

Suspect past sex offender



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Sarah Hansen's classmates wiped away tears after her funeral yesterday in Greenville.

Like most inmates, he quit prison treatment

By JAMES MALONE
The Courier-Journal

A man charged with raping and killing a Muhlenberg County teenager last weekend was a convicted sex offender who had received minimal treatment in prison.

And the experience of Robert Keith Woodall is not unusual. State prison officials say that most inmates imprisoned for sex crimes don't complete the voluntary sex-offender treatment program, which a new study suggests can be successful.

Woodall's case also highlights the limits of the state's registry that is supposed to track sex offenders upon their release from prison. Woodall was not listed in the registry, which is available only to law enforcement personnel, because his conviction predated the start of the registry in July 1994.

Woodall, 22, of Greenville, Ky., was arrested Tuesday night and charged with murder, rape and kidnapping in the death of 16-year-old Sarah Hansen, also of Greenville. He pleaded not guilty during an arraignment yesterday morning.

Hansen, a popular honor student, had gone to a convenience store near her house Saturday night to rent a video and never came home. Her body was found in a nearby lake a few hours later.

Woodall got out of prison last February after serving 3½ years of a five-year sentence for two counts of first-degree sexual abuse. His sentence was shortened because of time he was credited for good behavior in prison.

He had pleaded guilty in 1993 to sexually abusing a 9-year-old girl on two occasions in July 1992, when he was 18. A state corrections official said Woodall forced the girl to fondle him.

Woodall was indicted on three other counts of sexual abuse against three other young girls, but those charges were dismissed because of "the quality of the evidence," said Muhlenberg Commonwealth's Attorney David Jernigan. While in

TWO VIEWS:
Some say suspect was a bully; to others he was a friend. A7

A thousand people mourn loss of small town's 'perfect child'

By CYNTHIA EAGLES
The Courier-Journal

GREENVILLE, Ky. — On the church lawn, in the bank parking lot and in front of the insurance agency, they stood in silence, grimly watching the silver hearse.

More than 1,000 people — a fifth of the town's entire population — had jammed the Greenville United Methodist Church for the funeral yesterday of 16-year-old Sarah Hansen, a popular honor student who was murdered Saturday night.

And now they watched as first a half-dozen police cruisers, and then cars carrying Sarah's family, began the slow procession to the cemetery. Only the wail of a lone police siren pierced the silence.

"We come together in grief," the Rev. Arthur Burrows, Sarah's pastor at the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, had said at the funeral. "We gather to put our arms around one another and respectfully around this family. . . . You matter to us. Your grief reaches into ourselves."

Grief overwhelmed Greenville yesterday. But there was more than that.

Sarah Hansen died a violent death in a town where people tend



"God has taken Sarah into his arms and carried her to his home," the Rev. Arthur Burrows told mourners at Sarah Hansen's funeral.

to leave their doors unlocked. People thought a cheerful, laughing girl active in her school and church should have been safe here.

"This was the perfect child," Muhlenberg County Judge-Executive Rodney Kirtley said after the service, as if to emphasize the point that no one expected such a thing to happen in a place like Greenville.

"How could anyone do this ungodly thing to Sarah?" said the Rev. Vernon Perdue, pastor of the Methodist church.

Burrows told the mourners — who overflowed into the church's fellowship hall — they would find no answers. "This is the day when our faith is more essential than ever," he said. "There are questions for which we can find no an-

swers. The death of a precious child is one of those questions."

Part of the service was devoted to brief anecdotes about Sarah.

Perdue recalled how Sarah and her boyfriend Kyle Lovell, 17, who were active in the Methodist youth group, had clowned around on a citizens band radio on the way to a church retreat last fall.

After the retreat, youth director Brent Waltrip said, Sarah had confided that she had "invited Jesus into my heart."

Lovell talked about Sarah's closeness to her parents. He choked up as he whispered, "To me, Sarah represented all that is fun and good and beautiful. She was my best friend."

Sarah's older brother, Robert, read a poem. When he finished, he added in a quiet rush, "She was my hero too."

In the end, the best comfort anyone could derive was the message that Burrows offered.

"Sarah went Saturday night from the worst moment in her life to the best moment of her life. I can't explain it and you can't explain it," he said. But mourners should remember, he said, that "God has taken Sarah into his arms and carried her to his home."

Murder suspect former sex offender

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prison, Woodall completed only eight weeks of a two-year sex-offender-treatment program, according to Kathi Peterson, who heads the Corrections Department program.

WOODALL WAS denied parole in March 1994 because he dropped out of the program the previous fall. A 1986 state law prohibits parole for sex offenders who don't finish treatment.

