

OPENING THE MIND: PSYCHIC CRIME SOLVING



STAFF PHOTO/MATT BERNHARDT

Englewood psychic Jeri Segovia, 46, gives readings to police in an effort to help them solve crimes.

Police often turn to psychics

A higher percentage of police departments use psychics to help solve crimes than is usually publicized.

By David Green
STAFF WRITER

Englewood psychic Jeri Segovia remembers standing in front of her Tarot class and concentrating on Daniel Owen Conahan Jr.

Details of the man police suspect may be a serial killer began to materialize.

"I knew it was someone from a family that was well-to-do," Segovia says, remembering the session in May 1996. "He was very close to his mother. His mother was very ill. He was an aficionado of police soaps."

During the exercise, Segovia described Conahan to her class as a cold and methodical man who tied up young men, mutilated them and took their pictures after

they were dead. She told the class he had killed many times. She predicted he would kill again.

What Segovia didn't predict that day was that she would join the police investigation of the 43-year-old ex-Navy serviceman.

Impressed by the extent of her description of the murders, one of Segovia's students related details of the psychic session to the Charlotte County Sheriff's Office. Detectives invited Segovia to help hunt for bodies, employing a weapon over one quarter of law enforcement agencies utilize but far fewer publicize: psychic sleuths.

"I'll listen to anybody," says Detective Ricky Hobbs, lead investigator on the Conahan case. "When I start ignoring information, I may be hampering my own investigation."

Conahan is charged in the murder of Richard Allen Montgomery, 21, of Punta Gorda, whose remains were discovered in 1996. Police say he is a suspect in four other murders. The victims are all men who were tied to trees, raped, strangled and, in some of cases, had their genitals

mutilated.

Hobbs confirmed Segovia conducted a "map dousing" in which she dangled a crystal over a Charlotte County map to detect buried bodies. Segovia says she also read Hobbs' Tarot cards, and discussed with investigators the possibility of "astrally projecting" herself into Conahan's cell at the Charlotte County Jail.

Whether her telepathic efforts produced any concrete results is as open to interpretation as the Tarot deck.

"Nothing that we have come originally, or was verified, by her," Hobbs says. "She gave us some information. But at the time we spoke to her, a lot of information was already out."

Segovia, 46, who volunteered her services, has a more positive reading.

"It came out (during the map dousing) that there were more bodies," she said. "In a couple of places I told them about, they said they had already found bodies there."

One of the sites Segovia says attracted her dousing crystal was an area east of

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Police sometimes turn to psychics in big cases

PSYCHIC FROM 1B

U.S. 41 between Toledo Blade Boulevard and Kings Highway.

"They said that's not where they were finding the bodies," Segovia says. "They said, 'Are you sure?' I said, 'This is what my crystals are saying.'"

Hobbs would not confirm this exchange. But investigators recently discovered skeletal remains they suspect might belong to another Conahan victim in a vacant lot near Quesada Avenue in Port Charlotte.

Segovia says she also told detectives Conahan left bodies in Chicago before moving to Florida in 1993. Hobbs again would not confirm this detail; but he and another detective traveled to Chicago and Michigan recently to investigate several open murder cases matching the profile of several Charlotte County murders that may be linked to Conahan.

The Conahan case is not the only investigation in which local law enforcement agencies have attempted to harness the supernatural.

DeSoto County Sheriff Vernon Keen says his agency followed leads supplied by several psychics while looking into the 1994 disappearance of Arcadia mother Kelli Jo Krum and her 7-month-old daughter.

Keen's detectives searched a DeSoto County river and junkyard after callers described visions in which they saw Krum and her daughter at those locations.

DeSoto investigators also brought in a psychic recommended by another law enforcement agency — Keen would not discuss specifics — who held a piece of Krum's clothing and tried to describe her whereabouts.

"We follow everything we have," Keen said. "We get those kinds of calls, we follow them. We're not going to take the chance of not following those calls and missing out."

Keen says his detectives would not have missed much: Neither the phone tips nor the psychic session resulted in a break in the Krum case.

According to Marcello Truzzi, a sociologist at Eastern Michigan University and co-author of "The Blue Sense: Psychic Detectives in Crime," detectives' use of mediums is hardly rare.

At least 37 percent of police agencies nationwide have sought the help of spiritualists, according to one survey.

That doesn't mean psychics are wizards when it comes to breaking cases. In years of research on the subject, Truzzi has never encountered a case in which a psychic is credited with producing evidence leading to a conviction.

"It's something of a last resort," Truzzi says. "There's a tremendous amount of pressure to try anything and everything."

"There's a lot of ridicule that accompanies something like that," Truzzi says. "On one hand, they don't want to leave any stone unturned; on the other, they don't want to waste government money."

Given the unproven track record of psychic detectives, what

keeps investigators like Hobbs and Keen gazing into the crystal ball is the difficulty in proving supernatural tips won't pan out.

One skeptic says psychics prey off this possibility.

"It's impossible to prove the negative when it comes to the metaphysical," says Gary Posner, a Tampa Bay dentist and president of the Tampa Bay Skeptics, an organization dedicated to the scientific explanation of the supernatural. "How can I prove there isn't an invisible alien standing right next to you?"

Most of Posner's efforts have been spent working to discredit Lakeland medium Noreen Renier, one of the country's foremost psychic detectives who has worked with the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office. Posner's Internet Website includes a book chapter he wrote debunking Renier's claims of supernatural sleuthing.

"I haven't found any evidence whatsoever to cause me to even suspect for one moment that she has ever demonstrated 'psychic ability,'" Posner says. "I've never found psychic ability exists at all."

Not everyone shares Posner's skepticism.

The FBI has paid Renier to lecture on ESP at their headquarters in Quantico, Va. She has appeared on CBS' "48 Hours," the "Joan Rivers Show," "Geraldo," an A&E documentary, "Unsolved Mysteries" and "America's Most Wanted."

Renier also has helped investigators in 375 cases — including the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office, who paid her \$400 in 1990 to travel to a remote rural road where the badly decomposed bodies of a man and woman had been dumped.

"I remember shaking my hands," recounts Renier, 60. "Something was funny with my hands."

According to Lt. David Brewer, then head of the homicide unit, that wasn't the only "funny" occurrence that afternoon.

"Right away, she came up with the fact that the hands of the female victim had been severed," Brewer says. "We hadn't told anybody about that. All we had told her was that there were two homicides. She provided details that couldn't have been known to anyone outside the investigation."

After standing at the spot where the bodies were found and handling jewelry and a driver's license belonging to the victims, Renier also conjured a description of the killer.

Her portrait ultimately wasn't detailed enough to solve the case. But Brewer says his experience with Renier made him a believer.

"She didn't exactly break the case," he says, "but she proved some of the theories we had."

Brewer isn't the only investigator with faith in psychics. As long as bodies keep turning up, old-fashioned gumshoes will embrace new-age spiritualists in hopes of stumbling on that one crucial clue — and raising eyebrows in the process.

"When you've reached a brick wall, I really don't see any harm in employing a psychic," Brewer says. "They may open new avenues of thought."

"dentist"?