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Friends stand by Peterson

Visitors and the hope of a new trial encourage the Durham novelist convicted of murdering his wife.

By SANETTE TANAKA
CORRESPONDENT

The sun barely inched above the horizon when 72-year-old Joan Miner began the hour-and-a-half drive from Durham to Nashville, N.C. She turned onto an unmarked street. The complex ahead comprised several large gray and red buildings, rather plain-



Miner



Peterson

looking, except for a 10-foot barbed fence that circled the premises of Nash Correctional Institution.

Miner took a moment to collect her license and adjust her hat and scarf in the mirror.

Prisoners can only have one visitation session per week, so Miner tried to make the affair special for her friend, convicted murderer Michael Peterson.

Of the 980 inmates at the prison, only a handful had visitors that day, or any day. Peterson, the man Miner had come to see, is different.

Peterson has a core group of about 30 friends and family members who visit regularly, and approximately 80 people whom he said he corresponds with through letters and phone calls.

"Hello, Mike," she greeted him.

"My dear Joan," Peterson said. He

embraced her.

When Kathleen Peterson was found at the bottom of a staircase in the family's mansion in 2001, word of her death spread quickly.

Kathleen and Michael Peterson were prominent figures in Durham. Michael was a best-selling novelist and a frequent contributor to the Durham Herald-Sun who ran unsuccessfully for mayor in 1999. Kathleen was an executive for Nortel Networks.

Peterson said he found his wife and immediately dialed 911, reporting an

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accident. Police and prosecutors figured it differently, saying the volume of blood and Kathleen's autopsy results suggested a beating.

In October 2003, after one of the longest trials in state history, Peterson was convicted and sentenced to life without parole.

Friends in disbelief

Many of the couple's friends and family members do not believe he's guilty. The Petersons hosted exquisite parties in their sprawling white Forest Hills mansion and were fixtures at social events.

"I liked to be around them just so I knew that someone got along well," Miner said. "They made me feel optimistic and hopeful that some people could make it work."

After Peterson was convicted, his case fell from the spotlight, his name reduced to that of Durham lore. For a distinct group of supporters, though, he cannot fade away so easily.

Some, like Miner, are old friends, and some are family. About half of the people he corresponds with are from overseas – Switzerland, Belgium, England, France and Germany – and felt compelled to speak with him after seeing a documentary about the trial called "The Staircase."

Peterson's supporters meet on occasion and share news through phone calls and email threads, spearheaded by Miner, Michael's daughter-in-law Becky Peterson and a French woman who edited "The Staircase," Sophie Brunet.

The point lady

According to Brunet, 50, she first became acquainted with Peterson through a computer screen. She sifted through more than 600



Peterson hopes to get a new trial on the ground that SBI blood expert Duane Deaver has been discredited.

2003 NEWS & OBSERVER FILE PHOTO • CHUCK LIDDY

hours of film detailing the events leading up to and involving the trial to create what would become Jean-Xavier de Lestrade's eight-part documentary "The Staircase."



Brunet made a film.

As she watched the footage, Brunet became more and more convinced that the man on the screen was innocent. She was moved by the way he talked about his wife, their wedding and relationship. One month after the verdict, in November 2003, Brunet decided to write to Peterson and offer to send him some books. The two began corresponding regularly about novels, paintings and Paris – Brunet's hometown.

One year later, Brunet visited him for the first time, and she now flies to the United States several times a year to see Peterson. She talks on the phone with him almost every day and emails his friends and family regularly.

"How wonderful it is to visit him," she said. "You get to spend two wonderful hours with a man who will

listen to you and is really interested in your life."

A fragmented family

Although Miner finds the drives to Nash Correctional Institution comforting, 34-year-old Todd Peterson – Michael's son – finds them anything but.

A few times a year, Todd Peterson journeys from his residence in Mexico to North Carolina. During the final stretch of his trip, he maneuvers his car down the winding road as if on autopilot, staring absentmindedly ahead. He glances at his watch from time to time – no use being late.

