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## Allegations of Abuses Mar Murder Cases

BY APRIL WITT

The room is cramped and cold. The floor and walls are carpeted to muffle sound. A small table and two chairs are the only furnishings. There is no window, no clock, no clue to when night becomes day.

After 28 hours in that interrogation room, Keith Longtin was so exhausted he wondered if he'd lost his mind.

"The detective said, 'Well, thanks for making a confession . . . ' " Longtin recalled. "I'm like, 'What? I didn't admit to anything.' . . . He said, 'Yes, you did.' "

Longtin spent the next eight months in jail, charged with the 1999 slaying of his wife while Prince George's County homicide detectives overlooked DNA evidence that would set him free.

Eventually, other investigators -- not the homicide squad -- linked the DNA to a man they now say is the real killer. While Longtin was in jail, that man allegedly sexually assaulted seven women.

Prince George's County homicide detectives have coerced confessions and denied suspects lawyers during marathon interrogations that appear to violate state rules and exceed bounds set by other police agencies, according to a yearlong investigation by The Washington Post. The investigation involved dozens of interviews with lawyers and suspects and the review of hundreds of police and court documents.

In four cases, Prince George's homicide detectives took suspects into their interrogation rooms and extracted confessions to murder that later proved false. The confessions put the wrong men behind bars while the killers remained free to commit other crimes.

The four false confessions were made by Longtin; a teenager with learning disabilities who said he

stabbed a friend; a high school senior who implicated himself in a triple shooting; and an illiterate janitor who shakily signed a statement a detective wrote for him confessing to slaying a co-worker.

The four men were detained in the interrogation room from 11 to more than 38 hours. Three of the four insist that detectives refused to let them speak with a lawyer. And in each case, the suspect's alleged statement was virtually the only evidence homicide detectives used to charge him with murder.

In two of the cases examined by The Post, the trail went so cold while Prince George's police focused on what prosecutors eventually concluded was the wrong man that the true killer is still free. In all four cases, homicide detectives misread, ignored or lost evidence and failed to follow significant leads, records and interviews show.

In each case, the man was exonerated only through the intervention of outsiders -- detectives from other units, savvy lawyers and crime lab experts -- and not Prince George's homicide detectives.

Prince George's Police Chief John S. Farrell defended his detectives, saying he had faith they did not violate people's constitutional rights in the interrogation room. He noted that judges are not throwing out the confessions they obtain, but he said he would investigate The Post's findings.

"I look for accountability," Farrell said. "Does that mean mistakes are never made? No."

In all four of the false murder confessions that The Post examined, prosecutors dropped charges after exonerating evidence came to light, Prince George's County State's Attorney Jack B. Johnson said.

"Ninety-nine percent of the officers are good officers," Johnson said. "But any violation of rights is huge. We put people in jail because of their statements."

Johnson said he believes tamper-proof video cameras should be placed in interrogation rooms. Though many police departments, including the District's and Montgomery County's, videotape some confessions, Prince George's police never do.

Prince George's police came under federal investigation late last year when the Justice Department said it would review complaints of brutality, racial discrimination and excessive use of force. Federal authorities said the probe, which is expected to take more than a year, also would include a review of the police canine unit and of shootings of civilians by police officers.

The methods the Prince George's detectives allegedly used in the four false-confession cases -- including lengthy interrogations, refusal to let suspects speak with lawyers, and improper threats and promises -- were similar to police tactics described by suspects and defense lawyers in dozens of other Prince George's cases reviewed by The Post. In many of the other cases, the evidence does

not make clear whether the confessions extracted were false.

Some Prince George's lawyers, including former prosecutors, said interrogation room abuse is the routine rather than the exception.

**"That's the name of the game: They hold people for as long as it takes until they say something, and they don't let them see a lawyer," said Steven D. Kupferberg, a former Prince George's prosecutor who is now a private defense lawyer in Rockville. "I haven't had that experience in any other county, and I practice law all over [Maryland] and in D.C."**

Prince George's Public Defender Joseph M. Niland said long and intimidating interrogations are part of the history of the Prince George's Police Department.

"The culture is that not only is this okay, this is how you do it: You get in there and you make him give it up," Niland said.

