

**COLD-CASES**

# Middlesex cold case: Who sent the explosive device that killed Andrew and Patricia Puskas in 1982?

**Suzanne Russell** Courier News and Home News Tribune

Published 5:00 a.m. ET Aug. 9, 2018 | Updated 5:09 p.m. ET Aug. 10, 2018

MIDDLESEX BOROUGH - For nearly 40 years, a crime in this small town has remained unsolved.

Who sent the explosive gasoline-fueled device, disguised in a package, to the home of Andrew and Patricia Puskas, killing the two parents, destroying their home and leaving their three children orphaned, and why?

The Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office is revisiting the 1982 double homicide cold case in hopes of finding the answers to a crime that shocked the community. The public is asked to contact the prosecutor's office with any information about the case.

"Every cold case matters, every cold case is important because there is a victim," said Middlesex County Prosecutor Andrew C. Carey. "When it comes to murder or assault there is a victim out there and there is no closure for the family and friends and we don't like having unsolved crimes."

In the prosecutor's office, each cold case is assigned to a specific detective to concentrate on the case when time allows. The office tends to focus on cases where there may still be witnesses who might know something.

"And as time goes on of course that gets harder and harder," said Carey, who referenced how Michelle Lodzinski, a former South Amboy resident, was convicted of her 5-year-old son Timothy Wiltsey's 1991 murder in 2016, nearly 25 years after she reported him missing from a Sayreville carnival.

**READ: Michelle Lodzinski sentenced to 30 years for killing son**

## **READ: 6 years later, Linden High School graduate's murder remains unsolved**

### **READ: East Brunswick woman's 2009 homicide remains unsolved**

With the Puskas case, Carey is hopeful there are witnesses or some type of evidence, such as an item with DNA, for which testing has become more sophisticated, that will help solve the case.

"Somebody needs to know something. Somebody must know something about his case that hasn't been disclosed before," said Carey.

## **The package with blue bottles**

Sometime before 8:35 a.m. Feb. 25, 1982, an explosive, disguised as a package, was left near the front door of the Puskas home at 182 First St.

As the family was getting the three children ready for school, the package was noticed by the front door, according to Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office Detective Kevin Schroeck.

They brought the package, addressed to Andrew Puskas, into the home to take a look at it.

Schroeck said the family also contacted police because they thought the package was suspicious, and possibly contained an explosive device. They brought it inside because they weren't sure what it was until it was opened.

"They sent the kids outside," Schroeck said.

A 1982 Home News newspaper story of the incident indicated Andrew Puskas told police he considered the package a poor joke and did not seem to be alarmed.

"As the first arriving officer arrived on scene, the explosion occurred. The first arriving officer was immediately taken aback by the explosion, moved his car and began rendering assistance to the kids nearby," Schroeck said.

Schroeck said the first arriving officer described how the home's roof lifted off the house from the explosion.

The Home News newspaper stories indicate the bomb was attached to two bottles

containing a flammable liquid and a time set at 45 seconds that exploded in an archway between the living room and kitchen, collapsing the floor where the couple was standing, looking into the package, and setting the entire home on fire. Andrew and Patricia Puskas, both 35, were killed instantly, according to news reports.

Neither the arriving police officer, nor the children, were seriously injured, news reports indicate. The youngest child was in the family car, while the two older boys who had fled the home, suffered minor burns, according to newspaper reports.

The Crime Stoppers of Middlesex County website page about the Puskas case includes a description by one of the children of the device prior to detonating as two blue glass bottles, one dark blue and other a lighter blue. Several blue glass pieces were found at the scene, including one containing molded lettering reading in part "KING's" as part of the ending of a word.

Schroek said by all counts the Puskas were a nice family with no known enemies.

Newspaper reports indicate Andrew Puskas, a 1964 New Brunswick High School graduate, worked as a salesman in Newark and also was a lay minister. Puskas had attended Trenton State College and received an associate degree from Union County Technical Institute and had served in the U.S. Army Special Forces.

Patricia Puskas also was a 1964 New Brunswick High School graduate. She was not employed outside of the home, according to newspaper reports. The couple was active with their church and had no criminal records.

The children, all boys, were ages 9, 7 and 3 at the time of the explosion and later went to live with relatives. One of the children now lives out of state while another lives in the New Jersey area, Schroek said.

"It seemed like it was one of those cases that the public sort of found nerve-wracking, an explosive package shows up on your door," Schroek said.

## **A town shaken by a crime**

Former Middlesex Borough Police Chief James Benson agrees.

"People were shocked. Nothing like that happened in our community before," said Benson, who retired in 2010 after serving 18 years as police chief and 38 years with the police

department. "It was a huge thing for our community. The community was shaken by it for a long time after."

Benson said he was a sergeant at the time of the incident and he did not know the Puskas family.

He said their couple's backgrounds were investigated, but there was nothing that led to any answers about why someone would do this.

Schroek said looking through the case paperwork there are a lot of theories. Carey said there were rumors about a religious group but nothing came from that. He added every lead is being chased down, but there have been a lot of dead ends.

"We can't leave any stone unturned," Schroeck said.

## **How you can help**

The case is under investigation by Schroeck and Middlesex Borough Detectives Dan McCue and Sean Flanagan. Anyone with information about the double homicide can contact Schroeck at 732-745-3927 or McCue or Flanagan at 732-356-1900.

Information also can be provided to Crime Stoppers of Middlesex County, a non-profit organization that partners with law enforcement to enable the public to anonymously submit crime information and will pay a cash reward should it lead to an arrest.

Tip information may be provided anonymously by calling 1-800-939-9600 or submitted online at [www.middlesextips.com](http://www.middlesextips.com). Tips may also be sent by text messaging 274637 (CRIMES) with the keyword: "midtip" followed by the tip information.

Those who provide information will be given a unique numerical code that that allows them to communicate with the program and collect a reward should their information lead to an arrest. All reward amounts are approved and set by Crime Stoppers of Middlesex County Inc.

The Middlesex Borough Police Department also has tips line 732-356-1900 (TIPS).

*Staff Writer Suzanne Russell: 732-565-7335; [srussell@mycentraljersey.com](mailto:srussell@mycentraljersey.com)*