

The Crime Cafe with Dennis Griffin

Presented By:



Debbi [00:00:13]: *Hi, everyone. This is the Crime Cafe, your podcasting source of great crime, suspense, and thriller writing. I'm your host, Debbi Mack. Before I bring on my guest, I'll just remind you that the Crime Cafe has two ebooks for sale: the nine-book box set and the short story anthology. You can find the buy links for both on my website, www.debbimack.com under the "Crime Cafe" link. You can also get a free copy of either book if you become a Patreon supporter. You'll get that and much more if you support the podcast on Patreon, along with our eternal gratitude for doing so.*

Debbi [00:01:02]: Hi, everyone. Before I introduce my guest, I am going to give an extra thank you to my patrons, Ken MacClune and S. Koren. When this goes live, it'll be after "Thank You Patrons Day", but this is an extra thank you to you guys. I should be thanking my patrons every day for supporting the podcast. If you're interested, just go to my website www.debbimack.com and click on 'Crime Cafe'. Check out my Patreon page and the Crime Cafe ebooks while you're there. And now, I'm pleased to have with me today an author who writes crime fiction and true crime. A 20-year veteran of law enforcement, his latest book concerns the topic of cold cases. It's my pleasure to introduce Dennis Griffin. Hi, Dennis, how are you doing today?

Dennis [00:01:59]: Oh, hi Debbi, a pleasure to join you.

Debbi [00:02:02]: I'm so glad to have you here. I read your blog, your guest post, and that is just some powerful stuff you have in there about how unsolved murders end up being cold cases. Could you tell us a little bit about how you got involved in cold case investigation?

Dennis [00:02:22]: Yes. I was working as a private investigator for a firm in central New York and upstate New York. And my boss assigned me to investigate the 2007 death of a soldier from the 10th Mountain Division stationed at Fort Drum in Watertown, New York. So, I met with the mother of the deceased soldier, and she explained to me that the case—this was in 2010, so it was a three-year-old case at that time—the mother explained that she had not gotten any answers through law enforcement and through the Army CID investigations of her son's death, and she wanted us, she wanted my employer to see if we could find out any answers for her as to what may have happened to her son.

So, that was how I initially got involved. And there was a case of where her son had recently returned from deployment to Afghanistan. He'd just assigned back on the base after a 30-day leave, and this again was in 2007, and he moved off base with another soldier to share an apartment. He was there one night, the next night after they get off duty, he went out bar hopping. He disappeared that night and was never seen again. A missing persons report was filed with the local Watertown City Police Department, and the Army considered him as an AWOL after, I think, it was 48 hours.

Six months later, his skeletal remains were found in a field about three miles outside of Watertown. They were in such condition that no toxicology could be done and they couldn't establish a cause or manner of death, so everything was listed as 'undetermined'. And that was the situation I became involved in trying to find out her

son's activities that night; why he disappeared from the bar he was at and how he happened to end up in that field. So, that was my first involvement with that.

Debbi [00:05:00]: Hmm, so you were a private investigator?

Dennis [00:05:04]: Yes. I had retired from New York State and I was then working as a private investigator.

Debbi [00:05:10]: Very interesting. How do you decide which cold cases should be reopened?

Dennis [00:05:19]: Well, what I do, and I also have a blog talk radio show called *Crime Wire*, in which we profile some of these cold cases, and you have to use good judgment. And you always want to do a case that, if it hasn't been determined to be a homicide, if it already hasn't been ruled as a homicide, and it's either a suspicious death or possible suicide or accidental death, you have to make sure that there's enough information on the part of the survivor, the next-of-kin, her family members to indicate that there was some type of foul play.

For example, take a suicide situation. It's very difficult, understandably, in a lot of cases, for the family to admit or acknowledge that their loved one may in fact have taken his or her own life. And in some cases, there's substantial information to indicate that there was suspicious activity or that the so-called suicide may not have been a suicide. In other cases, you just have a gut feeling. The family member just says, "I know my son or daughter" or whatever would not have harmed him or herself. And it's unfortunate, and the people may be right, but you can't get very far as far as reopening a case if you don't have some type of information to go on or some strong indication that there was in fact a crime committed.

Debbi [00:07:03]: That's interesting. I was just wondering; you were talking about how the volume of these cases seems to be rising.

Dennis [00:07:14]: Yes.

Debbi [00:07:14]: I was just wondering if there was like a triage procedure for going through all of them.

Dennis [00:07:22]: Well, basically, when people contact me, I get all the information I can from them. I do, usually, a phone interview and we of course have emails. And I request documentation. Police reports, newspaper articles, anything they can send to me to help me properly evaluate the situation and determine whether it's something I think I can be of any assistance in. When I find out that there just isn't anything there, there's really not enough information to even start an investigation, as much as I hate to do it, I have to tell the people "I'm sorry but I don't believe I can help you. I don't believe we have enough to go on here to really get into an investigation".