James Papirmeister said that when he was a top homicide prosecutor for the county, he accepted detectives' testimony about confessions at face value. After he became a defense lawyer, however, he said he was shocked by the frequency with which his clients' rights were violated in the interrogation room and detectives then lying about it on the witness stand.

"Most of them want to get the right person," said Papirmeister, whose office is lined with laudatory mementos from his law enforcement days, including an honorary badge from Prince George's homicide detectives. "Some don't care about that. They just want to close a case. Job success: That's what it's all about. It's the ends justify the means. It's routine."

Homicide detectives have one of the most challenging and important jobs in law enforcement. They get out of bed in the middle of the night to canvass neighborhoods when someone is killed, attend autopsies before breakfast, sort lies from half-truths and spend hours trying to get killers to act against their best interest -- to confess. Artful interrogators who win uncoerced confessions are agents of justice. Without them, many murders would never be solved.

"The reason they are successful is that they are very diligent about what they do," said Lt. Col. Orlando D. Barnes, the Prince George's deputy chief. "If we can make any improvements, we will. . . . Interrogation is not an exact science."

Lt. Michael McQuillan, the homicide unit commander, said his detectives do a tough job well and never deny suspects attorneys or coerce confessions.

"We are ethical. We are thorough. We are truthful," McQuillan said. "I stand behind every one of these investigations. . . . I can tell you that in each case, the allegations they are making are not true.

"People do confess to murders they don't do," he said. "People confess to crimes they don't do.

Why? I don't know. You have to ask them."

False confessions have been documented sporadically throughout the country. But for one homicide unit to obtain at least four false confessions to murders -- three in the past three years -- is unusual, said American University law professor Michael E. Tigar, a prominent criminal defense lawyer.

"It shows a department that has a culture of illegality," Tigar said.

Richard A. Leo, a University of California criminologist who studies false confessions, agreed that it is unusual for one homicide unit to obtain false admissions in a number of murders.

"Police need a better understanding of how their methods of interrogation can lead to false confessions and why they are so powerful on the innocent as well as the guilty," Leo said. "But police do not acknowledge their mistakes. This would be like the airline industry not talking about crashes."

The U.S. Supreme Court has given investigators wide leeway in trying to gain confessions. Police may lie or trick suspects, for example, but they are barred from using psychological coercion or physical force. A confession must be voluntary and given freely.

Under rules of criminal procedure in Maryland, police are required to take the people they arrest before a judicial officer within 24 hours, although violation of that mandate alone is not grounds for throwing out a confession.

Niland said Prince George's homicide detectives are not adhering to the 24-hour rule.

"Until the last few years, police were real afraid to cross that 24-hour line," he said. "Now there are interrogations where they are keeping people for a lot longer than 24 hours, and they are getting away with it. The judges don't hit them on this stuff. So they are going to continue to do it."

Prince George's County typically has more murders each year than any other jurisdiction in the state except Baltimore. Homicide detectives have investigated an average of 114 slayings a year since 1990, the highest per capita homicide rate among the 25 largest county police agencies in the country, an analysis of computerized FBI Uniform Crime Reports data shows.

Under pressure from Farrell and the public to improve their performance, Prince George's homicide detectives have been clearing more cases than ever. They made arrests in more than 70 percent of homicides in 1998 and 1999, up from 49 percent in 1995.

The detectives who work the interrogation rooms are proud of their record in gaining confessions. Suspects admitted their involvement to detectives in 68 percent of all 1999 murder investigations that resulted in an arrest, according to case summaries in an internal report prepared by the homicide commander. By contrast, only a few of the summaries mention physical evidence as

leading to an arrest. The summaries provide only a snapshot of the investigations and are not comprehensive.

Farrell said the department's evidence-gathering efforts were in disarray when he arrived in 1995 from the Miami-Dade police force.

"We had to go from scratch," Farrell said.

He said fingerprint identification equipment was so old that the company that sold it refused to service it. Officers did not collect much DNA evidence because they had no easy way to process it, he said.

The department has acquired sophisticated fingerprint and ballistics equipment, and a new DNA laboratory is slated to begin operation in a few weeks, Farrell said.

