

Dennis Dolinger

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Slain activist knew suspect, friends say

By Rebecca Charry, Staff Writer

Friends of slain Ward 6 advisory neighborhood commissioner Dennis Dolinger say they suspect he had an ongoing relationship with the man now accused of killing him June 4 in his Capitol Hill home. "A few people have said they recall seeing Dennis with this man," said Will Hill, an ANC 6B colleague and close friend of Dolinger. "I think they did know each other."

Steven Craig Watson, 44, was extradicted June 11 from Alexandria, Va., where he was arrested at his home two days earlier on charges of credit card fraud. He now faces felony murder charges in the District. He was apprehended after he allegedly used one of Dolinger's debit cards June 5 at a hair salon and a clothing store in Old Town Alexandria.

Commander Kim Dine of the First Police District would not comment on whether police believe Dolinger and Watson knew each other. "That is something that is part of our investigation," he said. But those who knew Dolinger suspect the two may have known each other for months or even years. "I suspect there was some sort of longstanding dealings between Dennis and this guy," said Jim Myers, a neighbor and friend of Dolinger. Myers said Dolinger talked about being "worried about somebody" or "having problems with people" and was concerned about "keeping people away from him."

Dolinger's house was burglarized several times over the years and he believed it was done by someone he knew, Myers said.

Dolinger, 51, was found dead June 4 in the basement of his home with stab wounds to the head. There was no sign of forced entry.

People who knew Dolinger and who worked with him to fight crime in the neighborhood near the Potomac Avenue Metro initially feared that he had been killed in retaliation for his leadership in community policing activities against the area's pervasive drug markets.

A memorial vigil outside Dolinger's home June 6 drew more than 100 residents including ANC commissioners and members of "orange hat" anti-crime patrols from every ward in the city.

Dolinger, who was openly gay, lived with a housemate who police say is not considered a suspect. Dolinger had been on sick leave since November from his job as a management analyst at the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, according to a Metro spokesman. Friends said Dolinger planned to retire.

Dolinger lived on Capitol Hill for 20 years and served as the elected ANC 6B12 representative since 1993. Although he had a wide network of friends and colleagues across the city, even some who worked closely with him say they cannot imagine the circumstances of his death.

"We worked together for years," said ANC 6B chairman Peter Waldron. "But we really didn't know much about each other's lives."

As the investigation continues, many are seeking to explain how a good man could come to such a violent end. Hill wondered aloud whether Dolinger's murderer had asked him for money and became angry when Dolinger refused.

Myer, however, cautioned against speculation, recalling the "wild rumors" and "paranoia" that have swept the neighborhood and the city since Dolinger's death was discovered. Some, he said, wondered if Dolinger was killed in retaliation for his crime-fighting efforts, while others speculated that the killer's motive may have been tied to the fact that Dolinger was gay.

"People were really going to town on this," he said. "Poor Dennis gets murdered and everybody goes claiming their particular cause."

A memorial service was planned for June 12 at St. Augustine Catholic Church in Shaw, where Mayor Anthony A. Williams and Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton were expected to speak. Councilwoman Sharon Ambrose, D-Ward 6, introduced legislation naming the park across from Dolinger's Potomac Avenue SE home, which he often tended, "Dolinger Memorial Park." He is survived by half sister Yvonne Dorn Hecker of Redondo Beach, Calif.; aunts Virginia Burgstabler of Portland, Ore., Lucy Lowe of Damascus, Norma Masker of Herndon, Sue Puryear of Lancaster, and Joann Porter of Fairfax; and uncles Bobby Dolinger of Fredericksburg and Danny Dolinger of Corpus Christi, Texas.

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1999 Slaying

Va. Man Convicted in Activist's Killing

By Eric M. Weiss, Washington Post Staff Writer

An Arlington County man was convicted yesterday of first-degree murder and other charges in the 1999 slaying of a D.C. activist.

Prosecutors relied upon DNA evidence to identify Raymond A. Jenkins as a suspect in the stabbing of Dennis Dolinger, an outspoken advisory neighborhood commissioner who lived on Capitol Hill.

Dolinger, 51, was an anti-crime organizer who established an orange hat patrol to thwart drug dealers and other troublemakers. On June 4, 1999, police found his body in the basement of his home in the 1500 block of Potomac Avenue SE. He had been stabbed several times in the head, and his wallet, a diamond ring and a gold chain were missing. Public officials, including Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D), and neighborhood residents attended a memorial Mass for him. Just two weeks before he died, Dolinger retired from a job as a budget analyst for Metro -- a move he hoped would give him more time for his community activities.

Yesterday's verdict by a jury in D.C. Superior Court came in a case that has taken numerous twists. Another man, who was caught after allegedly using Dolinger's credit cards, was originally charged in the killing and spent several months in jail before authorities acknowledged that they made a mistake. Investigators believed that Dolinger's assailant was wounded in the attack, and none of the blood at the scene could be linked through DNA tests to the original suspect.

Investigators then broadened their DNA search to a database maintained by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice. The sample led to Jenkins, who had been arrested on an unrelated burglary charge a few weeks after Dolinger's death. He was serving a prison term in January 2000 when he was arrested in the murder case.

The case stalled as attorneys for Jenkins challenged the admissibility of the DNA evidence against him. Although prosecutors for years have used DNA analysis to link specific suspects to blood and other evidence, this marked the first time that authorities in the District relied upon a "cold hit" that led to someone through a large computerized database.

Defense attorneys argued that there was no scientific consensus on how to calculate the statistical significance of a cold hit. The trial judge, Rhonda Reid Winston, ruled last year in favor of the defense. But the D.C. Court of Appeals overturned her decision last December in a victory for prosecutors that set a crucial legal foundation for use of DNA evidence in the District.

Even with the DNA, prosecutors faced problems. Jenkins went on trial earlier this year, and in April a jury deadlocked on his fate.

This time, Jenkins, 45, was convicted of all charges, including felony first-degree murder, which carries a mandatory minimum of 30 years in prison. Jenkins's sentencing is scheduled for Sept. 15.

"We're just so elated," said Michele Gehrke, Dolinger's cousin, who was in the courtroom yesterday. She noted that the verdict came seven years to the month after Dolinger's death. "None of us would have thought it would take so long."