

1995

Lieutenant David Austen

Willoughby Police Department

How could this happen? How could a 27 year old, single female, living in an apartment with her parents, turn up murdered - in her own home, with her parents asleep? Like a Painesville homicide earlier this year, this type of crime doesn't happen in the suburbs, especially not in Willoughby.

But on August 17, 1995, it did happen. Joanne Kopaitich was savagely murdered as she slept in her own bed. It appeared to the Willoughby detective bureau, that this crime was a random act, and could be a tough case to solve.

Lieutenant David Austen was the officer in charge of the Willoughby Detective Bureau, and this case was the first homicide investigation of his command. He led the investigators in a textbook case, utilizing fingerprint and other trace evidence recovered at the scene, to identify a suspect, and arrest him within hours of the discovery of the crime. It turned out that the suspect was a stranger with no connection to the victim. Faced with the strength of the investigation and the pile of physical evidence, the suspect pled guilty prior to going to trial.

The Lake County Forensics Laboratory played an integral part in the collection, preservation, and analysis of the evidence in this case. To this day, they use the details of this case as an educational tool in explaining the capabilities of the lab, and the importance of physical evidence.

Austen was awarded the Jorge Medina award on February 21, 1996, at the Blue Coats annual banquet. Austen stated that he was honored by the award, but was saddened that the loss of a young woman's life triggered it.

Austen retired from the Willoughby Police Department and later passed away on April 19, 2008.