"A lot of these tools have been significant for us in terms of getting more hard scientific evidence, which is something that has just been lacking here," he said.

The U.S. Supreme Court warned of the danger of over-reliance on confessions in its 1964 opinion in *Escobedo v. Illinois*:

"We have learned the lesson of history, ancient and modern, that a system of criminal law enforcement which comes to depend on the 'confession' will, in the long run, be less reliable and more subject to abuses than a system which depends on extrinsic evidence independently secured through skillful investigation."

This series of articles will explore allegations that Prince George's County homicide detectives extract some confessions by isolating suspects for lengthy interrogations, denying them lawyers and dictating what confessions should say.

Samuel L. Serio, a lawyer who defended Keith Longtin, said Prince George's homicide detectives rely on confessions because it spares them a lot of painstaking evidence gathering and interviewing.

"If they got the confession: Case closed," said Serio, a former police officer who represented the Fraternal Order of Police for 17 years. "They are not going any farther. It's just a little box they check, cleared one arrest. The stats are, 'Did you close the case,' not 'Was justice done.' That's not even on the sheet.

"You know how many people who are behind bars that didn't do it?"

Longtin said that when Prince George's homicide detectives couldn't get a confession from him, they simply twisted his words to concoct one.

"They tried to frame me," said Longtin, 45. "The police lie, and nobody holds them accountable for their lies."

The officers directly involved in Longtin's interrogation did not respond to written requests for interviews. Their supervisor declined to discuss specifics of the case but said the detectives did nothing wrong. The following account is based on interviews with Longtin and police and on court documents.

When a homicide detective walked into the interrogation room and placed a stack of photographs face down on the small table, Keith Longtin feared that his wife must be dead.

Crime scene photos, he recalls thinking. He tried to calm down and help the detectives do their job. He answered questions, waived his right to a lawyer and volunteered blood and hair samples.

"They asked me different questions like, did I carry a knife," said Longtin, a welder who identifies himself as a born-again Christian. "I said yeah, I did. For my work. I didn't have anything to hide. I didn't fear I'd be implicated. You don't think something like that. All I'm doing is telling them the truth."

He had been given a tag that said "visitor" when they took him into the room about 1:30 p.m. on a Tuesday, Oct. 5. He didn't emerge until Thursday.

He began to fathom the depth of his troubles when a detective flipped the photographs. They showed the brutalized body of his once- beautiful blond wife.

"To see her like that, it looked like someone took a Skil saw and went across her nose. It was just wild to me," Longtin said. "She's nude. She only has a top on. . . . Her eyes were open.

"I got broke down," he said.

As he laid his head on the table and wept, he said, two detectives began accusing him and taunting him. While one detective shoved the hideous photos in his face, the other mocked his grief as phony and said he'd killed her.

The detectives believed they had reason to suspect Longtin. They knew that his brief marriage to Donna Zinetti had been in trouble. They knew that Longtin and Zinetti were living apart and that a church elder had separated them during a bitter argument in their Laurel church before she died. They knew that he had a bad temper and an arrest record for assault.

And they knew that he had shown up -- tearful and hysterical -- as police worked the crime scene in a wooded area near her apartment complex. The 36-year-old Zinetti had been found strangled and stabbed to death, with her jogging shorts down around her ankles. The detectives knew that the medical examiner recovered semen during her autopsy.

When detectives briefly left Longtin alone in the interrogation room, he said, he made a futile attempt to call a lawyer on his cell phone. The detectives confiscated his cell phone when they returned, he said.

By late Tuesday, reporters who had seen detectives hustle Longtin from the crime scene asked whether he was a suspect. No, said a police spokesman, in fact, Longtin already had gone home. Later, a spokesman would say he had been given "misinformation" by homicide detectives.

Longtin said there was no misunderstanding inside the interrogation room. He wasn't allowed to use the bathroom without two detectives escorting, records show.

"They wouldn't let me leave," Longtin said. "They wouldn't get out of the way and let me out of the room. They said later that they offered to let me go. That's a lie. I'd have left, believe me."

Longtin said one detective became angry when he stood up and asked to leave.

