

SEARCH, RESCUE NO EASY TASK: COPS

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

Three years ago yesterday, 20-year-old Tammy Lynn Lamondin-Gagnon, a bubbly young woman with a smile that could light up a room, went missing.

It was only six months later, York Regional Police publicly pieced together exactly what had happened to Ms Lamondin-Gagnon.

The petite brunette was murdered some time between 1 a.m. and 6 a.m. on May 29, 1999 in a Millard Street home in Stouffville.

Investigators are confident their only suspect remains 27-year-old Pol Claassen, who committed suicide at his family's business a week after being questioned by police about Ms Lamondin-Gagnon's disappearance.

Mr. Claassen and Ms Lamondin-Gagnon spent time together at a Newmarket night club and, ultimately, wound up at the Stouffville home of his sister, who was vacationing with her family at the time.

At 6 a.m., the morning of Ms Lamondin-Gagnon's disappearance, Mr. Claassen went to a nearby grocery store and rented an industrial carpet cleaner.

Three years later, her remains have never been found.

York Regional Police Det.-Sgt. Mark Tatz, one of the investigators who led the search for Ms Lamondin-Gagnon, knows people question how officers could have failed to turn up her body for three long years.

At the same time, police search techniques have come under scrutiny over the past week with the discovery of murdered Washington intern Chandra Levy, whose skeletal remains were found by a man walking his dog in a park where she often jogged.

The rough-terrained park had been searched by police after Ms Levy had gone missing a year ago but no trace of her was found at that time.

On TV detective shows and in whodunit movies, finding a missing person or a body is often portrayed as an easy task, with officers swiping a piece of clothing with the victim's scent under the nose of a police German shepherd. The dog takes mere minutes to track down its prey.

But Det.-Sgt. Tatz says reality is far different.

"TV makes it look pretty easy. I wish it was as easy as TV," he said.

Det.-Sgt. Tatz, who stressed police continue to investigate leads about Ms Lamondin-Gagnon as they trickle in, said investigators wish they could find her body to provide some closure for the young woman's family.

"It's like each of the cases, we have a number of unsolved cases, they're all important to us. Tammy's is as important as the rest of them. We would love to find her and put it to rest," he said.

"I certainly hope she is going to be found. I have no problem committing the (police) resources, but you tell me where to start."

People forget, he said, York is three times the geographic size of Toronto and remains very rural despite years of development.

"Just look at an aerial map of York Region" to appreciate the difficulties in trying to pinpoint where a murderer might deposit a body.

When Ms Lamondin-Gagnon first went missing, a witness, who was trying to throw police off course, suggested she was last seen at Newmarket's Fairy Lake.

On Tuesday morning, Const. John Loughry, who was new to the job when he and other search and rescue officers hunted for evidence in Ms Lamondin-Gagnon's case the summer of 1999, retraced the steps he took during that painstaking search of Fairy Lake.

He demonstrated different techniques police use in a search, such as compass training, land navigation and advanced technical medical training.

Police also rely on lost person characteristics, depending on whether they are looking for a missing toddler, an older child, a wandering senior with Alzheimer's, an adult contemplating suicide or human remains.

Officers pattern out the most likely path their victim would have taken — such as the toddler who continues to ride his tricycle because he doesn't appreciate he is lost or the Alzheimer's patient who doesn't allow physical hurdles like deep brush to impede his path.

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But it is the "human element," the unwitting or deliberate acts of the victim or criminal, that is the most difficult piece of the puzzle to gauge.

The force's major crimes and missing persons unit was investigating Ms Lamondin-Gagnon's disappearance and search and rescue officers were not called in until two days after she went missing as the case moved from a young woman who hadn't come home after spending the night with friends to a more sinister vanishing.



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

York Regional Police search and rescue officer Const. Ron Disano (front) demonstrates how police separate, move and push aside every inch of brush, weed and grass during the painstaking task of looking for a missing person. Const. John Loughry (back) helps in the search.

Although Det.-Sgt. Tatz and other lead investigators, Insp. Brad Law and Insp. Randy Horne, were well trained in search and rescue techniques, York Regional Police had no formal search and rescue unit at the time Ms Lamondin-Gagnon went missing.

The unit was established about two years ago in response to an audit of the force and as a result of inquest recommendations.

Still, Const. Loughry, who also participated in searches for Ms Lamondin-Gagnon in other areas of the region, stressed officers had been trained in search and rescue prior to the formal establishment of the team, which acts as a support unit to other departments such as homicide and missing persons.

In addition to search and rescue personnel, officers from other units such as canine, underwater recovery, regular patrol, major crimes and homicide joined Ms Lamondin-Gagnon's family and friends and a private investigator in the hunt.

Looking back, Const. Loughry said there is nothing search and rescue officers would have done differently to find her body.

"What would I have done differently? There isn't anything."

Although Fairy Lake welcomes joggers, moms and tots, strolling seniors, cyclists and roller bladers every day, the open areas and well-used trails of the park mask the dense brush that skirts the train tracks running alongside the park and off the beaten path.

Const. Loughry demonstrated how search and rescue officers stood shoulder-to-shoulder, using a grid pattern as they spent hours looking for evidence of Ms Lamondin-Gagnon.

