

# TIME

FROM THE MAGAZINE

Monday, Mar. 07, 2005

## Was the Killer Next Door?

Dennis Rader was a husband, father, church leader --and is now the man accused of terrorizing Wichita

By JEFF CHU

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Like all young moms in Wichita, Kans., in the late 1970s, Paula Rader had every reason to be afraid. A killer was on the loose. He was known as BTK--for "bind them, torture them, kill them," from a note sent to the local newspaper after he murdered four members of the Otero family in 1974. By 1979, when Paula's daughter Kerri was born and her son Brian was 4, BTK had killed three more female victims. But years later, BTK would send the cops a photocopy of a book cover with the adage "Never kill anyone you know," confirming that Paula might have been the safest woman in Wichita all along. As it turned out, she had been sleeping in the same bed as the man now suspected of being the serial killer.

Thirty-one years after the first BTK attacks, Dennis Rader, 60, was charged last week with 10 counts of first-degree murder. Paula had been envied by women at her church for the way her husband doted on her, helping with her coat and always opening the car door. The possibility that her husband of 34 years might be BTK has left her "in quite a lot of shock," says Brent Lathrop, a friend of hers since elementary school and co-owner of the Snacks convenience store, where Paula has worked as a bookkeeper since 1985. She is not alone in her distress. Any sense of righteous satisfaction that a brutal killer might be off the streets came with questions about how Rader--a former scout leader, a pillar of his church, a devoted husband and dad--allegedly could be so skillful at leading a double life.

Rader's lawyers are trying to find out if, in fact, he did. They have been spending as much as five hours a day, every day, with Rader at the Sedgwick County detention facility, sessions during which their client takes copious notes, complains about sleepless nights and growing depression, and asks repeatedly after his wife and kids, who haven't spoken to him and are believed to be in seclusion together outside Kansas. "He has so far been easy to deal with," public defender Sarah McKinnon tells TIME. "At times he seems weary. But I have seen him smile."

The horrific tally of 10 murders attributed to BTK began with that of Joseph Otero, his wife Julie and two of their five children, who were strangled in their home. The killer masturbated on 11-year old Josephine Otero, leaving evidence that, in the 1970s, investigators did not have the technology to analyze. Later, when the man claiming to be BTK took responsibility for the Otero murders in a letter to the Wichita Eagle, he referred to himself as a "monster" with a "sexual perversion hang-up." The toll grew to include six more women--all but two in their 20s--killed from 1974 to 1991.

Had the statute of limitations not expired, Rader would also be facing a charge of attempted murder, in the case of the lone person attacked by BTK to have survived, Kevin Bright, whose older sister Kathryn was stabbed and strangled to death three months after the Otero murders. After lunch on a warm April day in 1974, the Brights came home from taking their sister Karen to the bank. A man in a black stocking cap, camouflage jacket and black gloves was waiting, gun in hand, in the front bedroom. "He told us he was wanted in California and was headed for New York," Bright recalls. "He said all he wanted was money and a car, and he wouldn't hurt us."

BTK forced Bright to tie Kathryn to a chair in a back bedroom, then took him to the front and tied him up too. After forcing him to the floor, BTK tried to strangle Bright. "I just fought and fought," Bright, now 50, says. "He wasn't expecting me to get loose." BTK shot Bright three times in the head. Bright played dead, then stumbled the 15 feet to the front door and fled.

The description Bright later gave police--average-size guy, bushy mustache, "psychotic" eyes--led to nothing at first. And BTK was cocky enough to think he could get away with it. Run-of-the-mill criminals don't become pen pals with the press and the police. But BTK became a murderer-correspondent in the mold of Jack the Ripper and California's Zodiac Killer, who was still at large when BTK started his spree. In 1978, apparently frustrated by a lack of media attention, BTK wrote to a local TV station, asking, "How many do I have to kill before I get my name in the paper or get some national attention?"

In January 1991, BTK allegedly strangled Dolores Davis--at 62, his oldest victim--and dumped her under a bridge. Then he apparently went into hibernation until January 2004, after the Wichita Eagle ran a 30th-anniversary story about the unsolved Otero murder mystery. Two months later, the Eagle received a letter that contained, among other things, the driver's license of Vicki Wegerle, a young mom killed in 1986. The return address read Bill Thomas Killman. His ominous initials: BTK. Since then, BTK has communicated in some form about once a month, and it was his last missive, sent to a Wichita TV station in February, that might have produced his downfall--and the cops' break. Inside the envelope was a floppy disc. The disc had an

electronic imprint linking it to a computer at Christ Lutheran Church that Dennis Rader, the church-council president, used in late January, reportedly to print a meeting agenda. The disc, along with a DNA sample reportedly taken from Rader's daughter's medical records and forensic evidence collected in the 1970s, helped convince the cops that Rader was their man.

When Rader was arrested two weeks ago, his church family was stunned. "If you listed 500 people who were going to be arrested for this, he wouldn't be on the list," says Bob Smyser, who sometimes ushered with Rader at Christ Lutheran. Rader was known as an attentive father who used to take his kids, now both adults, camping and fishing. An Air Force veteran, he had been a scout leader for his son Brian's troop, with a particular skill for tying knots.

