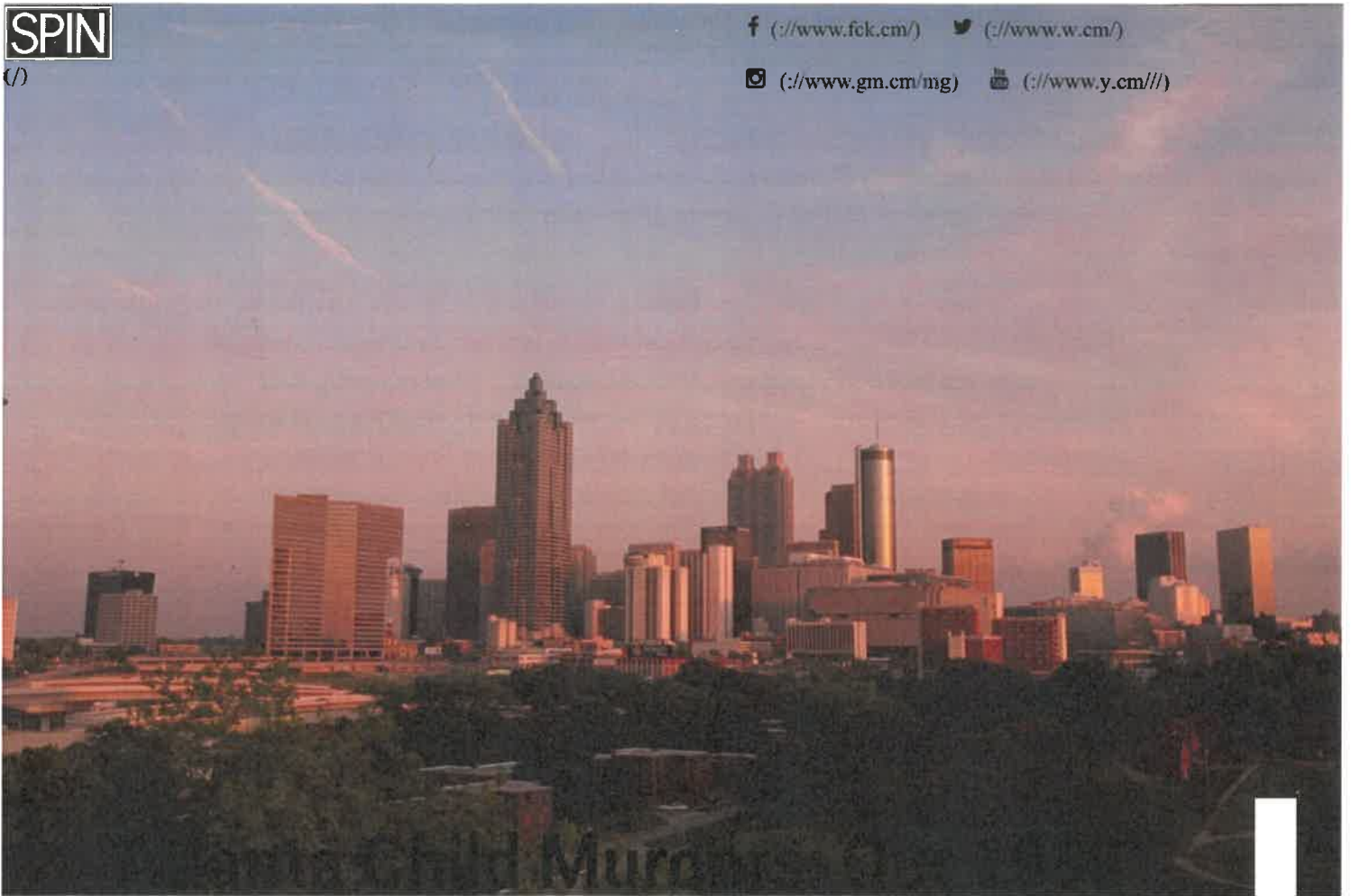


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CREDIT: Getty Images / Atlanta skyline 1994

