

Tale of two sisters

Cancer-stricken woman wants to clear up mystery of 1979 murder

On a blazing hot morning, a team of surveyors from the town of Markham made their way along the edge of a cornfield in York Region and came across a grisly scene.

About a kilometre off Warden Ave., along a rutted path favored as a lover's lane, they stumbled upon the body of a woman. The time was 10:30 a.m., July 31, 1979.

She lay fully clothed, face-down. The tall grass around her face was stained muddy brown. When police flipped her over, they saw only the skeleton of someone who had suffered massive head trauma. The heat and insects had stripped flesh, exposing her skull. She was identified via fingerprints.

Her name was Kathleen McLaughlin, 33, a small-town girl whose tragic life had driven her into the world of heroin and prostitution. Newspapers carried a few stories about the search for her killer. Investigators issued a sketch of a suspect. Friends on Toronto's tenderloin took up a collection to pay for her funeral.

That lover's lane is now an industrial park. Leads dried up and so did interest in Kathleen McLaughlin.

But Florence Vandewalker has lived with the mystery of what happened to her little sister for 19 years. The guilt at not being able to save Kathleen from herself has subsided. So have the nightmares that haunted her sleep. Anger and suspicion linger. Now Florence just wants answers.

"I would just like to know who did it. In the beginning I was out for revenge. I was bound and determined I was going to find out who did this," Florence says.

There's a renewed urgency to her search. Florence has battled cancer and now faces the prospect of another round of chemotherapy. She worries she might not make it this time. When she goes, there will be no one left to hold out hope that Kathleen's killer will one day be found.

She wants to know who took her baby sister to that remote cornfield and left her battered and bleeding.

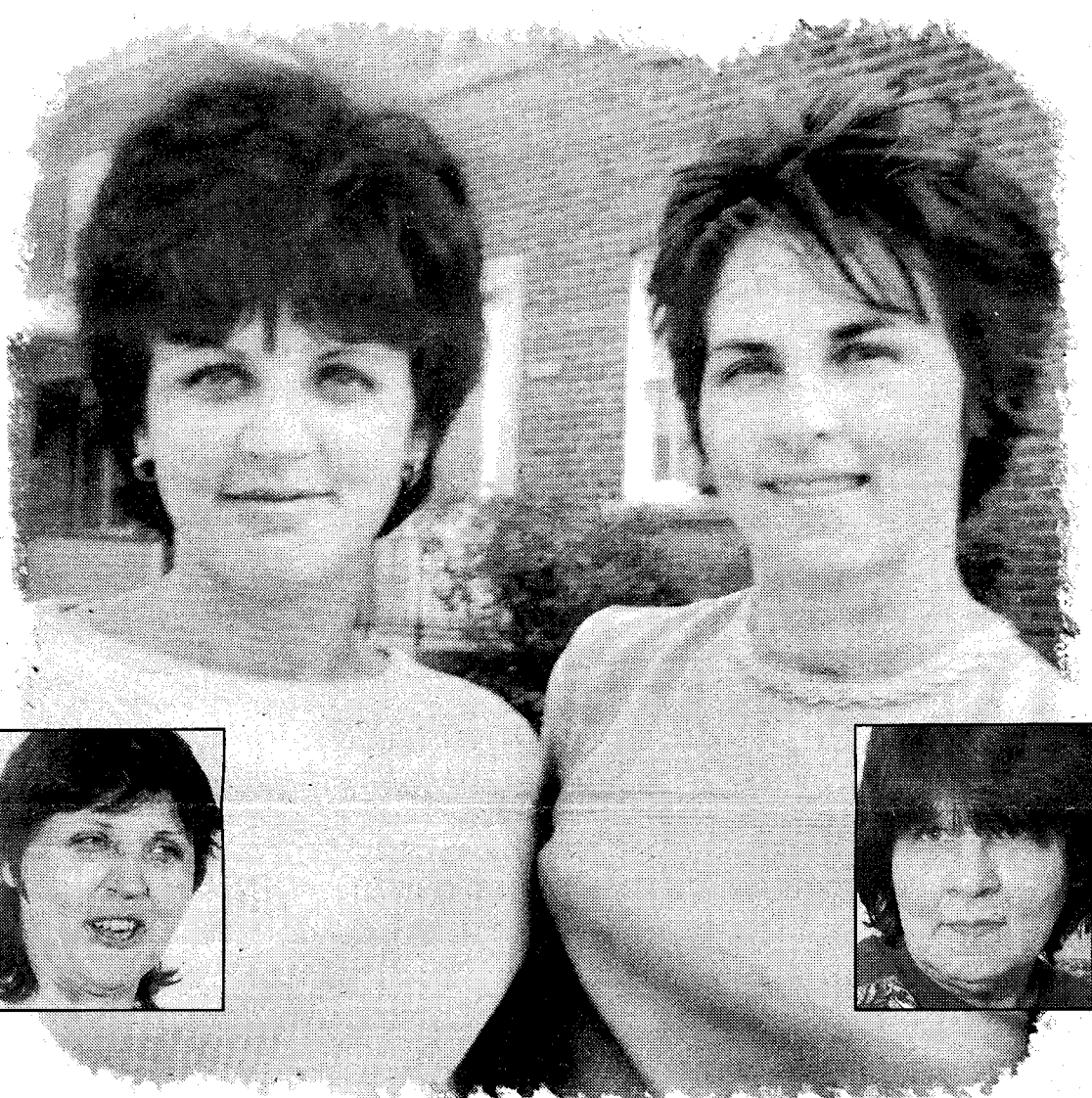
"It would be such a relief that I finally know who did it."