So, those are difficult things. If there's any possibility at all that I think we can do some good and maybe take some type of action that might lead to additional leads being developed, or possibly law enforcement taking a second look at where the case stands, I will try to do that. I really hate to say no, although there are certain

occasions where you just have no other choice. But if I can find some way that I think we can do some good, I always like to give it a shot.

Debbi [00:08:59]: That's excellent. The two examples from your guest post were just kind of sickening to me. The idea that one of the cases went cold because of possible anti-gay bias. And the other one, the alleged suicide, where they didn't even bother to basically verify what the husband was saying. How often do you come across cases that egregious?

Dennis [00:09:28]: More often than you would think. Until I got involved with that missing soldier, deceased soldier case, I never dreamed that there would be that many, that there would be that volume of these types of cases. And I want to say I'm former law enforcement, I'm very pro-law enforcement, but what I am not supportive of is incompetence or laziness or cover-ups. The police do, probably 99.9% do one heck of a job. They're dedicated. They want to solve their cases and so on, and my hat goes off to them.

But because law enforcement, like any other business, is comprised bottom line of human beings, I know they have a lot of technology today and they have computers and scientific advancements and so forth, but the bottom line is that human beings are the ones that enter the data and so on and so forth. And whenever you're dealing with human beings, you're gonna have isolated cases where someone may be just not as up to speed and not up to par. And those are what are upsetting when you find situations like that.

And I believe that the survivors of these deceased people, because of that, or in certain cases being denied resolution, they're being denied answers and their deceased loved one is not getting justice.

Debbi [00:11:09]: Hmm. And do you have any sense of the reaction to various people? I guess, I mean from various people, the reaction from, say, readers, from criminal justice professionals, and from the survivors? What was their reaction to the book?

Dennis [00:11:31]: It's been very positive. Reviews, so far, for example, have all been five stars. One of the problems readers have is these stories are quite graphic. I mean, we're talking death cases. And the emotional gamut you run, like when I was putting these stories together, I did a little editing. Most of the contributors had never written before, so I wanted to keep stories in their own voice but I also wanted to make them readable.

So, I did some minor editing, as little as possible, and I was going through these emotions. I mean, I went from shock to anger to frustration to sympathy, the whole thing, because each of these stories takes you through that road.

For example, one of the stories in there is called "The Lovers Lane Murders", and I've talked to the father of one of the victims many times over the years, and we always do one of my podcasts every anniversary of the murder. And this was the case out of Texas, out of Houston. And this young fellow, the son, was on one of his first dates with this girl.

They had gone to an area, which was called a “Lovers Lane” area and parked. And a person or persons unknown showed up at the scene, they took, they separated the two, they tied him to a tree, and then they raped and murdered the girl. And he, of course, had seen and heard it. Just the anger I felt knowing what this kid, a young man, went through. And then, they killed him and of course, he had to know that he was next. I mean, I just can't imagine what must have gone through his mind to have to endure that.

And it was difficult for me to do these stories, actually, and I wasn't directly involved but just reading them. And then I would talk and otherwise communicate with the providers, the contributors, and a lot of people who had initially wanted to tell their stories found out, when it came to reliving them and putting them on paper, they couldn't do it.

Debbi [00:14:26]: Mm-hmm.

Dennis [00:14:26]: It was just too much. They had good intentions but they just didn't have the emotional wherewithal to be able to see it through. So, it was an experience I had never gone through before and it was something.

Debbi [00:14:43]: Oh, my gosh. Can you tell us a little bit more about *Crime Wire* and *The Transparency Project*?

Dennis [00:14:52]: Yes, certainly. Several years ago, another lady and I—Susan Murphy Milano, she was a domestic violence expert—and I got together, and we decided we wanted to give people an opportunity, another platform to tell their stories. And these were cases, some were deaths, others were, like I said, Susan was into the domestic violence so we had some live victims who hadn't been killed but had been victims of domestic situations.

And so, we started *Crime Wire* and it was a weekly show. And Susan passed away a few years ago, and I lost interest for a while and then, after about two years, I decided to renew the *Crime Wire* broadcast, but I'm not a domestic violence expert, so I got into the death cases and focus solely on death cases.

And through them and through talking to all these people who ask to be on the show and ask for a chance to tell what their experience had been, I realized there were a lot more people out there who are what I consider victimized twice. First, by the loss of their loved ones. Secondly, by the system or shortcomings in the system that they relied on for resolution and justice.