Each tuft of grass or dandelion patch is swept with a foot or baton to ensure small evidence is not overlooked.

While deep brush and steep terrain pose obvious hurdles, Const. Loughry said broken twigs or evidence snagged on thorns can also point police in the right direction.

Anyone anything suspicious was uncovered, identification officers were called to investigate. Const. Loughry and Det.-Sgt. Tatz said search and rescue officers aren't privy to whether any evidence uncovered aided detectives in the Ms Lamondin-Gagnon case.

Although officers have to concentrate on the job, Const. Loughry insisted each search weighs heavily regardless if the victim is a child, an emotionally disturbed adult or a senior with dementia.

"You've got a job to do. You provide the same commitment to it always. It's somebody's grandfather or somebody's grandmother, somebody's child, somebody's loved one. It's an important person," he said.

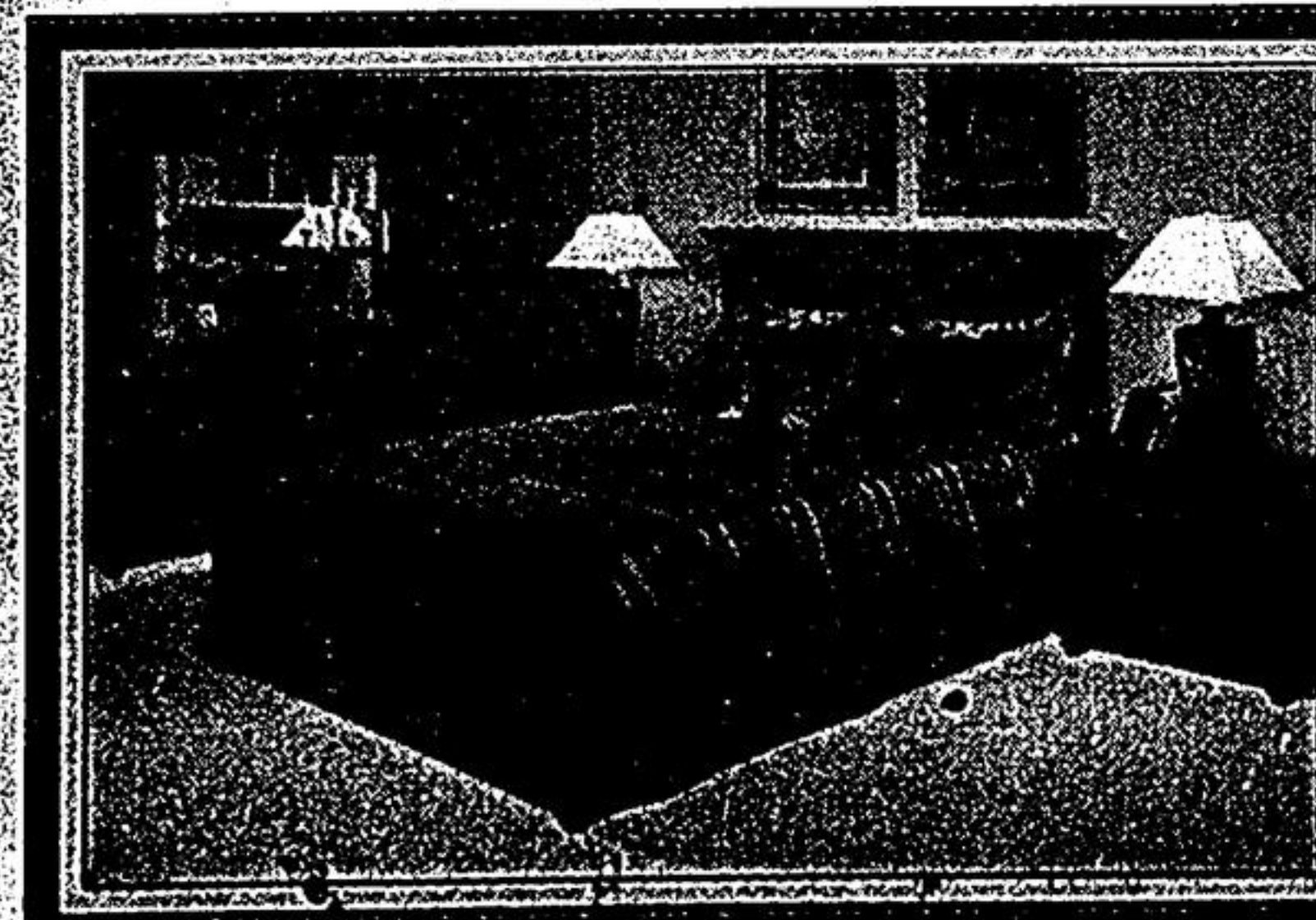
"The most difficult part of calling yourself a search and rescue team is, sometimes, you're just a search team."

Although Const. Loughry said search and rescuers properly scoured each search site for evidence, he admitted he is still upset remains of the young woman have never been discovered.

Other missing persons in York Region include:

- Linda Mariani of Richmond Hill; missing since Feb. 15, 2002;
- Pierre Mercon of Richmond Hill; missing since Oct. 31, 1997.

Anyone with information about Ms Lamondin-Gagnon or any other missing person in York Region is asked to call York Regional Police at 905-895-1221.



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