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Slain doctor's neighbor awarded \$25,000 for helping catch killer

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June 8, 2007, 3:45 PM EDT

BUFFALO, N.Y. -- "Wacky car."

Joan Dorn's entry in her running diary Oct. 14, 1998, was brief. But along with the license plate number she jotted down, it would be just what police needed when a sniper gunned down her neighbor a little more than a week later.

On Friday, the FBI awarded Dorn \$25,000 for her role in the capture and conviction of anti-abortion extremist James Kopp for the murder of Dr. Barnett Slepian, a doctor who provided abortions.

"Don't be afraid if you think what you wrote down was something ridiculous," said Dorn, an epidemiologist whose profession has taught her that every observation may be valuable. "You just really never know what it might lead to."

James Kopp raised Dorn's suspicion from the moment she saw him drive his 1987 Chevrolet Cavalier into her upscale Amherst neighborhood while she was out for her 5:30 a.m. run. She watched as the stranger got out, "way overdressed for the weather," did an awkward hand-to-foot stretch and then began plodding along with an apparent limp that made him seem all the more odd.

Dorn and the stranger ran different routes and when Dorn, an avid runner, returned nearly an hour later, the black car was still there.

"It just seemed to me that no one who ran like that would run that long," Dorn said.



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The car was still parked outside after Dorn showered.

She put a piece of paper on the kitchen counter with the license plate she had noted: BPE 216, Vermont.

"If I don't come home tomorrow from my run, check out this car," she told her husband.

On Oct. 23, 1998, Slepian was heating soup after returning home from a memorial service for his father. The doctor's wife, Lynne, and two of the couple's four sons, then 7 to 15 years old, were in the kitchen with him when a bullet from a high-powered rifle pierced a window, traveled through Slepian's body and ricocheted off a cabinet and wall before coming to rest in an adjoining room. Slepian, 52, died.

Soon after hearing of the shooting at a house she runs by every day, Dorn went to her running log and called Amherst police to tell them about the "wacky car" and its plodding stranger.

"It really did allow the case to progress," said Laurie Bennett, special agent-in-charge of the FBI's Buffalo office.

The license plate was registered to Kopp of St. Albans, Vt., who authorities quickly learned had been arrested dozens of times protesting abortion and was known as "Atomic Dog" in extremist circles.

"It brought the name immediately to the forefront and allowed us to begin investigating him," Assistant U.S. Attorney Kathleen Mehlretter said of Dorn's call.

As authorities closed in, Kopp disappeared, cementing their suspicion that Kopp was the shooter, and had been scouting Slepian's home the day Dorn saw him. Kopp would remain on the run for 2 1/2 years and was one of the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives when he was captured at a post office in Dinan, France in March 2001.

"Thank you. I don't know what else I can say," Amherst Police Chief John Moslow told Dorn before the two embraced. The murder shattered his city of 100,000, which regularly tops safest city lists based on its low crime rate.

"I hope my small part brings some closure to Lynne and her family, although it cannot bring back her husband," Dorn said. "I'm so sorry for that."

Lynne Slepian was at Friday's reward ceremony but declined to speak publicly. She and Dorn met privately afterward.

Kopp, who is now also suspected in the nonfatal shootings of three Canadian abortion providers and one in Rochester from 1994 to 1997, was convicted of second-degree murder in 2003 and sentenced to 25 years to life in prison. He was convicted this past February of related federal charges _ including violating the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act _ and faces a maximum prison term of life without parole when he is sentenced June 19.

Dorn said she plans to split her reward between the health care facility caring for her mother, who has Alzheimer's, and the University at Buffalo's School of Public Health, where she works.

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