# Feature, “A Question of Justice”

The facts of the following story come from volumes of court papers and police files our reporters went through

Written By **Robert Keating and Barry Michael Cooper**    December 29 2015, 12:32 PM ET

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*In late 1985, one of our editors, Rudy Langlais, stopped by my office one evening on his way home and casually said: “Would you be interested in new information about the Atlanta Child Murders? I got tipped off by some Guardian Angels there that the prosecutors got it all wrong, that at least many of the killings were done by the Klu Klux Klan.” I replied that I would indeed be interested.*

*Most of you reading this, if I may profile you, will be too young to remember, or possibly even have heard of, the Atlanta Child Murders or the Guardian Angels. Starting in 1979, a horrific crime spree, perpetrated over several years, claimed the lives of some 30 young, black boys. Eventually a man called Wayne Williams — who was actually never tried for the child murders, instead for the deaths of two adult men,*



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In February 1981, officials of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation and various other law enforcement agencies met in a downtown Atlanta office to discuss that devastating prospect. According to court papers, while a task force investigated the Atlanta child murders, another high-level and secret investigation discovered and covered up the fact that a Ku Klux Klan family may have been responsible for the murder of a young black boy and was possibly linked to the murders of 14 others in an attempt to ignite a race war between blacks and whites in the capital of the South.

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Faced with this astonishing discovery, these officials, black and white, decided to attempt to avert a bloody cataclysm by keeping secret the evidence of this plot and effectively hindering the public investigation. Subsequently, his lawyers claim, Wayne Williams was made a scapegoat — swept up in an investigation that had never centered on him — and rushed to conviction on the basis of evidence that was at best flimsy and at worst nonexistent. Overnight, Wayne Williams became the Atlanta Child Murderer and was sentenced to two consecutive life sentences. Meanwhile, the other investigation was quietly abandoned and incriminating evidence was destroyed.

While police scoured the ghettos, homosexual haunts, and psychiatric wards, according to the testimony of informants who were involved in Klan activity, members of the Sanders family in the backwoods just outside Atlanta carried out their plan to execute one black boy each month while arming themselves with high-powered rifles, fragmentation grenades, and various disguises for the urban war they expected to foment.

According to these informants, 30-year-old Charles Sanders was incensed when 14-year-old Lubie Geter backed a go-cart into his car. Sanders swore: “I’m gonna kill that black bastard. I’m gonna strangle him with my dick.” Several weeks later, Geter was found dead, strangled to death in a wooded area in the city. Shortly after, Sanders’ brother Don was heard on a wiretap to tell another Klan brother that he was going out to look for “another little boy.”



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One day last summer, Wayne Williams' lawyer received an anonymous package that astonished and frightened him.

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On July 7, 1980, the Atlanta Bureau of Police Services (ABPS) joined with other federal, state, and local law-enforcement agencies to form the Special Task Force on Missing and Murdered Children — the largest task force in the history of the United States. Despite the combined efforts of over 400 law-enforcement officers, the murders continued. By December, the total was 18 young, black children dead or listed as missing. Enraged by the suspicion that whites were responsible, packs of armed black vigilantes began patrolling the city's housing projects. City officials were helpless as the tensions grew out of control.

On January 3, 1981, 14-year-old Lubie Geter disappeared. His body was found a month later in a wooded area. Dog hairs were found on his body. The cause of death was listed as strangulation. His genitals, lower pelvic area, and both feet were missing. An eyewitness claimed she had seen him getting into a car with a tall white man with a jagged scar on his neck.

A month after Geter's body was found, a police informant identified by the code name "B. J. Jones" phoned his contact in the ABPS's intelligence division and said that he had information about the child murders, particularly the killing of Lubie Geter.

