

Girl's '86 death still fresh

-New book, new investigation into Brandie Peltz's homicide.

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ARGOS -- Dec. 11, 1986 still haunts the Argos community. George Kariger remembers it as a "sunny, cold day." He was 34 at the time, a fifth grade teacher at Argos Elementary School. "I remember being at a music program in the afternoon," Kariger, now in his 50s, recalled by phone from his home in Plymouth. "That's when they had them in the afternoon; now they're in the evening." "A sickness" was going around that fall, Kariger said, and several of his students were absent, including 11-year-old Brandie Peltz. Meanwhile the phone rang about 1 p.m. at the Peltz home, where Brandie was home alone. On the other end, the caller breathed heavily into the receiver but said nothing. It was the second time that week such a phone call had been placed to the home, and Brandie called her mother at work. It was the last time Roxie Peltz spoke to her daughter. Two hours later, a man reportedly passed the Peltz home and noticed smoke. He continued on to a neighbors home to call 911, and then returned to the home, where he reported finding Brandie dead inside. Deb Nifong, a neighbor, recalled hearing fire trucks that afternoon. She said she looked out her living room window and saw smoke coming from the Peltz home's second floor. "My first thought," she said, "was, 'Oh, at least Brandie's at school.'" It wasn't until later, she said, that she learned the girl had been inside the home. Kariger said he learned of the homicide from a female colleague. She called about 5 p.m. "She asked if I had heard the news," he said. "I was shocked." **New interest in case** Melissa Bradley, a childhood friend of Brandie, still finds it difficult to talk about her friend's death. Now 33 years old, she was one of more than 100 people who gathered on a recent Sunday to discuss the case. "I spent the night at her house so many times," she said through tears. "I rode the bus with her, and I think I might have talked to her the night before it happened." She said later that she drives by Brandie's old house almost daily, but has not been inside of it since Brandie's death. On occasion, she said, she asks the new owners whether they see "like a little ghost" wandering around. The crowd packed the B&R Building in downtown Argos to listen to Thomas Crowel. Crowel, a northwest Indiana businessman, has self-published "The Passerby," a fictionalized account of his nearly three years researching the 23-year-old unsolved homicide. And now authorities are giving the cold case a second look. Earlier this month, Indiana State Police announced that the Marshall County prosecutor had invited them to conduct a new investigation into Brandie's death. Brandie was found partially submerged in a bathtub in her burning Michigan Road home, strangled and sexually assaulted, just two weeks before Christmas. It is believed the fire was intentionally set to cover up the murder. Although Crowel changed names of people and places and invented minor details, he says the book otherwise hues fairly closely to the truth. Just how closely is a question many of the town's 1,500 residents would like answered. For nearly two hours, the residents at the B&R Building peppered him with questions about the book's proximity to the truth, his research methods, and the likelihood, in his opinion, the case might finally be solved. Also of interest was Crowel's confidence in the guilt of "The Passerby," who the book names as a suspect. "I name who I think the murderer is in the title (of the book)," the author said at one point, "and I stand by it." Crowel otherwise offered few specifics regarding his knowledge of the case, saying investigators had asked him to remain silent on certain points. At the event's conclusion,

Nifong, Brandie's former neighbor, stood before the crowd and made a plea for volunteers. Along with several friends, the 55-year-old has formed a committee to raise awareness of the case and ensure renewed interest in it does not wane. "We need help," she said as people stood to leave. "We got approval from the town to put bows around the light poles throughout town. We ask that you even put one out at your own home." Nifong then passed around a basket of pink ribbons, which she encouraged people to pin to their shirts. Later, she explained her motivation. "It just started out that a few of us said we needed to get the community involved," she said. "We talked back and forth and before you know it, we were planning it."

Fresh eyes' In the news release announcing that state police would be investigating Brandie's murder, spokesman Sgt. Trent Smith credited Crowel's book with renewing interest in the decades-old case. But in a phone interview, Crowel said from his office in Highland, Ind. that he initially intended to write a different story. "I wanted to write a murder mystery in Marshall County," he said, explaining he owns property in the area. "There were four or five unsolved murders, and I was thinking about Darlene Hulse." Hulse was murdered in 1984. A man beat the 28-year-old wife and mother and dragged her from her home. Her body was discovered in a wooded area a day later. Crowel said he was still considering Hulse when he stumbled upon Brandie's grave in the Argos cemetery where she is buried. "I have relatives from back in the late-1800s in the same cemetery," he said, "and as I was walking out I saw her heart-shaped grave." Peltz's age, 11, intrigued him, Crowel said, and he inquired about the circumstances of her death. "I asked a farmer about the grave," he said, "and he said, 'Oh, she drowned in the bath.' " Crowel said he did some digging, and found out the truth. For nearly three years afterward, he said, he spent countless hours investigating the case, pouring over old police reports and newspaper articles and interviewing countless witnesses. His research took him out of state, he said. He even placed a call to England, to follow up on a rumor that an Englishman had committed the crime. "I really got all heated up about the case," he said. "It really began taking up a lot of time." Soon, word got to Marshall County Prosecutor David Holmes that Crowel was making inquiries into Brandie's death. He reviewed the case and then contacted state police. "I thought if there was some interest, why not?" he said by phone of the decision to furnish state police with the case files. "If there's the possibility that it can be solved ... why not?" Holmes said county police long ago identified a suspect in the case, but were never able to charge the person. "They just kind of ran into a dead end on it," he said. Crowel is hopeful the new investigation will lead to an arrest. He said he has been contacted by state police and plans to share what he knows. "I have great optimism that the state police are going to be able to (solve the murder)," Crowel said. Smith, the state police spokesman, said investigators are reviewing the evidence, after which they plan to conduct a thorough investigation. "Times and technologies and things have obviously changed in the past 20 years," he said. "DNA samples and things were collected along the way, and basically what the agency is going to do ... is we will be putting fresh eyes on the case. We're going to start from square one and go over everything with a fine-toothed comb."

Staff writer Erin Blasko: eblasko@sbtinfo.com (574) 235-6187