



Laverne Pavlinac

On January 21, 1990 the body of 23-year-old Taunja Bennett was found in a remote area of the Columbia Gorge, just outside Portland, Oregon. She had been beaten, raped and strangled.

Laverne Pavlinac, 57, read about the murder in depth and decided Bennett's case could be used to end her 10-year abusive relationship with her 39-year-old boyfriend, John Sosnovske. She first made anonymous tips to police that Sosnovske had bragged about the crime, but when she perceived no response, she called the detectives working on the case, told them about her abusive relationship and said Sosnovske had murdered Bennett.

Pavlinac later changed her story, however, and said that the two of them had met Bennett at a Portland bar and that Sosnovske forced her to help him rape Bennett and dispose of the body.

Police interviewed Sosnovske, who denied Pavlinac's claims. A search failed to turn up incriminating evidence. Pavlinac then told police that she had found items in the trunk of her car that matched those sought in a search warrant. Police determined these were planted.

Still, detectives continued to interview Pavlinac. They took her to the Columbia River Gorge to see if she could point out locations only the police and killer would know. She did well at identifying the place where the body had been found, but failed to accurately identify places where personal items belonging to Bennett had been located.

Eventually, the case was turned over to prosecutors and Pavlinac and Sosnovske were arrested in February, 1990. Both proclaimed their innocence.

The evidence against them consisted primarily of Pavlinac's recorded confessions and accusations as well as her success in identifying the place the body was found. Pavlinac was tried first. She recanted her confession and said that she had made it up to escape from Sosnovske. In January of 1991 she was convicted of felony murder by a jury in Multnomah County Circuit Court. She was sentenced to life in prison with a minimum of 10 years.

Sosnovske, fearing the death penalty given the result of Pavlinac's trial, pleaded no contest to murder and kidnapping charges in March of 1991 and was sentenced to life in prison.

In 1994 newspapers and authorities began receiving anonymous letters from someone who contended he had killed Bennett. In 1995, Keith Jespersen, who was known as the "Happy Face Killer," confessed to killing Bennett and gave information only the killer and the police knew—the location of Bennett's purse.

In November 1995, Jespersen pleaded no contest to murdering Bennett. On November 27, 1995, based on Jespersen's confession and at the insistence of prosecutors, a Marion County Circuit Judge ordered Pavlinac and

State: Oregon

County: Multnomah

Most Serious Crime: Murder

Additional Convictions:

Reported Crime Date: 1990

Convicted: 1991

Exonerated: 1995

Sentence: 10 to Life

Race: Caucasian

Sex: Female

Age: 57

Contributing Factors: False Confession

Did DNA evidence contribute to the exoneration? No
:

Sosnovske released.

Sosnovske's conviction was set aside for violation of his civil rights. The judge refused to vacate Pavlinac's conviction, chastising her for abusing the judicial system. He ordered her release because keeping an innocent person in prison would have been cruel and unusual punishment.

– *Michael S. Perry*

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Laverne Pavlinac

Years Imprisoned: 4

Charge: Murder

Sentence: Life Imprisonment

Year Convicted: 1991

Year Cleared: 1995

Location of Trial: Oregon

Result:

Judicially Exonerated Released

Summary of Case:

"Codefendant of her then boyfriend John Sosnovske. Falsely convicted after falsely confessing that her then boyfriend Sosnovske and her strangled and disposed of the body of Taunja Bennett. She retracted her confession, claiming she made it to escape an abusive relationship with Sosnovske, but she was convicted after a trial - putting the onerous on Sosnovske to falsely plead no contest to a murder the two of them had nothing to do with. Pavlinac and Sosnovske's false convictions were overturned when Keith Hunter Jespersion, known as the 'Happy Face Killer' for drawing smiley faces on letters taking credit for murders he committed, confessed to killing Bennett and gave details that could only be known by the killer. The FBI administered lie detector tests that indicated Jaspersion was telling the truth he was the killer and that Sosnovske was telling the truth she was innocent. Four weeks after Jespersion's conviction of murdering Bennett, Judge Paul Lipscomb ordered the two released, saying: "There's no longer any doubt that these two individuals are innocent. The evidence is compelling." (ICFFP, Chicago Tribune)"

Conviction Caused By:

False confession by Pavlinac.

Innocence Proved By:

Confession and conviction of actual killer.

Defendant Aided By: