

## Is a Serial-Killer Gang Murdering Young Men Across the U.S.?

*Dozens of college-age men dead from ‘accidental’ drownings—but a team of retired detectives say the boys were drugged and killed by a shadowy gang with a sinister symbol*

Nicole Weisensee Egan  
*The Daily Beast*



photo: Photobank gallery/ Shutterstock.com

On the evening of Dec. 15, 2016, Dakota James called his friend Shelley in a panic. He was cold, disoriented, and scared out of his mind, wandering the streets of downtown Pittsburgh, trying to find someone—anyone—who would help him.

“I don’t know where I am,” he told her, sobbing. “I’m so cold. Please help me. I’m lost.”

Shelley didn’t hesitate.

“I’m thinking, ‘Did he get mugged? Did he get beat up? Was he in a car accident?’” she told *The Daily Beast* this week. “I was so scared. I said, ‘Where are you?’ I’m coming.”

“Pittsburgh’s North Side,” he told her.

She quickly hopped into her car to go get him, then remembered she could use her cellphone to figure out where he was because he’d enabled location services with her when she gave him a ride to the airport months ago.

That program was telling her he was on Pittsburgh’s South Side. But Dakota was texting her as she drove, trying to guide her. “I’m here,” he texted, sending a picture of a jean-covered leg. “Please help me. I’m so cold. The cops won’t help me.”

Her phone’s location services told her he was at a Springhill Suites on Water Street in Pittsburgh’s South Side, not North. She texted him that with a question mark.

“I’m here^^^,” he texted back. “I honestly don’t know.”

She got there in less than 10 minutes, arriving around 11:30 p.m. As she pulled up to the hotel, she saw a dark SUV in the wrong lane, facing the wrong direction. And Dakota was walking out of the hotel and straight toward the SUV.

“I pulled up not even 10 feet away from the SUV,” she said. “I said, ‘Dakota!’ He turns,

looks back then comes over to me, got in my car, and we left.”

He wasn’t slurring his words. He was walking a straight line, not staggering at all. His clothes weren’t disheveled or wet or dirty. He was emotional, still crying, and he was scared but he did not appear to be drunk.

“What happened?” she asked him. “Are you OK?”

He didn’t want to talk about it, he said.

“He said he just became aware that he was walking on the street and he had no idea where he was or how he got there,” said Shelley, 35, who asked that her last name be used to protect her privacy. “He said he went up to a police officer and they didn’t help him. So, then he called me.”

The last thing he remembered, he told her, was leaving his work Christmas party then heading to some bars with his coworkers from J.B. Hunt Transport Services Inc., where he was a carrier sales coordinator. That was around 7:15 p.m. Everything since then was a blank.

“I said, ‘Do you want to go to the hospital?’ Because I’m thinking, ‘Was he raped? Was he drugged? Because he seemed drugged, because he’d lost four hours,” she said. And he said, ‘No. I just want to go home.’ So, I just took him home. He was crying so much.”

The next day, he thanked her for picking him up, but brushed the whole thing off, saying he had a bad hangover. And she might have, too, if he hadn’t vanished five weeks later, after a similar night out with some of the same coworkers.

Was it just an odd coincidence? Or was James being stalked in the weeks before he died? If she hadn’t shown up at the hotel, would he have vanished that December night, instead?

“I didn’t think about any of this until after he went missing,” she said. “What happened that night?”

On March 6, 2017, 40 days after Dakota James disappeared, a woman walking her dog saw his body floating in the Ohio River, about 10 miles from where he was last seen in downtown Pittsburgh—at 11:49 p.m. that January night—and about 30 feet from the shore.

His death was ruled an accidental drowning by the Allegheny County Medical Examiner’s

Office. But a team of retired detectives and a gang expert believe he’s one of about 100 victims of the Smiley-Face Killers, an alleged organized gang of serial killers that communicates on the dark web, with cells in dozens of cities across the United States. An additional 250 cases might be connected, but they can’t prove it, they say.

James fits the profile of the other suspected victims: smart, athletic, popular, college-age white men who went out drinking and never came home, they say. More recently, some alleged victims have been openly gay, like Dakota. Like him, weeks later, their bodies were discovered in lakes or rivers with smiley-face or other graffiti specifically connected to the group spray-painted nearby. So far they’ve connected about 70 deaths with similar graffiti nearby. About 30 of the men, including Dakota James, had the date-rape drug GHB in their system, according to the autopsy reports.

