

Nashua Telegraph

Wednesday, January 6, 2010

Experts say behavior shocking but not unique

By DAVID BROOKS

Staff Writer

The callousness and arrogance shown by Kimberly Cates' alleged killers after the Mont Vernon home invasion may be shocking but it's not unique, say two men who have studied youth criminals for years – yet that doesn't make the behavior any easier to understand.

“What everybody wants to know is, what kind of people are these, and what would motivate such a horrible crime?” said David Finkelhor, director of the University of New Hampshire Crimes against Children Research Center. “But you really couldn't make that kind of assessment without knowing a lot more about them, about the dynamics of the group ... about the behavior of these kids in other environments.”

Ted Kirpatrick, associate dean of the College of Liberal Arts and director of Justiceworks, a research and development group in justice studies at UNH, agreed.

“I can't tell you the number of homicide offenders I've talked to over the years,” he said. “I'm not convinced that there's always a clear answer, especially in cases like this.”

Kirkpatrick and Finkelhor were asked for their impressions Tuesday after they read affidavits summarizing statements by law enforcement and by the four suspects in the Oct. 4 killing.

Both agreed the long premeditation and planning, and the large number of people involved, are unusual even within the context of killers.

Beyond that, however, they said it was difficult to read too much into police summaries of statements given by teenage boys.

“One of the other things that makes it hard is, when you get groups of teenagers engaged in criminal activity, there's a fair amount of posturing going on – that's part of what motivates the whole thing – so the overt conversations and comments can only be interpreted in a bigger picture,” Finkelhor said.

Among the most shocking statements included in a 13-page document known as a Gerstein affidavit, used to convince a judge that search warrants and other investigation is justified, are those in which Christopher Gribble and Steven Spader bragged: Gribble told one teen the killing and attempted murder were “awesome” and Spader said he wanted to “do it” again, according to police.

“You find that in some offenders, particularly young males, (bragging) that they have accomplished the goal,” Kirkpatrick said. “My experience is that feeling is short lived. Offenders are human beings too, and while we can never forgive them or forgive their behavior, we do see contrition over time.”

He noted, for example, that some of the killers involved with the infamous Manson family had altered their thinking to the point that they “almost externalized it, that it was somebody else who did that.” He also mentioned Robert Tullock, a then-17-year-old who participated in the murders of two Dartmouth College professors in 2001, saying Tullock’s smirking and arrogance in court is unlikely to last in prison.

“That bravado is a fleeting feeling. It would be the rare person who can hold on to that for many, many years,” he said.

Kirkpatrick also noted the incompetence demonstrated by the killers in the statements, including the fact that they told other people about the crime and did a poor job disposing of evidence – notably by bagging up clothing, some of which had their names, and tossing it into a river but never making sure it sank.

“That’s typical,” he said. “If you watch the television shows and movies, they show killers as Hannibal Lecters, who are really bright. But inevitably it’s the errors of the offenders that help investigations.”

“In the heat of the moment, you know most human beings are going to do what seems in hindsight to be quite foolish,” he said.