

Retired judge helping sheriff's office crack its cold cases

Ken Cowsert joins sheriff's cold case team

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Detectives Joe Dunn (left) and Jim Scharf (right) are getting volunteer help from retired Snohomish County Superior Court judge Kenneth Cowsert (center) assisting with cold cases with the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office in Everett. The team looks for leads in homicides and missing persons cases.

By [Diana Hefley](#), Herald Writer

EVERETT -- When retired Snohomish County Superior Court judge Ken Cowsert asked about volunteering with the sheriff's cold case team, detective Jim Scharf had one question for him.

"Can you work 40 hours a week?" the homicide detective asked. He was only partly joking.

Last year when Cowsert inquired about helping out, Scharf was the lone detective in the cold case unit. His partner had moved on to another job, and detective Joe Dunn hadn't been assigned to the team yet. With about 65 unsolved homicides and missing persons cases on his shoulders, Scharf welcomes the help, especially from someone who was a longtime prosecutor before being named a judge.

Cowsert became the detective's partner and found himself going out on "major suspect interviews."

"I just ask what needs to be done and do it," Cowsert said.

He [retired from the bench](#) in late 2011, after 26 years with the county. He planned to putter in his woodshop and push dirt around with his tractor.

"I have learned from the dog that an afternoon nap is not such a bad thing," he said.

But Cowsert also figured he couldn't walk away completely from the criminal justice system after decades of prosecuting crimes and then presiding over criminal and civil cases.

Volunteering with "Jimmy" seemed like a good idea.

"I spent many years seeing families ripped up when one of their loved ones suffers a tragic death by violent means," Cowsert said.

That hurt is compounded when no one has been held accountable, he said.

So on Tuesdays, Cowsert heads back to a familiar place -- the courthouse.

"Old habits are hard to break," he said.

He enjoys seeing former colleagues and shooting the breeze with the major crimes detectives, whom he calls a "dedicated bunch of professionals."

He hunkers down with Scharf in an office where rows of notebooks hold the stories of dozens of people whose lives were taken.

The sheriff's office launched the cold case team in 2005 after years of pressure from families of victims whose homicides were never solved. Early on Scharf and his partners learned that other cold case teams use civilian volunteers to help with the often laborious work of jump-starting stalled investigations.

Chuck Wright, a retired community corrections supervisor and mental health professional, has been a volunteer for years. Other volunteers have included a former Everett city prosecutor and more recently a retired court reporter has been donating her time.

Fresh eyes and ideas are welcome, Scharf said.

"I can't think of everything," he said.

Cowsert has helped the detective see things from a prosecutor's perspective, including why criminal charges can't be filed in some cases without more evidence.

"I did about 200 trials. I'm aware of how things can go wrong on us," Cowsert said.

Meanwhile, Cowsert said he has come to appreciate how much work goes into a homicide investigation. As a prosecutor, he was used to getting completed case files with the pieces in place. Now, behind the scenes, he sees how many hours detectives put into tracking down leads, many of them dead ends.

"It's a slow, grinding process," Cowsert said. "They're called cold cases for a reason."

Cowsert said he's been reading case files, looking for ways investigations can move forward, whether it is interviewing a possible witness or deciding which potential tips might deserve a closer look.

"I think in every case there is something -- a piece of evidence or somebody knows something -- that will crack it open," he said. "These things didn't happen in a vacuum."

The cold case team has had [some successes in recent years](#). They found the man responsible for slaying Susan Schwarz in 1979. He was sentenced to 24 years in prison. Digging into two homicides led to a suspect in an unsolved rape from 1998. The rapist is now serving 13 years in prison. Last year, detectives arrested convicted rapist [Danny Giles](#) for the 1995 murder of Patti Berry and the disappearance of Tracey Brazzel that same year. Giles is awaiting trial.

Cowsert hopes he can help bring answers to more families.

"I like responsibility and accountability," he said.

Diana Hefley: 425-339-3463; hefley@heraldnet.com.

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