"He said he was going to handcuff me to the wall and beat the crap out of me if I didn't sit down," Longtin said.

As the questioning continued through a sleepless night, Longtin grew wearier. The police interrogation log shows that fresh rounds of detectives came in and out of the room to question him.

The interrogators dropped ever more details of the crime into their comments until he developed a pretty good idea of just what had happened to his wife, Longtin said.

"There were so many of them," Longtin said. "One detective would leave and another one would come in. He would say, 'Well, what do you think happened? This is what I think happened.' He would give me a clue or information. Then another one would come in and ask me what happened, and I'd say things that I'd heard [from the detective] before."

One detective told Longtin that his wife had sex before she died.

"She had a boyfriend," Longtin recalled the detective taunting him. "You killed her because you caught her with him, and that's why she had semen in her. It was consensual sex."

"I kept telling him, 'Look, my wife walked with the Lord. She walked with Jesus. She wouldn't do that.' "

He said one detective barked, "You did it!" over and over.

"I'd say, 'No,' " Longtin said. "He'd say, 'We know you did it.' He was hammering at me, just constantly. Every time I would say something: 'You did it.' That's all he would say. 'You did it."

You did it.' "

The next day -- more than 24 hours after the interrogation began - - a police spokeswoman acknowledged that Longtin had not left the police station.

"I understand that he's here of his own free will," Cpl. Irene Huskens told a reporter.

Inside the interrogation room, Longtin said, he continued to insist that he had nothing to confess.

Late Wednesday afternoon, about 28 hours into the questioning, one detective suggested he was insane and just couldn't remember that he had murdered his wife, he said.

Longtin said he began to question his own sense of reality.

"I didn't have no sleep from Sunday," he said. "I was burned out - - period. With all the back-and-forth, my mind wasn't right. I remember him at one point saying, he said to me, 'You have a split personality.'

"I said, 'No, I don't think so.' But I thought about it. At that point, when you are tired like that, I thought, 'Well, maybe I do.' "

Longtin said the detective asked: "Didn't you go over to her house and have an argument with her, and she ran out of the house and you grabbed a knife? How big was the knife?"

The detective "was trying to catch me that way," Longtin said.

"I'd say, 'Well, if I did that in my other self. . . . But I couldn't have done it because I had no blood anywhere. I had no blood anywhere on my clothes or on me.' I'd say, 'It wasn't me. It wasn't me.'

"We went around with that for like 15 minutes. Then I remember saying something like, 'The guy who killed her, if he goes there and he grabbed a knife from the kitchen drawer, and he ran after her and he stabbed her . . . '

"The detective said, 'Well, thanks for making a confession. What can I do for you?'

"I'm like, 'What? I didn't admit to anything.' I said, 'No, I didn't do it.'

"He said, 'Yes, you did.' "

The police log indicates that Detective Bert Frankenfield was the only interrogator in the room between noon and 5 p.m. that Wednesday. His notes say that over those five hours, Longtin both maintained his innocence and "remembered" his wife being chased down her apartment hallway with a kitchen knife and grabbed from behind. Detective Glen Clark relieved Frankenfield and



remained in the room until 10 p.m., the log shows.

In his notes, Clark boiled that into five spare sentences: "Defendant goes to victim's house on Sunday night. They have an argument. She leaves to go run. He goes to kitchen, grabs a knife to follow her. Defendant will not talk any more."

Longtin never wrote or signed any statement incriminating himself, records show. He said he didn't go to this wife's apartment, he didn't grab a knife and chase her -- and he never told detectives that he did.

The police log indicated he slept about 50 minutes in more than 38 hours in the interrogation room. He said he hadn't slept at all. On Thursday afternoon, two days after he arrived at police headquarters, Longtin was taken before a magistrate.

"The defendant admitted to having a verbal and physical altercation at the victim's apartment," Detective Ronald Herndon wrote in a sworn charging document.

"The defendant gave details about this case that had not been released to the media and only the perpetrator would have known. He stated that during the altercation the victim ran out of her apartment and that he ran after her with a knife. The defendant knew that the victim had been stabbed several times and that the stabbing occurred in the wooded area near the victims apartment."

