

Former prostitutes cover Canadian serial killer trial

The details of the serial murders of six prostitutes and drug addicts in Canada's Vancouver have turned so grisly in the second week that some newspapers have stopped printing them, or are offering them only online.

Robert Pickton, 56, stands charged with killing at least 26 of 61 women who vanished over nearly 20 years from the seedy lower east side of Vancouver. For years, police barely raised an eyebrow until they found gruesome evidence on a pig farm outside the western Canadian city.

But for two Canadian reporters, telling the full story is not up for debate.

Pauline VanKoll, 42, and Trisha Baptie, 33, former prostitutes and drug addicts who worked in the same poverty-stricken Vancouver neighbourhood as the victims, are reporting on the trial for orato.com, a citizen journalism website.

The numbing work of the police, sifting through 292,824 cubic metres of soil and sending 400,000 swabs of evidence to the laboratory, helped sweep away Baptie's distrust of the police.

'The police might not have taken the missing women seriously at first, but when they found the first signs of something seriously wrong, it is pretty evident they threw all the resources they could at it,' she wrote.

And while still bitter that her 'friends will still be dead no matter what new policies and procedures', she writes they may not have died 'in vain if through all this, some very serious and open discussions happen around drug detoxification beds, drug rehabilitation', better supports for kids in care and 'safety for the girls on the streets'.

Only the first six cases Pickton is charged with are on trial now, and the remaining 20 are to be tried later over the coming year or more.

Pickton, who has pleaded not guilty, was arrested in 2002, triggering an 18-month forensic marathon on his farm in the Vancouver suburb of Port Coquitlam. Prosecutors say DNA evidence was found from some of the missing women.

The bloody details - of decapitated heads being split in half and other violations - have drawn criticism from readers. Media interest has dropped off dramatically for the second week of the trial with the number of reporters at the courtroom far less than the 350 that were initially accredited.

When the trial opened early last week, many Canadians were angered at the sensational tone of coverage, prompting several media outlets to change their coverage and issue warnings about the graphic material. Some papers offered two formats of coverage: a censored version in print and an uncensored version online.

But for VanKoll and Baptie, the focus is not on the terrifying details but on the victims.

Paul Sullivan, editor-in-chief of orato.com, explained that the women, who have been off the street and drug-free for several years, were selected for their life experiences rather than their journalism

backgrounds.

'We tried to find people to give first-person accounts. We wanted people who had lived the story and feel the story - who are the story,' he said.

Sullivan said the testimony has been hard on the fledgling reporters, and that their job is to add to the context of the story by explaining life on the street.

'Both women see this as part of their healing but it's been tough,' he admitted. 'I don't know if they were ready for the impact of sitting in the same courtroom as Pickton.'

VanKoll and Baptie's reports are raw and emotional.

'My anger at the end of last week's trial was almost uncontrollable. It reminded me of the anger I once felt when I was on the street. I couldn't hold back my tears for the street sisters killed,' VanKoll wrote last week.

Baptie wrote that nothing had prepared her for the first day of the trial, 'listening to the Crown describe how heads of victims were cut in half, how bodies had been mutilated and other atrocities I will let other media report', she wrote.

Pickton is the first person to be charged in the disappearances, which were not initially probed because, police explained, women working in the sex trade are difficult to track and there was no evidence that they had been abducted.

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