

# Unsolved

From A1

if the truth will ever come out. "You don't forget about something like that," Kubath said. "It was a shock. He was just a young man."

As the 50th anniversary of the Schwochert killing arrives today, the fallen teen's family members are hoping to rekindle interest in the case, and possibly turn up new evidence of what happened that night.

Doug Schwochert, the victim's younger brother, said it still hurts to think that both of his parents, Richard and Catherine, died never knowing who killed their first-born son, or why.

But seeing the mystery solved even today, Schwochert said, would bring relief and closure to him, his four sisters and other family members who still live every day with the unanswered questions.

"It would mean something," the 64-year-old brother said. "Finally, justice has prevailed then."

Others in Burlington who experienced the terrifying events that unfolded on New Year's Day 1973 similarly hope to see some logical conclusion.

Deborah Breske Vos, a neighbor and friend of the Schwochert family, remembers stopping at the gas station and seeing David just hours before he was killed. Breske Vos, who was 21 years old at the time, was returning from a New Year's Eve party with her husband when they stopped at the gas station to buy cigarettes on the way home.

The next morning, Breske Vos heard that someone in town had been killed overnight. She telephoned the Schwochert home to ask if David knew anything, seeing as how he had been out late. She is still haunted by the sound of Schwochert's father telling her over the phone that David had been murdered.

Five decades later, Breske Vos finds it difficult to believe that nobody in the small, tight-knit community could help police crack the case.

"Murder in our town is a pretty big thing," she said. "People were too close not to know about each other, and have the answers."

In the early 1970s, Burlington was a quiet little city with a population of 7,400 — about three-fourths of the size it is today.

Like any other year, 1972 brought such popular community events as the Kiwanis Club's annual pancake day. The city's Human Rights Council held a student poster contest commemorating "Brotherhood Week." The Haylofters community theater group had a hit with a musical-comedy, "The Boy Friend."

The year, however, was not without heartbreak, too. That summer, teenage sisters Susan Pringle and Judy Pringle, both Burlington High School students, were killed in a car crash on Spring Valley Road.

Inside the house at 416 Ridge Ave., Richard and Catherine Schwochert were busy with their six children — two boys and four girls. David Schwochert was the second-oldest at 16, just behind sister Debbie. Then there was Doug, Cindy, Jean and Terri.

David had a talent for woodworking, and he also enjoyed working with his hands on electronics and cars. Just recently, he had taken a job at the Clark gas station, 590 Milwaukee Ave.

A co-worker, Leonard Drew, wanted the night off for New Year's Eve, so he asked Schwochert to fill in.

Schwochert's friend, Steve Oaks, also worked at the Clark station. Oaks was just finishing up work when Schwochert reported for the overnight shift on New Year's Eve.

Oaks died in 2021, but his older



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A family photo from 1971 shows David Schwochert, second from right, posing with his siblings, youngest to oldest, from left, Terri, Jean, Cindy, Doug, David and Debbie.

## How to help

Anyone with information about the David Schwochert killing can contact investigator Susan Conley at the Racine County Sheriff's Office at 262-636-3170 or email [susan.conley@racine-county.com](mailto:susan.conley@racine-county.com).

brother, Gary Oaks, remembers that Steve was stunned with "total shock and disbelief" when he heard about Schwochert's murder. Steve realized that he could have easily been the one caught in harm's way, although he chose not to discuss it much later in life.

"I don't think he wanted to think about it," Gary Oaks recalled. "How the hell could something like that happen here?"

Kubath, who had joined the Burlington Police Department five years earlier, sensed that something was wrong as soon as he arrived at the Clark station for a routine building check about 4:20 a.m. The gas station was located along State Highway 36 at the current site of a parking lot across the street from Veterans Terrace.

The front door was unlocked, but the place was vacated. There were empty beer cans in a trash basket, and what looked like confetti on the floor. Kubath figured someone had themselves a little New Year's celebration.

But where was everyone?

After contacting the business owner, police realized that the gas station's teenage employee was missing.

"We had no idea where he was," Kubath said. "As the time progressed, now you know something's wrong."

A few hours later, a grim discovery led police to a field along Highway 36 just north of Burlington's city limits, about 2 1/2 miles from the Clark station.

David Schwochert was found dead, lying on his back in a field southeast of the intersection of Highway 36 and County Road W. He was lying in a pool of blood, with two bullet wounds in his head from a .38-caliber gun.

He was still wearing a blue-colored work uniform, but his money belt and coin-changer were gone, along with about \$60. No money was reported missing from the Clark station.

The site where Schwochert's body was found was just east of the current Taco Bell restaurant at 2056 Milwaukee Ave. Because it was outside Burlington city limits, the investigation was handled by the Racine County Sheriff's Office.

One of the first questions that investigators asked: Who found Schwochert's body, and how?

