

Forensic genealogy leads to murder charge in 1980 Kent cold case

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By [Sara Jean Green](#) - *Seattle Times* staff reporter

Years of covert surveillance to collect DNA samples from nearly a dozen first cousins ultimately led to the arrest last week of an Arkansas man accused of raping and fatally strangling a Boeing training supervisor and part-time waitress in Kent more than four decades ago, according to King County prosecutors.

Kenneth Kundert, 65, was charged Tuesday in King County Superior Court with premeditated first-degree murder in connection with the February 1980 killing of 30-year-old Dorothy “Dottie” Silzel. That same day, he was arrested and booked into jail in Clinton, Ark., a town of just over 2,500 people that’s 70 miles north of Little Rock, the state capital.

Kundert was identified as a possible suspect through forensic or genetic genealogy, a technique increasingly being used by law enforcement agencies across the country to identify possible suspects in decades-old crimes. Forensic genealogy builds family trees from DNA profiles recovered from crime scenes through a combination of traditional genealogy and the DNA profiles of relatives who used sites such as Ancestry.com or 23andMe to generate their own DNA profiles and then uploaded them to GEDmatch, a public genetic-genealogy website.

Its first known use was in 2018, when Joseph James De’Angelo, a former cop, was identified as [the Golden State Killer](#) responsible for a series of rapes and murders across California in the 1970s and ‘80s. That same year, the Snohomish County Sheriff’s Office [used forensic genealogy to identify a SeaTac man as a suspect](#) in the 1987 killings of a young Canadian couple, its first known use locally. Forensic genealogy also led to the [arrest and conviction of Patrick Nicholas](#) in the 1991 killing of Federal Way High School student Sarah Yarborough.

Prosecutors here have begun extradition proceedings to bring Kundert, who was 20 at the time of Silzel’s killing, back to King County. He has a court appearance in Arkansas on Monday, according to the Van Buren County Jail’s inmate roster. Since he hasn’t yet been moved to King County, no defense attorney is listed in court records.

The murder case against Kundert says that after several of his male cousins were eliminated as suspects, his DNA was found on a cigarette butt that was later matched to male DNA located on Silzel’s body.

Though there is no evidence that Kundert knew Silzel, one of his family members lived in an apartment that was about 1,200 feet from Silzel’s condominium, where she was found dead on Feb. 26, 1980, according to the charges.

Silzel worked full time in Seattle as a Boeing instructor but also had a part-time waitressing job at a Kent pizza restaurant a couple of blocks from her condo, according to charging papers and a

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Seattle Times news story published in August 1981 about her unsolved killing. She was last seen alive a little after 10 p.m. on Feb. 23, 1980, when she finished her shift at the restaurant and drove home.

Silzel, who had been divorced for five years, lived alone.

After Silzel failed to show up for work at Boeing and her family and friends were unable to contact her, a close friend's husband and a patrol officer went to her condo. Her car was parked in its usual spot and her front door was locked, but a glass sliding door in the back was partially open and the locking mechanism appeared damaged, the charges say.

They found Silzel dead in her second-floor sewing room.

An autopsy determined Silzel suffered blunt force injuries to her head and died from asphyxia caused by compression of the blood vessels in her neck, charging papers say.

The Washington State Patrol Crime Lab was able to microscopically locate sperm on swabs from Silzel's body in 1980 but it would take 22 years before advances in DNA technology enabled scientists to generate a genetic profile for her unknown male assailant, the charges say.

The male profile was added to the FBI's Combined DNA Index System, known as CODIS, in 2002 and run daily against known samples of people convicted of felony crimes without ever resulting in a match. Fourteen years later, a partial DNA profile from a stain on a robe found wrapped around Silzel's arm was matched to the same unknown male.

In March 2022, a forensic genealogist employed by the California-based Identifinders International uploaded the male DNA profile to the GEDmatch and Family Tree DNA databases, identifying 11 potential suspects, who are all first cousins, according to charging papers.

Kent police began researching Kundert in September and learned he was living in Arkansas. At the request of a Kent police detective, detectives with the Van Buren County Sheriff's Office — who were conducting an assault investigation involving Kundert and two of his male relatives — tried to obtain a sample of Kundert's DNA during an interview, say the murder charges filed in King County.

During the lengthy interview, detectives watched Kundert smoke a pack of cigarettes, then place each butt in his pocket along with an empty water bottle he had drank from, say the charges, which note that Kundert declined to provide a voluntary DNA sample.

Meanwhile, Kent police found employment records showing Kundert worked in Seattle and Snohomish County in 1987 but no earlier records were available, say the charges. Prosecutors also determined that Kundert had misdemeanor convictions in King County in the 1980s and '90s, according to the charges.

(People convicted of misdemeanor crimes are not required to submit DNA samples for inclusion in CODIS.)

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In March, Kent police detectives went to Arkansas to surveil Kundert and watched him drive into the Walmart parking lot in Clinton while holding an all-white cigarette out the driver's side window, charging papers say. He extinguished the cigarette and dropped it into a receptacle outside the store.

Detectives collected the cigarette butts from the receptacle but only three of them were all white, the charges say. A DNA profile from one of the three white butts was then matched to the unknown male DNA taken from Silzel's body, according to the charges.

A reference sample of Kundert's DNA will be taken once he's extradited back to King County. It can take as little as a week for an out-of-state defendant to be transported if he or she waives extradition but can take three to five weeks if extradition is not waived before a governor's warrant is issued.

Prosecutors have requested that Kundert be held on \$3 million bail.

Seattle Times researcher Miyoko Wolf contributed to this report.

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