Lt. McQuillan defended the interrogation last week, although he declined to answer specific questions about it.

"We didn't make any of it up," he said.

Detectives Herndon and Frankenfield did not respond to written requests for interviews. Clark said he could not discuss the Longtin case because the man now charged with the Zinetti murder is about to go on trial.

The case against Keith Longtin began to unravel when a Prince George's County detective -- from the sex crimes unit, not homicide -- and a District detective noticed similarities between the Zinetti case and a series of unsolved sexual assaults.

Three days before the Zinetti slaying, a Howard County woman was abducted at knifepoint, forced to drive to a secluded spot and raped in front of her toddler.

Ten days after Longtin's arrest, a man with a knife sexually assaulted a Laurel woman in the stairwell of her apartment building.

Twenty days after Longtin went to jail, a man grabbed another woman in the stairwell of her Laurel apartment building, threatened to kill her and held a knife to her throat while he sexually

assaulted her.

The next day, a man assaulted a woman carrying groceries into her District apartment complex, raped her and threatened that he'd kill her like he did that "other woman."

Three days later, a well-spoken man helped a woman carry her groceries, followed her into her New Carrollton apartment and held a knife to her throat as he raped her.

Three days after that -- and 27 days after Longtin went to jail -- a man with a knife sexually assaulted a woman outside her Laurel apartment building.

The following day, a man struck up a conversation with a woman entering her Laurel apartment building. He grabbed her from behind, put one hand over her mouth and held a knife to her throat. He tried to steal her purse. She struggled and grabbed his knife, and he ran away.

In mid-November -- more than five weeks after Longtin went to jail -- a man with a knife forced a woman and her young child into a wooded area near her New Carrollton apartment complex, pulled down the woman's pants, threatened to kill her, and fled when a stranger approached.

The detective from the sex crimes unit took her suspicion that the knife-wielding rapist might have killed Zinetti to the homicide detectives, according to Assistant State's Attorney Tonia Belton-Gofreed.

"They ignored her and laughed at her," Belton-Gofreed said.

Confident that Longtin was the killer, homicide detectives had not sought to match the semen taken from Zinetti with DNA samples from the very similar Howard County rape three days before her death. Zinetti died with a clue in her hand, a single hair apparently torn from her attacker. Prince George's police lost it, records indicate.

On Nov. 16, a woman walked into the London Fog shop at Union Station and was stunned when she recognized a new clerk, Antonio D. Oesby, as the man who had raped her about three weeks before, police said.

District police arrested Oesby, who had been released from prison in Maryland six months earlier after serving three years for the attempted kidnapping of a woman from her Columbia apartment building in 1996.

Within days, police said several Maryland women who had been accosted at knifepoint identified Oesby as their attacker.

A District prosecutor won a court order to draw blood from Oesby. A DNA analysis showed that the semen recovered from Zinetti's corpse was Oesby's, police said.

The Prince George's sex crimes investigator's hunch had proved right.

"I remember her saying later when we got the [DNA] hit, 'I told you so,' " Belton-Gofreed said.

On June 12, more than eight months after his interrogation by Prince George's homicide detectives, Longtin was released from jail. The state dropped all charges against him.

Chief Farrell assessed the chain of events that set Longtin free: "I'd say the system worked. Another one of our investigators did what was supposed to be done. Other information came to light. It was taken forward . . . and the right thing was done."

Oesby has since been convicted of one sexual assault in the District and three in Prince George's County. He is awaiting trial for other crimes, including Donna Zinetti's murder, to which he has pleaded not guilty.

During the eight months Longtin spent in jail, he missed his wife's funeral. His bills went unpaid. His credit rating was destroyed. He said police sent his truck to a junkyard. They gave the wedding ring he'd bought for his wife to in-laws who never liked him.

Longtin said all he had left was his faith.

"I stood on the Lord, and he delivered me out of the mouth of the lion," Longtin said.

He still struggles with depression. He finds it hard to get out of bed to go to work. A lot of days, he doesn't. ■

*Staff researchers Bridget Roeber and Bobbye Pratt and staff writers Craig Whitlock and David S. Fallis contributed to this report.*

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