The call stunned his contact. Jones, who had a strong record of providing reliable information, had been one of their best informants for 18 years. He said that in 1978 or '79 he had met Charles Theodore Sanders, a member of the Ku Klux Klan, a narcotics dealer, and a drug user, who attempted to recruit Jones into the Klan because of his expertise with explosives. The Klan, Sanders told Jones, was attempting to create an uprising among blacks in Atlanta by murdering black children. Sanders said the Klan was also killing black adults, but not in Atlanta. He wanted Jones' help in committing more murders of Atlanta's black children.

Atlanta Child Murders ABC report





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Atlanta Child Murders NBC report

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On February 26, Police Services investigators were sure that the extremely volatile racial situation in Atlanta was about to explode. They feared that if the Klan investigation was turned over to the Metro Task Force, which was plagued by leaks, the news of the Klan's role in the killing of black children would lead to a war in the streets of Atlanta.

A meeting was called in the early morning of February 27 at the Georgia Bureau of Investigation in Atlanta, attended by Phil Peters, director of the GBI; Major Griner of ABD-SIS; Inspector R. Hambrick, Lieutenant Bob Ingram, Assistant Director Tom McGreevy, and Special Agent Adams of GBI; and Lieutenant Sam Hazel of ABD-SIS.

Griner had already received information that five of the murdered children knew each other: Lubie Geter, Aaron Wyche, Aaron Jackson Jr., Darron Glass, and Curtus Walker. The special committee was faced with an astounding realization. If these five boys knew one another, then Charles Sanders could also have known all of them.

Peters emphasized how sensitive the investigation was and how necessary that these discoveries not be revealed outside the committee. This bunker mentality led to the remarkable situation whereby two investigations into the murders were being conducted simultaneously, one unaware of the other. While the public investigation, mired in chaos and disorganization, pursued wild leads, employed psychics, entertained fantastic theories, and suffered from the ineptitude in its ranks, the secret investigation — run by a committee of sober professionals trying to avert a race war — focused very sharply and efficiently on its subject, the Ku Klux Klan and the violent Sanders family.



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On March 4, the committee's wiretap recorded a late-night phone conversation that made them shudder. Charles Sanders was overheard negotiating the sale of M16 rifles at a cost of \$25 each and fragmentation grenades at \$50 a case.

"If you threw that motherf\*\*ker into a crowd it would have to be someone you really wanted to get," said Charles.

"Yeah," said the other voice, "I suppose the Klan does s\*\*t like that."

"Yoo hoo," answered Charles.

On March 5, the committee decided to begin closing the net.



CREDIT: Getty Images

**On March 2, 15-year-old Joseph (Jo Jo) Bell disappeared** after leaving his job at a seafood restaurant called Cap'n Peg on Georgia Avenue on the edge of the sprawling McDaniel Glen Housing Project. Jo Jo showed up a few days later at a friend's house on Gray Street. According to a police report, there Bell met his good friend Stanley Parker, who said, "One day I went by Tom Terrell's house, and when I walked in, Tom Terrell and another dude that was in the house was arguing. Jo Jo Bell was sitting on the couch. When I walked in, he said, 'Hi Stanley,' and I asked him what was Tom Terrell and that dude fighting about. He said he didn't know and got up and left. A little while later, Jo Jo Bell comes back running. He was breathing hard, and I asked him what was wrong. He said, 'Man, it feels like somebody is following me.'" Jo Jo Bell went on to tell Stanley that "a white dude and a black dude were parked on the corner of Kennedy or Gray Street — he couldn't remember which one — in a black and brown car. The white dude opened up the car door and told Jo Jo to get in. Jo Jo ran back to Tom Terrell's house, trying to get away from the dudes. I told Jo Jo, 'Come on man, let's get together.' Jo Jo said no, and he



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The voice on the phone was Jo Jo's. "They're about to kill me!" he screamed. "I'm about dead. They're about to kill me!"

