

CASE STUDY I

DNA LINK LEADS TO LIFE SENTENCE

It was her first overnight shift behind the counter at Big Ben's convenience store. Tragically, it was also her last.

Marie Lorraine Dupe, 46, was stabbed to death in Sydney, Nova Scotia, on March 22, 1992. The killer used a 30-centimetre store knife to stab the victim dozens of times. As she lay bleeding to death on the floor, he snatched \$300 from the cash register and two cartons of cigarettes. His escape on foot in a blinding snowstorm made it impossible for police dogs to follow the trail.

There were other leads – several cigarette butts and a used coffee cup – but forensic science was not far enough advanced to extract useful samples for DNA analysis.

Local police conducted a massive investigation, interviewing 200 people, but the murder remained unsolved for more than a decade. With every lead exhausted, frustrated police, along with the family and friends of the victim, could only hope for a break in the case.

By January 2001, technology had progressed far enough to allow authorities to establish a DNA profile from the items carelessly discarded at the scene of the crime. The profile was added to the National DNA Data Bank. Eventually, that would be the critical link leading to a conviction in Nova Scotia Supreme Court and a mandatory life sentence.

In a totally unrelated case nine years after the murder – and hundreds of kilometres from the scene of the

horrific crime – an Ontario court convicted 28-year-old Ernest Gordon Strowbridge of assault causing bodily harm. The judge, citing a relatively new section of the Criminal Code, ordered Strowbridge to provide a biological sample for the purposes of forensic DNA analysis. The resultant profile was entered into the National DNA Data Bank. It generated a “hit” with a profile from the DNA on one of the cigarette butts found at the scene of the Big Ben's murder.

That discovery led to Project Phoenix, an elaborate undercover operation spearheaded by the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), in close collaboration with Cape Breton Regional Police who now had renewed hope that Marie Lorraine Dupe's killer may have been found.

In a carefully planned operation, the OPP arrested Strowbridge in July, 2001 on an outstanding warrant for possession of stolen goods. An undercover officer, posing as another



prisoner, befriended Stowbridge as they were transported in a police van.

After the two were released from custody, the officer asked if Stowbridge would be interested in making some quick money. Over the next several weeks, Stowbridge was involved in several vehicle thefts that were actually orchestrated by police.

Eventually, he was given the opportunity to meet with the crime boss to interview for a job with the organization. The meeting took place in a Toronto hotel, with a hidden police video camera capturing every word.

Eager to impress the boss, Stowbridge volunteered the gory details of the 1992 stabbing in Sydney.

"I got drinking Kelly's wine, back in Nova Scotia 10 years ago," he tells the undercover officer, "and I did that Big Ben's murder. I didn't realize I done it until the next day... maybe she didn't serve me or something. I don't know. Maybe she was rude to me, laughed in my face. The next thing I know I'm over her, jabbing her."

The videotape, combined with powerful DNA evidence, led to a trial in Nova Scotia. The court heard that

the odds of his DNA matching that of another male were one in 1.5 trillion.

Faced with overwhelming evidence against him, Stowbridge pleaded guilty to second degree murder and received the mandatory sentence of life imprisonment.

The presiding judge was emphatic about the importance of the DNA evidence. "We live in a new time in the criminal justice system," noted Justice Joseph Kennedy. "So-called cold cases are now coming before the courts . . . because there have been remarkable developments in the DNA process."

