

Police puzzled as to why Fort Worth man was beaten to death

Posted Monday, Mar. 29, 2010

[FORT WORTH](#) -- There are years of Larry "Gene" Casteel's life that are unknown to his family, times when the mentally challenged man would simply disappear.

"You just never knew when he might leave, and it might be months, it might be years before we'd hear from him," said his stepmother, Trish Casteel.

But in the last decade or so, Gene Casteel had stopped running, telling one family member that he had gotten too old to be living on the streets.

In May 2009, after years of living in Alabama, the 40-year-old man with childlike tendencies moved with his father, stepmother and sister to Mansfield. He got a janitorial job at Six Flags Over Texas. He dreamed of getting an apartment of his own.

But on July 15, 2009, after completing a job placement test at a Goodwill facility in southeast Fort Worth, Casteel vanished again.

Last month, DNA tests confirmed that human remains found in September at an illegal dump site near downtown were his. Homicide detectives say he had been beaten to [death](#) with a heavy object, possibly a baseball bat, and are still trying to identify his killer.

"He was very trusting, and I think that probably got him into some trouble," Trish Casteel said.

Why someone would want to kill Casteel stymies investigators.

He was believed to have been carrying little or no cash when his disappeared. His wallet, which is still missing, contained a Social Security card and an inactivated debit card, neither of which has been used since his disappearance. His cellphone, which also has not been recovered, had not been used since his disappearance.

Homicide Detective Matt Barron said the lack of an obvious motive concerns him because Casteel may have been targeted merely because he was mentally challenged and homeless.

"What did they have to gain from killing [him]?" Barron said. "It was very obvious that he didn't function in the normal way, so that worries me greatly that someone just did it for sport."

A puzzling disappearance

What prompted Casteel to leave the Goodwill facility that July morning still puzzles his family.

Trish Casteel said she had dropped off her stepson so he could take a job placement test in hopes of getting a job at a Walgreen's warehouse. The test, which had psychological and IQ exams, was supposed to take six hours.

But Casteel finished early. Instead of waiting for his stepmother to pick him up as they had planned, he signed out and left the facility about 11:20 a.m.

When Trish Casteel arrived about 3:30 p.m., her stepson was nowhere to be found. She checked inside the Goodwill store and a nearby gas station. She drove up and down to Interstate 20, hoping she'd find him walking around, but to no avail.

Disappearing had been commonplace for Gene when he was younger.

"He would just kind of take off," Trish Casteel said. "I could drop him off at school in the morning and he'd go in the front door and out the back. It was almost like something would click. ...There was really no rhyme or reason to why it would happen."

As he grew into adulthood, Casteel would float among relatives, living with his mother and later his grandmother for long stretches before abruptly vanishing.

"You never really knew where he was when he was gone," said his father, Larry Casteel. "When he'd come back, he'd tell you he had been to New York, California, Florida. One time he said he was down in Brownsville, Texas, for a while. Maybe he was, but you never knew for sure."

Those days, however, seemed long in the past.

When his father, stepmother and sister, Jessica, moved from Michigan to Texas last year, Gene Casteel wanted to come along, eager to be close to his two brothers, James and Jason, who already lived in the area.

"He made the comment to me, 'If I go to Texas with you guys, we'll all be down there together,'" Larry Casteel said. "It seemed like he wanted to be down here."

Family members say Casteel took to Texas, a state he had previously only visited. He beamed with pride when he got his job at Six Flags. He loved hanging out with James, sometimes calling him five or six times a day.

He gave no hints that he intended to leave the Goodwill facility that July morning. He and his stepmother made plans to activate his new debit card and go shopping that afternoon. He had left his prized iPod at home.

Trish Casteel filed a missing-person report with police. She made fliers with his picture and description, posting them at area businesses. "They never did generate anything," she said.

Alive for a while

Homicide investigators believe that Casteel was alive for weeks after his disappearance.

Barron said that at some point, Casteel obtained an identification card required for meals, shelter and other services at Fort Worth's homeless shelters. Records show that he used that card July 27 -- 12 days after his disappearance -- and that he had begun eating regular meals and attending chapel service at the Union Gospel Mission.

But the visits to Union Gospel stopped Aug. 2.

For the next two weeks, shelters had no record of serving Casteel.

Then, on Aug. 15 through 27, the card started being used again, this time for meals at the Salvation Army shelter.

Barron believes, however, that someone else was using Casteel's card at the Salvation Army. He said Casteel's remains were almost skeletal when found Sept. 6 in a lot near the 700 block of East Ninth Street.

"That doesn't leave enough time for his body to be in that state of decomposition," Barron said. "My suspicion is whoever did this to him probably did this to him somewhere between Aug. 2 and Aug. 15. They got his stuff and then just started using his card to get whatever they could off it."

Hope turns into grief

Inside the Casteels' Mansfield home, Gene's belongings remain in his room - evidence of the hope that his family had clung onto until last month, that he would one day return.

"I think when you're faced with a situation like that you prepare yourself for the worst but hope for the best," Trish Casteel said.

In the closet hangs a suit that Gene had worn only once.

In the week before his disappearance, the family had traveled to Michigan, where younger brother James had gotten married.

"He hated to dress up," Trish Casteel said. "We bought him a suit to wear to their wedding. He called it a monkey suit."

Trish Casteel begins to cry as she recalls her stepson's quip about having to wear the suit.

"He said, 'This is the last time I'll wear this until I'm buried,'" she said. "And we couldn't even do that."