Kathleen McLaughlin — Kay to her family — was the youngest of four kids raised by her mother, Muriel, near Port Perry. Florence, the oldest, remembers her mother as a caring, gentle woman who was estranged from her children's father.

In 1961 Muriel, then 40, became ill with cancer. Her death sent Kathleen's life spinning out of control. As the youngest, Kathleen was sent to Toronto to live with her father. She escaped from her loss by running with a neighborhood girl who was already dabbling in heroin.

By the time she was 15, she was hooked, and came to support her habit through prostitution.

"My problems of insecurity, inferiority, frustration and depression all began with my oatmeal bowl," Kathleen later wrote of her childhood in a letter to Florence.



HAPPIER TIMES ... Kathleen McLaughlin, left, and sister Florence in the late 1960s. Inset left, Kathleen as she appeared just before her murder in '79 and, inset right, Florence today.

- SUN files, Mike Cassese photos

"Most people's oatmeal bowls had nice things written on the bottoms, so when you finished all your oatmeal it would say ... 'Yes, mother loves you' ... When I got down to the bottom of my oatmeal bowl, it said, 'ALL GONE, DUMMY.'"

"We tried to talk to her about it. She would laugh it off like it was a big joke," Florence says.

"I had no idea when they take heroin how they react or how long it would last. But she used to come to my place to get some sleep and get cleaned up ... I told her you know where I live and if you ever need help come here," Florence says.

Kathleen racked up a criminal record that included robbery, car theft, theft, drugs and fraud. In the early '70s, a window of hope opened. She began a stable relationship and weaned herself off heroin with methadone. But the romance went sour and she was in and out of treatment programs and the Clarke Institute.

By 1976, Kathleen was on the street, hang-

ing out in the Sherbourne and Carlton Sts. area. Once a clear-eyed, dark-haired beauty, she had packed on weight, the flesh of her face had begun to sag and she looked dishevelled.

Florence pleaded with her sister to straighten out. "She said: 'You're not my mother! I don't have to listen to you!'"

On June 10, 1979, she and another man rolled a fellow street denizen, and Kathleen was arrested. She was released from custody the next day on the condition she report to court officials. She reported on June 19, but missed her June 23 appointment. On June 27, a hooker spotted her near the La Baza restaurant on Carlton St. It was the last time anyone saw her alive.

Since 1971, when the region of York was created, there have been 101 murders there, 15 of them unsolved. Those files have been divvied up among the members of York Regional Police's homicide squad, and since he joined the team in 1993, Det. Mark Tatz has been responsible for the case.

"There's a couple of theories as to how it

was actually done," says Tatz as he pulls through a case file thick with tissue-thin witness statements and horrific crime photos.

It wasn't unheard of for johns to bring hookers up there for privacy, then ditch them without payment. Perhaps McLaughlin and her customer drove there to turn a trick and the deal went sour.

"As he tries to take off, she jumps in front of the car and tries to stop him, trips and falls and gets hit. Or she gets thrown out of the car and he backs up and smacks her in the head," Tatz said, adding that the type of injuries Kathleen sustained were not consistent with a beating.

There's also the chance she ran afoul of drug dealers. Tatz said she had robbed drug dealers in the past. There was no evidence she was sexually assaulted. Investigators found no DNA samples or tire tracks.

The seedy world inhabited by Kathleen, who used 11 aliases, didn't help police. Many of her associates would only give police their first name, and their only address was whatever street corner they frequented.

"Even today it would make it more difficult. You are dealing with a group of people who generally don't want to assist the police," Tatz says.

As many as 10 investigators were assigned to the case and over 100 witness statements were taken. Eight suspects were identified and all were cleared. A suspicious man was seen at the time of Kathleen's disappearance in the cruising area trying to convince women to accompany him north of the city. Police circulated a composite sketch. That man was tracked down, interviewed and ruled out as a suspect.

Over the years, two other men were checked out as possible suspects — one in '82 and another man in '95. Both were also cleared. Without someone coming forward to help police, hope for solving the case remains "very poor," Tatz says.

"It is going to take someone having a conscience and saying: I was there or somebody told me."