Parole Board Chairman Helen Howard-Hughes said Woodall also had been written up several times for fighting in prison and appeared to have adjusted poorly to life behind bars in his first year.

Criminologists say sex offenders are more likely than almost any other criminals to repeat their offenses, but treatment can reduce repeat offenses.

Peterson said a study to be published shortly will show that between 1990 and 1995, sex offenders who didn't complete Kentucky's treatment program before being released from prison were arrested three times as often for new sex crimes as inmates who finished treatment in prison.

Experts say the repeat-offense rate is actually much higher, but offenders are often not caught or the victims don't press charges.

Nationally, the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers says that without treatment, up to 40 percent of sex offenders who target children will re-offend and up to 35 percent of those who attack adult women will repeat their crimes.

BUT FEW inmates are enrolled in Kentucky's program. In 1994, The Courier-Journal reported that just 9 percent of sex offenders released from prison between 1987 and 1994 had completed treatment. Peterson disputed the newspaper's analysis but said she did not have any data on the percentage of sex offenders who complete the program in prison. And she acknowledged that the large majority of inmates don't complete treatment.

Currently, Peterson said, 350 of Kentucky's 2,000 imprisoned sexual offenders are enrolled. Peterson said inmates like Woodall who are serving five or fewer years are much less likely to participate in treatment than those serving longer sentences. That's because they have little incentive to complete treatment, she said.

Inmates become eligible to enroll in the two-year treatment program three years before they are eligible to face the parole board. But with credit earned for good behavior, a five-year sentence typically becomes 3½ years, even without parole.

"I don't know what the solution would be other than to have longer

sentences," Peterson said.

If short-term sex offenders have little incentive to enroll and complete the treatment, then the state should motivate them, possibly by taking away good time, said state Rep. Charles Geveden, D-Wickliffe.

Experts say sex offenders can't be forced to enroll in treatment, because inmates must admit their problem for the program to help them.

SOME LEGISLATORS yesterday also called for a law that the public be alerted when a convicted sex offender is released to or moves into a community. But others urged caution.

State Rep. Brent Yonts, a Democrat who represents Greenville, said his constituents have contacted him about the issue of public notification — although some Greenville residents interviewed yesterday said they were aware of Woodall's record.

"This is the most tragic, vicious, community-destroying event that's ever happened in this town," he said. "This has woke up the community. This is no longer Mayberry, U.S.A."

Yonts said he called Gov. Paul Patton yesterday to ask that a law requiring mandatory community notification of the release of sex offenders be placed on the agenda for a special session this year. "I don't really appreciate them being let out, and particularly without warning."

Kentucky's on-line sex-offender registry has about 325 names, but neither Woodall nor hundreds of other sex offenders convicted before July 1994 are listed, because of how the legislation was written.

The database can only be used by law enforcement, but police are not alerted when an offender moves to town, though offenders are required to tell the state when they move. "Obviously, that's something that needs to be addressed," said Barbara Jones, general counsel for the Justice Cabinet.

THE STATE has no way of knowing how many times police have queried the registry nor does it have any way to determine whether offenders are faithfully reporting new addresses, said Hansel Hill, who oversees the LINK offender database for the Kentucky State Police.

A 1994 federal law required states to create sex-offender registries open to the public by August 1997. But Jones said subsequent amendments have created confusion about whether Kentucky must make its registry public.

The Justice Cabinet and a task force of law-enforcement officials are currently evaluating proposed changes in the registry law, including how to track offenders as they move

about and exactly what information should become public, Jones said.

Some question whether the public release of such information is wise. Civil libertarians have challenged the constitutionality of these measures, though courts have generally upheld the legality of state registry laws.

"How does it affect your neighbor who is successfully completing a program; nobody would want him in the neighborhood," said Joe Roehrig, executive director of the Family Center: A Child Abuse Treatment Agency, in Louisville.

With treatment, offenders are much more likely to control their behavior, Roehrig said.

And Geveden said he would have reservations about making the registry public "unless it could be shown to me it would perform some useful service."

"If the information served only to embarrass the offender, then it performs no useful purpose," Geveden said, adding he feared vigilante retribution and useless public alarm if the data were misused.

One state legislator, however, questions the effectiveness of treatment programs for sex offenders and advocates stiffer and swifter sentences for serious crimes.

"Short of wearing a hat and a beacon that goes off, how are you going to keep (a sex offender) out of that (Hansen's) van?" asked State Sen. Kim Nelson, D-Madisonville.

"What needs to be done is that someone (convicted) needs to be put to death in a relatively short period of time. The penalties we have aren't enough of a deterrent."

Information for this story was also gathered by staff writer Nikita Stewart.