"The first hour is awesome, you don't worry about time because you know you'll see him after the lunch break," Todd explained. "You're talking, laughing, giving life updates, sharing funny stories about what's going on in prison. ... It's an hour of beauty. You're catching up with someone you love."

"The second hour ... It's beautiful, fun, joking – but you're always looking at that clock. You have one hour, 15 more minutes, five minutes. If you really add up how much time I have left with my dad, it will probably be only 20 to 40 hours until he's dead."

Todd and his brother, Clayton, are children from Peterson's first marriage. Their siblings are Margaret and Martha Ratliff, the daugh-

ters of the couple's deceased friends, and Kathleen Peterson's daughter, Caitlin Atwater.

"I know my children were hurt, were very sad after the trial," Michael Peterson said in an April 13 interview. "But I think – at least I hope – that the kids were also drawn closer together. I think people often become closer in sadness as much as in joy. That's what I try to focus on."

Todd Peterson and Caitlin Atwater have not spoken since his father was charged. Atwater has publicly denounced Peterson, 67, claiming that the evidence shows that he indeed killed her mother. Efforts to reach her for this report were unsuccessful.

In good spirits?



Perlmutter helped write book.

Journalist David Perlmutter first got to know Peterson when the two co-authored a book published in 1998. The Charlotte Observer reporter quickly began to consider the Petersons his close friends.

Perlmutter now visits Peterson two to three times a year, and little seems to have changed, Perlmutter said.

"It's like we're sitting in the kitchen of his house," he said. "We just sort of resume where we left off – mainly just catching up with each other. He asks me about my family, my daughter. We talk about the case, the status of it, where it is."

Sometimes Perlmutter wonders whether Peterson is as content as he seems. Peterson said he refuses to get his spirits down, at least during visits.

"Since I enjoy – treasure – the visits and visitors, I always try to have a good time," Peterson said. "How do I stay positive? Part of it is Buddhism, part is just the way I am. I am almost never down or depressed."

They discuss the past as well, which often revolves

around Kathleen.

"I wouldn't visit him if I didn't think he was innocent," Perlmutter said. "I do this for Kathleen as much as I do Mike. I mean, Kathleen is my friend, too."

Hope for a new trial

Peterson's past attempts at securing a retrial have failed. In October 2005, one of his defense attorneys filed an appeal stating that irrelevant evidence presented by the prosecution prevented Peterson from getting a fair trial. In November 2008, another defense lawyer filed a motion alleging that prosecutors withheld evidence during the trial.

The most recent incident that offers Peterson hope involves a State Bureau of Investigation agent who was fired in January for hiding and manipulating key blood evidence.

In 2003, the agent, Duane Deaver, served as a vital witness for the prosecution, stating that the blood patterns on the stairwell and on Peterson's clothes proved that he attacked Kathleen with a fireplace poker. Based on those developments, Peterson's lawyer David Rudolf met April 12 with the judge on the case, Orlando Hudson, who agreed to schedule a hearing in September.

During the hearing, if Hudson determines that Deaver's testimony unfairly influenced the jury's verdict, he may grant Peterson a new trial. Deaver's lawyer, Philip Isley, declined to comment.



Steele is a friend from Duke.

Tom Steele, Peterson's roommate at Duke, travels from Wintergreen, Va., to the prison several times a year. He said he tries to be a supportive friend to Peterson because in the end, that's all he can do. And from Peterson, Steele says he learned firsthand that the justice system is flawed.

"I used to wonder if a plain old person in the same circumstance could ever be found guilty," Steele said. "Now I know."

Sanette Tanaka is the editor of The Chronicle at Duke University. A longer version of this report appeared in Towerview, the Chronicle's monthly magazine. Tanaka's aunt and uncle also call themselves supporters of Peterson, though she did not consult them for this article.