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However, the secret investigation continued apace, and in the latter part of March, it widened its scope to unlimited taps on the phones of Donald and Terry Sanders. On April 1, the following conversation between Terry and Don Sanders was intercepted:

**TS:** Hello?

**DS:** Hey.

**TS:** Yeah.

**DS:** What's the good word?

**TS:** I just don't know. What are you doing?

**DS:** Ah, there ain't nothing to it.

**TS:** Uh.

**DS:** Is Ricky around?

**TS:** Well, he just left with Kenneth.

**DS:** Did he?

**TS:** Yeah.

**DS:** Where's he headed?

**TS:** To his apartment or something...

**DS:** Do you think he'll be back?

**TS:** Oh, yeah.

**DS:** After a while.

**TS:** Yeah.

**DS:** I'll just give a buzz back, and I might get out and ride around a little bit, and I might come by there.

**TS:** Go find you another little kid, another little kid?

**DS:** Yeah, scope out some places. We'll see you later.

When two caucasian hairs were removed from the underclothes of the fifteenth victim, Charles Stephens, who was found murdered in a trailer park in East Point, Georgia, that was frequently visited by the Sanders brothers, the secret investigation shifted toward gathering fiber and hair evidence from the vehicles used by the Sanders brothers and from Charles Sanders' husky dog. To get hair samples from the dog, investigators claimed they were from a health agency and said they had come to take the dog away for shots. Lab tests were done on the dog hairs and carpet fibers, but the results were apparently inconclusive.



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Atlanta. It's mothers of murdered sons. It's government officials trying to contain a tense racial climate. It's police woefully inept, and needing a conviction to save their shattered ego and image. So from the outset, Mary Welcome's defense of Wayne Williams was against all odds. Recognizing this, she brought in a Mississippi lawyer named Al Binder, himself a gifted courtroom gymnast. Williams' defense deteriorated because of the forces, legal and emotional, that began to work against them.

Immediately, the case was moved up on the court calendar, leaving Welcome and Binder very little time to prepare fully. Soon they discovered that the judge would let the prosecution refer to — and, by association, accuse Williams of — the murders of ten Atlanta boys. At the same time, the judge denied all but one of Welcome's motions intended to delay the trial's start. With the governor threatening to replace the prosecutor if he didn't move things along faster, and the FBI and even Vice President George Bush exerting their powerful influences to move things along, the defense was in trouble. The defense's attempt to investigate many of the leads and loose ends in the prosecution's case in hopes of finding the real killer had to be abandoned in the face of the need now to defend Williams against an avalanche of unrelated charges.

The extraordinary fact of Williams' case is that the evidence against him came down to a few strands of fiber that the prosecution claimed were found on the bodies of the two victims and matched a rug in Williams' car and a blanket in his home.

While such fiber evidence is commonplace in criminal trials, it is rarely the linchpin of any case, in that fibers are notoriously unreliable in connecting anyone to anything. And yet they were essentially the evidence upon which Wayne Williams would be convicted. But there was other tainted testimony and evidence.

Take the testimony of Ruth Warren and Darryl Davis, who claimed that they had seen young murder victim Lubie Geter (who Williams was accused by implication, not directly, of murdering) getting in a car with Williams shortly before he disappeared. In her original testimony, Warren had identified the man with Geter as having a two-inch zig-zag scar on his neck under his left ear, resembling jagged lightning. Yet Wayne Williams has no such scar. During the trial, Davis testified that he had seen Williams with Lubie Geter at an Atlanta mall, but the prosecution failed to reveal in an earlier statement to police, Davis stated that the man he saw with Geter was six feet tall and had a moustache and goatee. Which is not a description of Wayne Williams.

The prosecution also founded part of its case on dog hairs that were discovered on a number of the victims, both the two victims that Williams was standing trial for murdering and some of the ten other murdered young boys whose cases were used in the trial to demonstrate a pattern to Williams' actions. This dog hair evidence, too, was highly erratic and hardly substantial. Originally, the forensic studies indicated that they



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hair, a beard, and scary eyes.

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