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Gay men kept vanishing on the streets of Toronto. Now, a serial killer has confessed.

Antonia Noori Farzan, The Washington Post Published 4:24 am PST, Wednesday, January 30, 2019



IMAGE 1 OF 29

In this courtroom sketch from left to right, defense lawyer James Miglin, Justice John McMahon, court registrar, Bruce McArthur, Crown Attorney Michael Cantlon, Detective Hank Idsinga, and friends and family of ... [more](#)

For the better part of a decade, rumors about a serial killer haunted Toronto's Gay Village, a gentrifying neighborhood of rainbow-flag street signs and historic Victorian homes where bathhouses and X-rated video stores were slowly being replaced by banks and chain coffee shops. As one gay man after another disappeared under mysterious

circumstances, residents canceled plans to go out, carried pepper spray on walks and made sure their neighbors knew when to expect them home.

But in December 2017, the Toronto Police Service assured residents that there was no reason to believe that the community had a mass murderer on its hands.

"We follow the evidence, and the evidence is telling us that that's not the case right now," Toronto Police Chief Mark Saunders told reporters at the time. "The evidence today tells us that there is not a serial killer."

A month later, however, LGBTQ activists learned that their worst fears had been confirmed. In January 2018, police announced that Bruce McArthur, a regular at the neighborhood's gay bars, had been charged with killing five men, dismembering them and hiding their remains in flower pots at a private home where he worked as a landscaper. Over the spring and summer, as officials continued to comb through the planters and search a nearby ravine, they located the remains of three other men who had vanished years before. There was no longer any doubt that a serial killer had been stalking Gay Village.

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On Tuesday, McArthur, 67, pleaded guilty to eight counts of first-degree murder, one for each of the eight men who he is believed he Globe and Mail, almost all Gay Village, though several grants from South Asia or the homelessness and financial

ristically gaunt when he hair and thick white beard the eight victims' names were read out loud: Selim Esen, 44; Andrew Kinsman, 49; Majeed Kayhan, 58; Dean Lisowick, 47; Soroush Mahmudi, 50; Skandaraj Navaratnam, 40; Abdulbasir Faizi, 42;

and Kirushna Kumar Kanagaratnam, 37. Court records describe most of the murders as "sexual in nature," and indicate that McArthur used ligatures to kill his victims.

Each count of homicide carries an automatic life sentence, according to the BBC. At a sentencing hearing next week, a judge will decide whether McArthur will serve the eight sentences concurrently or consecutively, which would determine whether he could apply for parole after 25 years.

Speaking to reporters outside the courthouse as snow began to fall, LGBTQ advocates and friends of the deceased men said that they were glad to finally have closure, and grateful that there would be no need for a long and potentially painful trial. But the case's resolution also prompted questions about how McArthur had been able to avoid scrutiny for so long.

"Why did it take so long to zero in on McArthur as a suspect?" the Toronto Star's editorial board wrote in an op-ed that questioned whether police had shown a bias against men who frequented Church-Wellesley, the area known colloquially as Gay Village. "Why did the police seemingly not take the concerns of the LGBTQ community more seriously? The Church-Wellesley community had long feared there was a serial killer in their midst and the police denied it. Would police have taken more and swifter action if McArthur's victims had not been gay or people of color, homeless or addicted to drugs?"

The first of McArthur's victims to disappear was Navaratnam, a Sri Lankan refugee who was last seen leaving a gay nightclub with an unknown man at around 2 a.m. on Sept. 6, 2010. Later that year, Faizi, an Afghan immigrant, was reported missing after he visited a bathhouse and gay bar. When Kayhan, who was also originally from Afghanistan and a regular at bars in Gay Village, vanished in the fall of 2012, police launched a probe into the three men's disappearances, calling it Project Houston.

McArthur was questioned in 2013, after police learned that he had once dated Navaratnam and had spent time with Kayhan before his disappearance, the Globe and Mail reported. But officials found no reason to implicate him in the men's deaths. A year and a half after it began, the Toronto Police Service shut Project Houston down, having failed to identify a suspect.

Authorities now believe that McArthur kept a low profile for two years after being interviewed by police, then resumed killing in August 2015. That month, Mahmudi, a native of Iran, was reported missing by his son-in-law. Police were not aware that he had any ties to Gay Village, and didn't suspect that his disappearance was connected to the other men's until his remains were exhumed from the planters.

At some point over the next two years, Kanagaratnam, a native of Sri Lanka whose application for asylum had been rejected by the Canadian government, disappeared. His death was not reported to authorities because his family members assumed he was in hiding. Likewise, no one ever informed the police that Lisowik - who reportedly was homeless, had been a sex worker in Gay Village and was addicted to crack - was missing. Police believe that he was killed sometime around April 2016.

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Police questioned McArthur again in 2016, after a man claimed that McArthur had tried to choke him while they were having sex, the Globe and Mail reported. Due to conflicting accounts, detectives chose not to press charges.

In April 2017, Esen, a native of Turkey who had struggled with drug addiction, was reported missing. Then, in June, Kinsman failed to show up for work at the Toronto HIV/AIDS Network after attending Gay Village's annual Pride parade. Kinsman's friends and family launched a citywide search, and in August 2017, police established a second task force, named Project Prism, to look into both of the men's mysterious disappearances.

As early as September 2017, investigators zeroed in on McArthur, CBC reported. Police found that Kinsman had written "Bruce" on his calendar on the day he disappeared, and surveillance footage showed him getting inside McArthur's van, where his DNA was later recovered. According to court records, police searched McArthur's apartment and discovered trinkets belonging to three of the missing men, along with a duffel bag that contained duct tape, a black bungee cord, a surgical glove, zip ties, a rope, and syringes. Then, in January 2018, they found the garden planters.

LGBTQ activists contended that it had taken the disappearance of Kinsman, a white man, to "reopen public interest in the cases of the missing South Asian and Middle Eastern men." While Toronto police have defended their investigation, they have also made a number of changes since McArthur's arrest, including establishing a missing-persons unit for the first time and pledging to re-examine all of the missing-person reports that have been filed since 1990. The department also formed an advisory board made up of activists, lawyers and former judges, who will conduct an independent investigation into how those reports are handled.

"If mistakes were made, we should learn from them," Toronto Police Detective David Dickinson, who led the investigation, said at Tuesday's news conference.

One reason McArthur avoided detection may have been his age, the Globe and Mail suggested. McArthur is believed to be the oldest serial killer in Canadian history, placing him in the small minority of people over 60 who are charged with homicides. Experts told the paper that most mass killers start offending in their 20s, meaning that McArthur wouldn't necessarily have fit the profile that police were seeking.

After his arrest, shocked acquaintances described McArthur as a pleasant man who loved plants and his grandchildren, and bore an uncanny resemblance to Santa Claus. A native of rural Ontario, he had realized he was gay at a young age, but married a woman in an effort to conceal his sexuality, according to court records obtained by the BBC. In his 40s, after he came out, he left his wife and children to start over in Toronto, where he became a regular at bars around Gay Village.

In 2003, he was convicted of beating a male prostitute with a metal pipe, the BBC reported. His sentence required him to stay away from Gay Village, not have contact with prostitutes and stop using amyl nitrite, or "poppers."

What drove him to commit the murders remains a mystery. "I don't know if we'll ever know why," Dickinson said on Tuesday.

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