

Exposing 'a domino of misinformation'

NEW BOOK DETAILS HOW POLICE GOT THE WRONG MAN IN 1981 BARBARA STOPPEL HOMICIDE

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It's one of the darkest chapters in Manitoba judicial history. Now one of the key figures who helped expose a notorious wrongful conviction is preparing to go public with his own findings.

Retired Winnipeg police officer Andrew Mikolajewski is set to release a tell-all book into the botched investigation surrounding the 1981 strangling death of 16-year-old Barbara Stoppel inside the St. Boniface doughnut shop where she worked.

"It may be said the case itself represents one of the most disturbing acts of omission by a police service in Canada," Mikolajewski told the *Free Press* this week in a telephone interview from his home in British Columbia.

"The investigation began innocently enough but soon took on a life of its own. A domino of misinformation leading

to tunnel vision."

Thomas Sophonow was quickly identified by police as the killer and went through three trials and spent four years in jail while proclaiming his innocence for two decades. Mikolajewski was one of the officers assigned to take a fresh look at the case in 1999, and that ultimately paved the way to Sophonow being exonerated and awarded \$2.6 million in compensation following a public inquiry. Mikolajewski's work would also help identify another suspect, Terry Arnold, who committed suicide in 2005 before he could be charged.

"This is a family, the Stoppel family, that went through the death of a beautiful young girl, a preliminary hearing, three separate trials. They hated the wrong man, an innocent man, for God knows how many years. Then they lived through the whole thing again with the inquiry. And finally, they still had no closure. This is, in the same way, what Tom Sophonow lived through all those years. It was devastating," Mikolajewski said.

Stoppel's family members have thrown their support behind Mikolajewski, who will be releasing the book online at barbstoppel.com in the coming weeks.

"I'm happy he's doing it for a number of reasons. One, to get the truth out. Two, he gets the freedom he needs," Rick Stoppel told the *Free Press* on Friday. The Winnipeg real estate agent said he continues to think about his slain sister on a daily basis. He recently got an advance copy of Mikolajewski's work and is anxious to sit down and read it.

"I can't forget about it and can't move on because the majority of my life has been involved with this. It's just part of everyday occurrence," he said.

The *Free Press* reached out to Sophonow for comment. He has mainly stayed out of the public spotlight since the inquiry and now lives with his wife in B.C.'s Lower Mainland. He responded with a written statement on Friday afternoon, noting he has already read an advance copy of the book.

"The book is written in the most respected memory of a young girl who was murdered, and it is reflective of that," Sophonow said.

"I find myself very fortunate that Andrew is writing the book so candidly. There are a lot of hopes that I wish this book would do. Other than the most obvious, I would hope that this book becomes a guide to all the law enforcement agencies illustrating what tunnel vision really is."

Mikolajewski said he's been working on the book since he retired in 2014 following a 28-year career. He said there are many details about his face-to-face meetings with Arnold where he pressed for information about Stoppel's killing.

"He told me in his own way why he did what he did on the night of Dec. 23, 1981. It was as much as a confession as you can get out of him," said Mikolajewski. Arnold would leave behind a suicide note in which he denied any involvement.

Mikolajewski said his biggest shock in reviewing the file beginning in 1999 was how often Arnold's name had come up in the initial investigation, only to be ignored.

"Not only was Tom Sophonow innocent, but the real killer's name was peppered all over the report," Mikolajewski said. "What struck me is that most, maybe all of the police we had interviewed in the case... when we gave them the information we had on Terry Arnold, they all said they didn't know that. I don't know which, if any, of the investigators read the entire report."

Mikolajewski said his biggest challenge in writing the book was to break away from "writing like a cop." He's not making a dime off the online publication — despite the Stoppel family wishing he was seeing a profit.

"It would be good if he could have benefited. He's put so much time into this," said Stoppel.

Mikolajewski said he hopes his work — both in the case itself and now writing about it years later — helps ensure a similar injustice doesn't occur again. It's why the website he's set up to host the book carries a simple message at the top of the page: "In memory of Barbara Gayle Stoppel and all the victims that followed."

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Read more by Mike McIntyre.