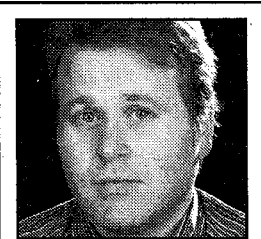
Last month, Florence quietly and privately observed what would have been her sister's 52nd birthday. And on July 31, she also marked the 19th anniversary of her death.

"Always, when she was leaving, she would kiss me goodbye. She thought she was going to live forever," Florence says. Among her few mementoes of her sister, there's a letter dated August 1969, written from jail, where Kathleen was serving time, trying to straighten out her life.

"Listen Flo, the past is the past and I am going to forget all or at least I'm going to try my best. Drugs and the whole bit," she wrote.

Kathleen was desperate to forget her past. While there's still time, Florence refuses to forget.

(Anyone with information is asked to contact York Regional Police at 905-773-1221, ext. 7865, or Crime Stoppers.)



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— Florence Vandewalker, on the 1979 murder of her sister

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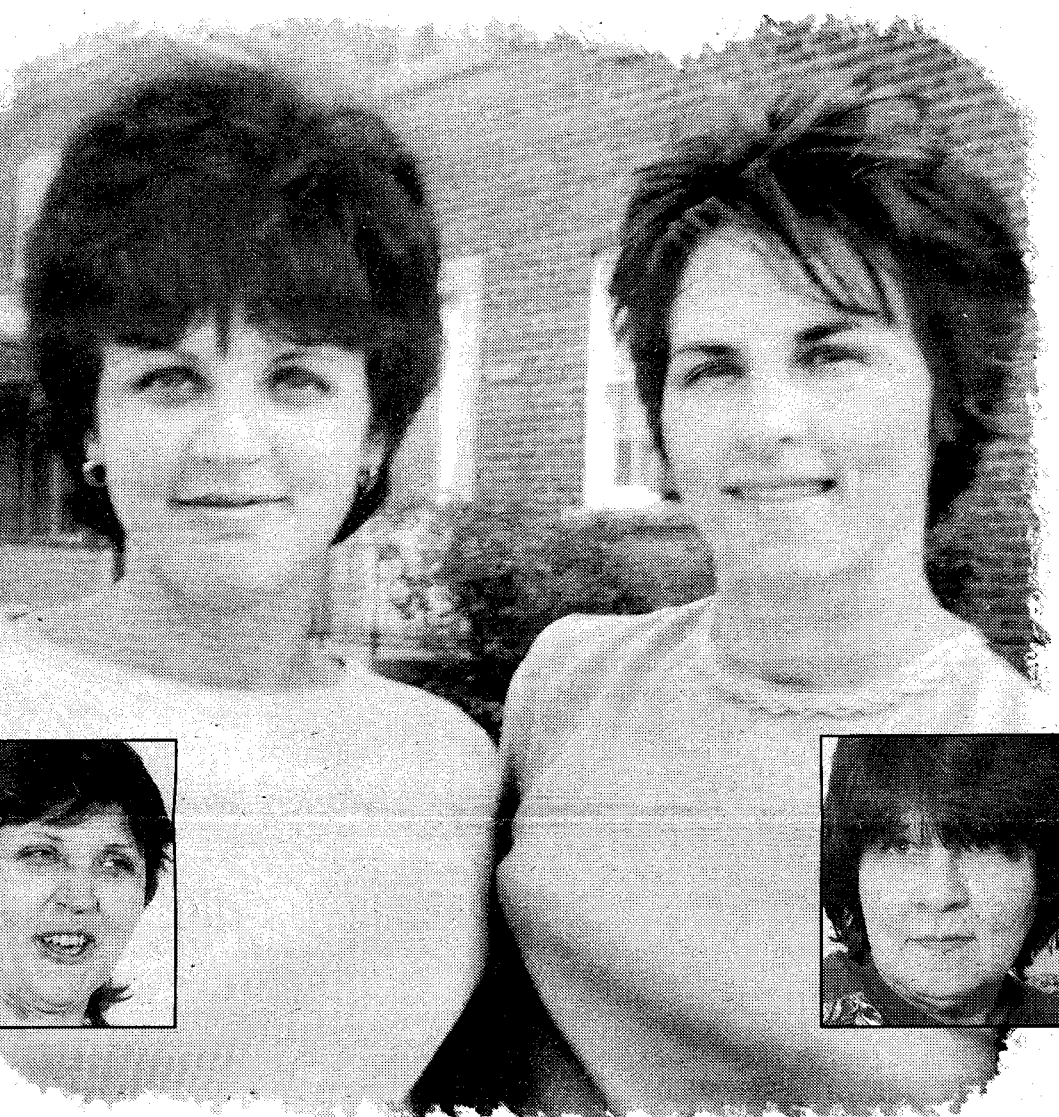
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