Smyser's three young sons knew Rader, who often collected the church offering, as "the man with the money plate." He helped kids gather their crayons before worship started and chatted with them about school. Convivial, if not very gregarious, he liked to hear other members' fishing stories. In almost every way, Rader seemed to live by the book. He was persnickety, but this had its upside. As an installation manager at the ADT alarm company in the 1980s, Rader drew incredibly intricate, accurate layouts of security systems and homes--not unlike the crime-scene diagrams sketched by BTK and sent to the media. "His attention to detail was flawless," says ADT co-worker Mike Tavares. "Anyone who didn't know a thing about it could have installed the entire thing." But his strict adherence to the thick binder of company rules known as the "blue pages"--and his expectation that everyone would do the same--rankled some colleagues. Rader left ADT in 1989 after clashing with a manager who had a more flexible philosophy.

In 1991, he became a code-compliance officer in Park City, the working-class Wichita suburb where he, Paula and one of BTK's victims lived. It seemed an ideal job for a lover of rules, and he held it until last week, when the city council fired him. "He'd come by and measure your grass, and if it was too long, he'd give you a warning and tell you, 'You got 10 days to mow it or get a fine,'" says James Reno, who lived a few doors down from the Raders. No permit for your garage sale? He would follow you to city hall to make sure you got one.

Some afternoons he would wander through backyards in the neighborhood, tranquilizer gun ready, chasing stray pets. He did it as if he were the action hero in a hunt-'em-down video game, tracking the creatures with an aggression that for a 7-year-old boy might have been charming, if a bit creepy. In a grown man, it was just weird. The true 7-year-olds knew it too--kids in the area made up a game called Hide from Dennis, taking cover whenever they saw his white van approach.

But you don't suspect someone of murder because he is nitpicky or hates stray pets--you probably just decide he is annoying. In fact, Rader's mix of good and bad traits makes him human and relatively normal--which is what experts, though perhaps not the rest of us, expect serial killers to seem. BTK "has done such monstrous crimes, so we want the guy to be a monster, drooling and with one eye in the middle of his forehead," says former FBI profiler Gregg McCrary, author of *The Unknown Darkness: Profiling the Predators Among Us*. "But we look right through them because they fit in society well." If Rader is convicted, he would go down in the annals of crime as "an evil Walter Mitty," says Robert Beattie, author of the forthcoming BTK history *Nightmare in Wichita*. "His external life was a mask of sanity. His internal life was one of violent fantasies."

How could BTK have juggled two lives for more than three decades? Perhaps the answer is that there wasn't such a dichotomy after all. Serial killers "like to have authority over others," says McCrary. Rader's life--from his city job to his community roles--"was about dominating others. He was smooth enough to do it in socially acceptable ways, when it was at church or Cub Scouts. But in his pathological life, he did it in a very abnormal way."

Experts suggest the murderer had a couple of reasons to resurface over the past year. Thirty years after the Otero killings, he may have wanted to remind everyone of his handiwork. Also, the local media were reporting on Beattie's forthcoming *Nightmare in Wichita*. "He couldn't stand somebody else writing his story," says psychologist Samuel Harrell, who consulted on the BTK case in the 1970s. "He's all ego." But he was not trying to get caught--he didn't think he could be caught. All the poems and puzzles he created over the years to taunt the police were peppered with clues to his identity, like a word search he sent to a TV station last May packed with terms like "lost pet" and "6220"--his house number on Independence Street in Park City. But he was just showing off, a peacock fanning out its feathers. "If he wanted to get caught, he would have hung out at the crime scene," says profiler McCrary. "He just thought he was smarter than everybody else."

That made Wichita police all the more exultant when they announced on Feb. 26 that "BTK is arrested." But Harrell says the declaration was part of "such an orgy of self-congratulation and excessive publicity that I wonder if Rader can get a fair trial in this county." Rader's lawyers, who will not confirm reports that their client has confessed to all 10 killings, wonder the same thing. A change of venue "is one of the things we'll be looking at," says counsel Steve Osburn.

The discovery process has just begun, and Rader is not scheduled to appear in court until March 15. In the meantime, he has to try to get used to prison food. One night at dinner, he found a pebble in his potatoes and told his lawyers that he considered it "extra protein." His only regular human contact, apart from his lawyers and the prison

guards, is with the characters of the book he is reading. It is a detective novel. --  
Reported by Maggie Sieger/Grand Rapids and David E. Thigpen/Wichita

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Donald Miller was the quintessential boy-next-door. Growing up in a quiet middle class neighborhood in East Lansing, Michigan, Don seemed completely normal. Although he grew up in the mid-70s, when many of his classmates were growing their hair long and dabbling in drugs, Don was a clean-cut straight arrow. He served as a youth minister at his church. He went to the local college, Michigan State University, where he played trombone in the school marching band. He dated a girl who went to his church, Martha Sue Young. But Don Miller wasn't the normal boy-next-door. He became a serial kille... A Killer Next Door Ratings & Reviews Explanation. Where to watch. Rent/buy from \$2.99. There are no critic reviews yet for A Killer Next Door. Keep checking Rotten Tomatoes for updates! Audience Reviews for A Killer Next Door. There are no featured audience reviews for A Killer Next Door at this time. See All Audience Reviews. A Killer Next Door Quotes. There are no approved quotes yet for this movie. Movie & TV guides. The Killer Next Door book. Read 1,012 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. No. 23 has a secret. In this bedsit-riddled south London wr... What can I say except after reading "The Wicked Girls," which was just amazing, "The Killer Next Door" was a huge disappointment. I had such a hard time reading this novel as I found it quite mundane; my interest kept wavering. I almost gave up a few times but I trudged on, and on, and on.