Hometown Girl Attempts to Put Rumors in Their Place

College Student Documents Ada's Side of the 1982 Debra Sue Carter Murder

Debra Sue Carter, a young Ada woman, was raped and murdered in her garage apartment. The event occurred in 1982, but controversy has surrounded it ever since. Now, thirty years later, Laura Frye, a senior majoring in American Studies at Saint Louis University (Mo.) has returned home to tell Ada’s story in her senior thesis.

“If someone is going to talk about this, they’re going to get it right,” Christy Sheppard, Debra Carter’s cousin, said. Frye held a forum at the Ada Public Library March 15 to aid her research. Friends, family and citizens of Ada gathered to discuss the Carter case and its effects on the community.

Ron Williamson, Carter’s neighbor, and Dennis Fritz, Williamson’s friend, were convicted of the crime in 1987. Williamson, the prime suspect, was sentenced to death, and Fritz was sentenced to life in prison.

The men were locked away for 11 years until April 15, 1999, when DNA testing proved their innocence. The justice system dropped the charges just five days before Williamson’s scheduled execution.

Another DNA test showed Glen Gore, the key witness in the original case, was present at the scene. He was sentenced to life in prison in 2006.

Frye wanted to know what happened to Ada after the carnage left in April of 1999.

John Grisham’s 2006 non-fiction bestseller, “The Innocent Man,” documents the murder. Grisham’s story is incomplete and some say has many inaccuracies, which increased Frye’s interest in the case.

“The Grisham book made me realize,” Frye said, “I am a former resident of Ada, had a role in the story because we were all kind of indicted at that point.”

A 2005 Ada High School graduate, Frye grew up during the trials, exonerations and the book release. As she became older, she started to understand the significance of the effects on Ada.

“I guess that is my mission,” Frye said. “It’s not what does an outsider have to tell, but what does Ada have to tell about itself?”

“I couldn’t get it out of my mind,” she said. “What’s the ‘other’ other side of the story?”

When citizens step outside Ada city limits, they realize how people are influenced by Grisham’s book, according to Maggie Frye, Laura’s mother. Maggie said she strongly feels the need to defend her town and the Pontotoc County justice system when outsiders drag up the case.

“If you read it,” Maggie said, “you need to remember that it’s not all true. It’s biased towards Ada.”

In response to Grisham’s book, Bill Peterson, District Attorney for the 22nd district of Oklahoma from 1980-2008, also took a side on the case.

In his blog, Peterson said Grisham had errors in his book, and he claims Grisham made a bad name for Ada and the DA. Peterson told the Ada News Grisham’s work influenced his decision to retire from the justice system in 2008.

Sheppard defended Grisham’s portrayal of her cousin, but said she thinks he was unfair to Peterson. She said she wished Grisham focused more on Debra’s story and less on Williamson’s.

“I don’t think the last few hours of her life should define her existence,” Sheppard said.

Laura Frye will present her paper at the Saint Louis University Senior Fair in April 2012. She said she plans to send a copy to the Ada Public Library, East Central’s Linfield Library and the Ada News.