

## Case Studies

### Case 3: Dennis Stockton

#### The Crime

On July 20, 1978, a young man named Kenny Arnder telephoned Dennis Stockton at his home. Arnder wanted Stockton to drive him to Kibler Valley, a remote, wooded area in southwestern Virginia. Arnder said he was scared because someone whom he feared had seen him stealing tires off a car. Stockton agreed, and drove Arnder to Kibler Valley, dropping him off at 6 PM. Stockton left, but later returned around mid-night, finding a number of people who were having a party.

Five days later, Arnder's body was found in a gully near a dirt road in North Carolina, close to the Virginia border. The body was covered with branches and already decomposed, making identification difficult. Arnder's arms were stretched out in the form of a cross and his hands had been chopped off at the wrists. He had been shot between the eyes.

#### The Suspect

Dennis Stockton already had a criminal record and was one of the last persons to see Kenny Arnder. The police questioned him shortly after Arnder's body was discovered. Stockton readily showed the police guns he had in his house, but they were different calibers than the murder weapon. Then the police left.

Later, Stockton heard rumors about who had killed Arnder. However, Stockton did not go to the police with the information he had heard about the crime.

Two years after the crime, Stockton was in jail on other charges. He heard rumors that the police suspected him of Arnder's murder. He believed he knew where the rumors were coming from and he offered to reveal some new information to the police. The police took him to his house, where he showed them letters from a prominent citizen who had written to Stockton, offering him money in order to have Arnder killed. Stockton claimed he had been given \$2,000, with a promise of \$3,000 more if he killed this rival. Stockton said he kept the money, but never killed anyone. Later, he received another \$1,000 and a letter asking him to kill someone else. Again, he kept the money, but did not act on the offer. He gave the letters to the police, indicating that the author of the letters might be the one spreading the rumors about Stockton's killing Arnder as a way of getting back at Stockton for not carrying out the murders requested in the letters. Later, the letters were lost by the police.

Finally, four years after the crime, Stockton was charged in Virginia with the murder-for-hire killing of Kenny Arnder, when another convicted felon offered to testify that he heard Stockton agree to a contract on Arnder's life.

## **The Trial**

Dennis Stockton's trial was held in the rural town of Stuart, Virginia in 1983. Stockton was charged with accepting \$1,500 for murdering Kenny Arnder from Tommy McBride. Allegedly, McBride was angry with Arnder for crossing him on a drug deal and wanted Arnder killed as a message to others. Arnder's mother testified that the last person she saw with her son was Dennis Stockton.

Randy Bowman testified that he had been at McBride's house trying to sell some stolen goods and heard McBride offer to pay \$1,500 to have Arnder killed. Bowman testified that Stockton quickly agreed to the deal. Bowman's testimony was the only evidence directly linking Stockton to Arnder's murder. Bowman stated that he was not given any promises in return for his testimony, although he was facing criminal charges.

At the sentencing hearing, a different witness testified that he had seen Stockton kill and bury another man named Ronnie Tate in North Carolina in 1979. Ronnie Tate had also been at the park in Kibler Valley the night Kenny Arnder was last seen alive. Stockton claimed he killed Tate in self-defense after Tate had pulled a gun and threatened to shoot him. Although Stockton had admitted to this killing earlier and had even led police to the body, it helped establish for the jury that Stockton would be a future danger to society, and he was sentenced to death.

## **Meet the victim**

Kenny Arnder was 18 years old when he was killed. He was the second youngest of Wilma Arnder's six children. She had raised all the children herself after her husband left her. Kenny was a tall boy, with long hair that was common in the 1970s. He was easy-going, but in his teens he started associating with a rough crowd. Sometimes he would live away from home. When his body was found, he was wearing jeans, a T-shirt with a slogan joking about drugs, and a necklace with a white stone, the same clothes he had been wearing when he was last seen alive five days before.

Arnder had known Stockton for some months and looked up to him. Mrs. Arnder recognized Stockton because he had been at their house a few times. Stockton telephoned her after Kenny was reported missing and again when his body was found. She did not doubt that Stockton was the killer, but she found it cold-blooded that someone could kill his friend.

## **Meet the defendant**

Dennis Stockton was born in 1940 in North Carolina. He spent most of his adult life in prison, work camp, or jail. His first stint in jail came when he was locked up for passing bad checks. His parents let him stay in jail over the weekend to teach him a lesson. He was sexually assaulted by a guard. When he was 17, he was sentenced to three-to-five years in prison for two counts of passing bad checks in his parents' names. When he returned home at age 20, he was already a hardened adult.

Stockton's early years were spent in Shelby, North Carolina, where he lived with his parents in a small rented house near the cotton mills. He did well in school and had an IQ estimated between 130 and 160. He loved baseball and played whenever he could. His father was away for much of his childhood, fighting in World War II. When he returned, he was often abusive to Dennis.

Stockton played baseball on a prison team and claimed he was scouted by the New York Yankees. But he never made it to the big leagues. He became heavily involved with drugs, both using and dealing, committing arson by contract, safecracking, and carrying a gun. Police frequently sought him out as a suspect in crimes. He sported a prison tattoo, and idolized race car drivers. At one point, police claimed they had seen a human body part preserved in a jar in Stockton's house. He said he had gotten it from a biker gang and just kept it to show off at parties.

