

DAILY PILOT

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Column: Thaw in cold case killing gives rape victim hope that her attacker will be caught too

BY [PATRICE APODACA](#)

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Editor's note: This column includes a graphic description of a rape.

In March 1973, more than three months before the body of 11-year-old Lincoln Intermediate student Linda Ann O'Keefe was found in Newport Beach's Back Bay, a young Lincoln teacher was working late at the Corona del Mar school.

She was in a good mood. Earlier in the day, she had delivered a St. Patrick-themed comedy routine to the staff in the teachers' lounge. As evening approached, she hopped in her new green Ford Pinto wagon, stopped for dinner, then headed home.

After parking in the garage of the apartment building where she lived, she stepped out of the car, but was roughly thrust back inside. An arm wrapped tightly around her neck.

"This is real," a man's voice told her. "Shut the door and shut up."

He began beating her and tearing her clothes off, then used her jeans and blouse to restrain her. With her top wrapped around her head, she gasped for breath. If she didn't comply, he threatened, he would kill her.

Then he raped her. As her body was brutalized, her mind struggled to find a way to survive. She tried talking to her assailant, pleading, cajoling — anything to appeal to his humanity. He began to choke her. Certain she was about to die, she told him that she was planning to participate in a March of Dimes walk-a-thon that weekend and she had to live so that she could go with her students.

Suddenly, he loosened his grip, opened the door and left. The young woman stumbled upstairs to her apartment, where her roommate called the police. She spent the next several hours in a hospital emergency room, and described every detail of the assault to authorities. Her attacker was never caught.

That woman was named Claire Ryan — Miss Ryan to her sixth-grade students — but legions of students and parents have known her for decades by her married name, Mrs. Ratfield. By the time of her retirement from Lincoln two years ago, she had long been revered as a passionate, masterful educator who strives to mine the gold in every student.

Claire Ryan Ratfield taught both of my sons in the sixth grade at Lincoln, which had by then been converted to an elementary school. I consider her a dear friend.

Why do I now relate this story of a savage attack on a beloved teacher?

Because after the murder of O’Keefe in August 1973, Ratfield had been contacted by Newport Beach police, who told her they were exploring whether the cases could be connected. As recently as about six years ago she was told by authorities that they had not ruled out a potential link. And just last week Ratfield let me know that Newport police had requested her rape kit from the Orange County Sheriff’s Department, but detectives did not know whether it still, in fact, exists.

Now the O’Keefe case is back in the news. An arrest was finally made in February, and when Ratfield heard about it she immediately called Newport police to offer her assistance.

Heather Rangel, the NBPD’s press information officer, said that the department is not releasing any further information on the O’Keefe case at this time but welcomes calls from anyone who might be a witness. She would not confirm whether police see a connection between the two cases.

The suspect in custody for the girl’s death, James Alan Neal, 72, formerly known as James Albert Layton Jr., was identified through DNA technology that was unavailable back in the 1970s. He was arrested in Colorado Springs, Colo. He faces charges of special-circumstances murder, kidnapping and lewd and lascivious acts on a minor under 14. And new charges related to two sexual assaults in Riverside County — one

between 1995 and 2000 and another between 2002 and 2004 — were levied against him Wednesday.

After she was assaulted, Ratfield struggled. While she was grateful to be alive, she was also riddled with guilt — survivor’s guilt — particularly when she learned about O’Keefe.

Depressed and traumatized, she sought healing through an avocation that had always called to her: comedy.

She took a class in stand-up comedy taught by the famed comic George Carlin, and started performing at clubs throughout Los Angeles and Orange counties, working with such comedic icons as Robin Williams and David Letterman.

“That was my therapy,” she said. “It transformed everything I did. I became existentialist, living life to the max.”

She also used her comic skills to inform her teaching. Ratfield was well-known for utilizing humor in the classroom, as a means to connect with students, to add nuance and depth to her lessons, and to infuse her renowned student musical productions with bursts of creativity. And throughout her career at Lincoln, she continued to crack up her colleagues in the teachers’ lounge.

Retirement hasn’t dimmed Ratfield’s boundless energy. She is back on the stage, performing regular gigs at the Harp Inn Irish Pub in Costa Mesa, and she recently auditioned for “America’s Got Talent.” An educational foundation that she started to train teachers in cutting-edge techniques is another one of her passion projects.

Ratfield is well aware that, despite the break in the O’Keefe case, the chances of achieving some resolution in her own case remain slim. She can live with that, she said.

This resilient woman found her way back from the dark through humor. We who have learned from her and laughed with her are grateful that she did.

Patrice Apodaca is a former Los Angeles Times staff writer, and is the coauthor of “A Boy Named Courage: A Surgeon’s Memoir of Apartheid.” She lives in Newport

Beach. She is a Newport-Mesa public school parent and former Los Angeles Times staff writer. She is also a regular contributor to Orange Coast magazine. She lives in Newport Beach.