of her child to go shopping for their baby at Edgewater Mall in Biloxi. It was the baby's father, Michael David Lamb, now 36, who turned out to be her killer.

By nightfall, Nicole's parents had started to worry because she didn't come home or call to say she was going to be late. They called Lamb's home and to their astonishment, Lamb and the baby were there but Nicole was not. Nicole's family reported her missing to Biloxi police, who listed Nicole as a possible runaway.

The FBI later got involved, but nothing ever came of the investigation. Nicole's family had no doubt something horrible had

happened to her. They knew in their hearts she was dead.

Nicole's car was found in a distant parking lot at what was then Gulfport-Biloxi Regional Airport, just out of reach of security cameras that could've showed who dropped her car off there the night of her disappearance. Nothing made sense. Nicole's family knew she would never leave her son. They waited and waited for someone to take notice of Nicole's absence.

Lamb was eventually arrested on a charge of murder, but later pleaded guilty to a reduced charge of manslaughter. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison in April 2009, but served a little more than three years by earning time off his sentence. "Michael Lamb murdered a human being and he essentially got away with it," Nicole's brother Nicholas Muñoz said. "This is not just an injustice to our family. It's an injustice to our state. We let a killer go free."

Article revives cold case

In 2008, the Sun Herald looked into Nicole's disappearance further and interviewed her family. They'd been looking for someone to take an interest in what had happened to Nicole.

The Sun Herald's cold case series featured Nicole's story in March 2008. The story noted Nicole was never seen alive after she left to go shopping with Lamb, and that friends suspected he knew what had happened to her. When Nicole's parents picked up the baby that night in 1994, they asked Lamb where Nicole could have gone. He didn't have any answers.

They hoped Lamb's mother or siblings would tell them something. They had no answers either, and Vincente and Victoria Muñoz drove their grandson home. It was the first of many hard nights over the years.

Shortly after the Sun Herald's story on Nicole's disappearance, Biloxi police decided to take a closer look at the case. Cold case investigators Christopher De Back and Mike Smith tracked down Lamb at a car dealership in Peoria, Ill. By then, he had two other children with a girlfriend.

Conflicting stories

It wasn't long, investigators said, before Lamb was telling them what happened.

Lamb knew why they had driven to Illinois to see him and he confessed to killing Nicole. Lamb said he'd shot and killed Nicole after the two argued at his mother's Lakewood Drive home in Biloxi. Lamb said he and Nicole, their son and his mother, Dianne Lamb, were sitting around a kitchen table, where a .38-caliber pistol his mother had just cleaned was sitting. He said he picked up the gun and "it just went off, shooting Nicole in the shoulder."

Lamb told a different story later to another of his girlfriends, though the result was the same. Court records show he claimed to that woman, mother of his two other children, he had stabbed Nicole and later disposed of her body. The woman told Biloxi police she had been afraid to tell her story because she had been the victim of physical abuse.

The woman said Lamb claimed to have thrown Nicole's body in a Dumpster near a ballfield.

Laws allowed early release

Lamb pleaded guilty to manslaughter in Nicole's killing. April 9, 2009. A judge sentenced him to the maximum time allowed for manslaughter -- 20 years.

"We thought that meant 20 years," Nicholas Muñoz said. "This guy is a proven liar. He changed his story multiple times. He blamed his mom. He blamed Nicole.

"As for him being released, aside from it being absolutely ridiculous, the guy ruined our family for life. He kept us in limbo for 14 years and the state of Mississippi is saying he's good to get out. This needs to be fixed for every other family this could happen to. It's just not right."

By the time he was sentenced, Lamb had spent 205 days in custody. Mississippi Department of Corrections spokeswoman Tara Booth said that time was applied to the time he would serve for his manslaughter conviction.

Booth confirmed Lamb was released from prison Dec. 23, 2012. As for his post-release status, Booth said, Lamb is not on probation or parole.

Sentence had simply expired

Lamb's sentence for manslaughter had simply expired under the state sentencing-computation laws that applied to crimes committed before 1995, when the state enacted a truth-in-sentencing law, Booth said.

Lamb had gained trusty status in custody, Booth said, though he wasn't one of the type of trusties allowed to leave prison grounds to work. Still, as a result of the status, Lamb was eligible to earn time off his sentence "at the rate of 30 days for each 30 days served," Booth said. In addition, Lamb earned meritorious time as set out in sentencing laws, meaning more time came off his sentence for completing educational and vocational programs while incarcerated.

Booth said MDOC does not decide when to release an inmate -- it follows state sentencing-computation laws that determine when an inmate is eligible for release.

In addition, Booth pointed out Lamb was sentenced for a crime committed in 1994, a year before the state passed a "truth in sentencing" law requiring offenders sentenced to jail for certain violent crimes to serve 85 percent of their sentence.

Justice for Nicole?

That MDOC officials followed the law regarding Lamb's release gives little comfort to the Muñoz family.

De Back and Brown are equally frustrated.

"This department worked closely with this family to find justice for Nicole," De Back said. "It's frustrating to know the system, in my opinion, has holes in it. I wouldn't have expected him to get out so soon. You always assume they'll serve 50 percent or 75 percent (of their sentence), not just a little over three years."

Brown agreed.

"To me, it's very disappointing that you could plead guilty to manslaughter in the death of another and ... serve a little over three years. Drug dealers and burglars serve more time than that, but if you kill somebody you can be out in less than four years. It's ridiculous. I hate it for the family."

Dillon Muñoz, Nicole's son, refers to his biological father as "my sperm donor." He's spent his life with his grandparents, who adopted him shortly after Nicole's disappearance.

When he heard of Lamb's release, he said, "It really made me upset. His early release and the late notification was unacceptable. He should have been in (the state prison at) Parchman for the rest of his life. You never know if he will do something else to someone else's mother or someone else's daughter.

"I have so much aggravation toward him. You want him to show remorse for what he did."

The Sun Herald was unable to reach Lamb for comment.