Police at the time said a private citizen named Wendell Adams happened upon the grisly scene. Adams, who lived in the area, was described as a police radio buff who heard transmissions about the search for



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David Schwochert, center, wearing a dark shirt behind the boy with sunglasses, joins other Burlington kids in a 1971 bike ride for charity, including neighborhood friend Gary Oaks, shown in the rear wearing a Schlitz Beer shirt.



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Just hours after he vanished from the gas station where he was working, David Schwochert was found shot to death Jan. 1, 1973, in the wooded area behind where a Taco Bell restaurant now operates at 2056 Milwaukee Ave. in Burlington.

Schwochert. He took it upon himself to join the search, and he found the teenager's body just after 8 a.m. — less than four hours after the search had begun.

Gary Large, a police officer for the neighboring Town of Burlington at the time, recalls that investigators were suspicious of Adams. The body was found in a remote area, and nobody could understand how Adams thought to look there, Large said.

"That was always the question," Large said.

How police were able to rule out Adams as a suspect was not explained at the time, and it remains unclear.

When word of the tragedy reached 416 Ridge Ave. that New Year's Day morning, Schwochert's parents called the family together and told their five remaining children that David had been killed.

Doug Schwochert, who was 14 years old, has little memory of the hours and days that followed. But he grew up thinking often of his lost brother, and feeling a profound sense of loss.

"It's always like there's something missing," he said.

Others in Burlington remember the episode as a moment of lost innocence for a community that suddenly went from peaceful and idyllic to seeming violent and frightening.

Dozens of students from Burlington High School filed into St. Charles Catholic Church for their fallen classmate's funeral.

"I just thought, 'Things like that don't happen here,'" Breske Vos said.

Oaks, now 72 years old, said it was difficult for years to go past the Clark gas station without thinking about David Schwochert. People eventually stopped talking about the tragedy, he said, but nobody stopped wishing that the murder mystery would be solved.

"We were just hoping," Oaks said, "that somebody someday would say something."

Police investigators working under then-County Sheriff Robert Bertermann recovered a bullet in the ground beneath where Schwochert's body was found. Then they came across the teenager's wallet, followed by a coin-changer believed to have belonged to him.

The Clark gas station company offered a \$1,000 reward for information about the killing.

But the days and weeks soon turned into months and then years, without any break in the case.

Tom Terry, who was Racine County's deputy medical examiner at the time, said his office had little involvement in the case. Because the cause of death was clear and obvious, Terry said, the medical examiner's work was largely finished after the death was declared a homicide.

DNA forensic testing was still years into the future in 1973.

Terry lived in Burlington, however, and he was friends with Schwochert's father. So he followed the police investigation with interest, wondering if the killer would turn out to be a passerby, a local resident, or perhaps even a serial killer on a rampage.

Unfortunately, considering the lack of evidence and the time that has passed, Terry expresses doubt that the case will ever be solved.

"We'll probably never know," he said.

Kubath, who served 30 years as a police officer, retired in 1995 with a nagging sense of unfinished business in the Schwochert homicide. Knowing that a young man lost his life without anyone being held accountable still troubles the ex-cop.

"I feel like justice hasn't been served," he said.

Bertermann retired as sheriff in 1977 and then died in 1996. Many other officers involved the case have died, too.

Richard and Catherine Schwochert both died in 2018 — just two months apart — and were bur-

ied together at St. Charles Cemetery near their son David's final resting place.

The Racine County Sheriff's Office is declining to discuss the Schwochert case or to release public records, citing the fact that even 50 years later, the killing remains the subject of an open investigation.

Lt. Michael Luell, spokesman for the sheriff's department, said evidence has been re-submitted to a state crime laboratory. But he would not divulge the nature of the evidence or any test results.

Officials at the state crime lab also declined to comment.

Schwochert's remaining family members have created a Facebook page and have appealed to the public for help closing the books on their family's unsolved personal tragedy.

Doug Schwochert, who owns an auto-repair shop in Burlington, said although the pain of losing his brother has long since faded, seeing the murder remain unsolved leaves a sense of incompleteness.

"We just want to know that, yeah, it's over," he said.

Some of David Schwochert's other siblings have chosen to share their thoughts via email.

Terri Nowicki, the youngest of the six children, recalled staring into her brother's casket and wondering, at age 7, why he was not moving or opening his eyes. Nowicki often wonders how her family might be different if David had lived.

"Our family wishes closure," she wrote, "for the heinous act of my brother's murder."

Debbie Regner, the oldest of the children, wrote that many people in Burlington remember the Schwochert homicide, which is an indication, she said, of how deeply the community was touched by the tragedy.

"Our family is not the only ones whose lives were changed," she wrote. "Our safe little city of Burlington would be forever changed, too."