And I decided that one of the issues that they encountered a lot was, when the case was a homicide, had been declared a homicide, ruled a homicide, and they tried to get records from the police, they would ask the police, you know, “it's been X number of years and we'd like to know what you have done, and you know, what did the investigation consist of, where are we at with it?” And the police in a lot of cases will say, “Well, this is an open case, therefore, we're not going to tell you. You can't see the records; you can't know what has been done.”

And of course, that's frustration as the family is trying to find out where things stand or how much of an effort has been made. So, they would even file a FOIA request or

Sunshine Law request, depending on the jurisdiction. And then they are told, “Well, open cases they’re exempt from FOIA requests. We don't have to honor them.” So, now, where do they go? Because the police agency that's handling the investigation is also the same one that decides what can and can't be released.

So, for example, if the investigation had been botched, if there had been irregularities, are they gonna wanna share that? You know what I'm saying, are they going to want to let other people know what happened or did not happen, what they did or did not do? So, I've started a Facebook group called *The Transparency Project* with the goal of getting legislation, hopefully, through public awareness, getting legislation passed that would help change and balance the playing field and give these survivors a better shot at having access to information that might help them understand what happened to their case. And maybe, depending on their resources, emotional and financial, they might be in a position to hire their own private investigators, for example, to take a look at the case. And they can only do that if they can get information, so that was where *The Transparency Project* came.

Of course, now, today, with all the stuff going on throughout the country, everybody's talking about transparency, you know, not just these cases but the idea of open—and I'm not advocating that every single case under investigation be opened up to the public, okay? There are lots of good reasons not to share certain information, the police should not share certain information with potential perpetrators and suspects. That's not an issue. The issue is, when, we've got one case, for example, that's in the book, it's over 50 years old. Now, after 50 years, what harm can it be to let the daughter of the victims know what happened? It just doesn't make sense.

So, there are a lot of good reasons for the police to withhold information but there are also certain cases where it doesn't make sense at this stage of the game to not share information with the family and let them know maybe for some resolution. So, that's *The Transparency Project*. And as part of that, I put together this book, *Survivors*, because I wanted to give people a chance to tell their stories not only through podcast but also through writing their stories and getting them out there in printed format and hopefully, draw attention or public awareness to the entire issue.

Debbi [00:20:56]: That's awesome. So, if people are interested, they should go to Facebook and look for *The Transparency Project*?

Dennis [00:21:04]: Yes. What I did when I started *The Transparency Project*, and I talked to some of the initial members, we decided to make it a closed group for this reason: you're dealing with people who are going through and have gone through some very stressful times regarding the death, and I wanted to make sure that we didn't get a bunch of scammers, and people trying to sell sunglasses and you know, that kind of membership.

So, it's a closed group now, you actually have to apply for membership. I get a chance to then take a look at the applicant and get a feel for, you know, for who they are and so forth. So, it is a closed group but anybody can go to the site, *The Transparency Project*, just request membership. I will take a look at who they are and then approve them. I've only had to turn down on a couple so far or a couple of people that didn't look like they were really interested in the cause, they were more interested in personal benefit.

Debbi [00:22:15]: Uh-huh. Well, I'm gonna have to wrap up real soon now but I just want to ask, is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you'd like to mention?

Dennis [00:22:27]: Yes. I really truly believe that if we can get enough support and public support for the survivors and the cause of the survivors in what we're trying to do, I think we can make a difference. Because a few phone calls to legislators, some letters, those types of things, if we can get that momentum going.

And in fact, we are in the process of doing a treatment, we are trying to get a documentary series started to profile some of these cases through a TV series. And so far, the contributors who have submitted their stories for the book are very interested in going further with it. Some people, the thought of TV scares them a little bit, you know, and they get ... they have second thoughts about that. But the majority are willing to take the next step and if we can get a network interested, they would be more than happy to tell their stories on camera. And if you can see these people and hear them, I mean a book is fine but if you could actually see them and the emotions and so forth, I think that would be very powerful. So, we're making some progress and forward movement in that area.

Debbi [00:24:04]: That's fantastic. Well, it's been great talking to you today and been wonderful having you on, Dennis. Thank you so much for being here.

Dennis [00:24:16]: I thank you, Debbi. I really appreciate the opportunity to talk to you and your audience.

Debbi [00:24:21]: It's my pleasure, believe me, and it's a very important subject, so I'm so glad you were on. Before we go, let me remind you, as if you have a choice, that you can find the buy links to the Crime Cafe nine-book set and short story anthology at my website www.debbimack.com along with my Patreon page. Please check it out. Thanks to everyone for listening and please leave a review. It helps a lot. On the next episode, I'll be talking to mystery author, V.S. Kimanis. See you in two weeks, and until then, happy reading.