“Dakota was clearly murdered,” Kevin Gannon, a retired New York City police sergeant who has devoted his life to solving these cases, told The Daily Beast.

The evidence to support that claim? James’ body wasn’t decomposed enough to have been in the water for 40 days, Gannon said. His body was undamaged, despite traveling 10 miles down river and underneath a concrete and steel dam to get to where it was found. Someone used his PayPal account for an \$11.99 transaction two days after he vanished. And there appeared to be ligature marks around his neck, indicating he was strangled, says Cyril Wecht, the famed forensic pathologist and former Allegheny County medical examiner, who reviewed the autopsy report and photos at the request of James’ parents.

And there were 11 smiley-face symbols spray-painted on the Roberto Clemente Bridge, the closest bridge to where James was found and where police believe he fell into the water. It was a good distance away, about 10 miles, but the investigators have discovered that the smiley-face graffiti usually appears on the first man-made structure visible from where a body is found. They don’t know if the graffiti was already on the Roberto Clemente Bridge before James died.

Gannon, his former colleague at the NYPD Anthony Duarte, Prof. Lee Gilbertson, and another retired NYPD detective, Mike Donovan, are the stars of Oxygen's *Smiley Face Killers: The Hunt for Justice*, a new six-part limited series that premieres Saturday, Jan. 19 at 7 p.m.

They have a theory; they have suspects; and they say they have evidence. What they don't have is the support of any of law enforcement or the medical examiners who either ruled these deaths accidental drownings or left them simply undetermined (instead of ruling them a homicide, suicide, or an accident). They also have a host of detractors, from the FBI—which looked at the deaths in 2008 and concluded the vast majority appeared to be accidental drownings—to the Center for Homicide Research—which looked at 40 of the cases and concluded the same—to the various police departments and medical examiners that handled each case and steadfastly refuse to change their conclusions. None of that deters Gannon. He has mortgaged his home and maxed out his credit cards trying to solve these cases. While looking into the death of one college freshman, he was accused of sexual assault; local prosecutors declined to bring charges. A bout of cancer in 2004 forced him to stop for 18 months. But then he returned to the cases. "It's been a difficult road and that's why we had to choose TV, to go to the court of public opinion," Gannon admitted. "We felt like there was no other option."

They are hoping the publicity generated by the show will finally force law enforcement to take some action against the group.

"To me, this is one of the most dangerous domestic terrorist groups in the United States and somebody needs to pay attention to them," Gannon said.

Despite all of their efforts, so far just one of the cases has been changed to a homicide. And that was only after four years of exhaustive efforts by his parents. Chris Jenkins, a 21-year old University of Minnesota student, vanished after leaving a Minneapolis bar on Nov. 1, 2002. Four months later, he was found floating in the Mississippi River on his back, with his arms crossed across his chest. His death was initially classified as an

accidental drowning but in 2006, the police finally agreed to change it to homicide. Minneapolis Police Chief Tim Dolan even made a very public apology to the Jenkins family in November 2006, telling reporters, "When we are investigating a case, we will obviously do the best we can, but we're going to occasionally make mistakes. In Chris Jenkins' case, we did make a mistake...And for that, for the Minneapolis Police Department, I want to apologize to the Jenkins family." The police had a source who had given the specific details about the spot where Jenkins was thrown off a bridge, Dolan said, but he would not elaborate.

Since then, though, not much has happened. "In terms of what the police have done, to our knowledge, it would be nothing," Jan Jenkins, Chris' mother, who wrote the book *Footprints of Courage* about her family's quest to find justice for Chris, told The Daily Beast. "We don't even know who the sergeant is on the case."

John Elder, a spokesman for the Minneapolis Police Department, would only say the case remains an "open/active investigation" and urged anyone with information to call Crime Stoppers of Minnesota.

But the first episode of the Oxygen limited series is about James, a 23-year-old graduate student at Duquesne University who was working full-time while getting his MBA. The scenes with his parents, Pam and Jeff James, are gut-wrenching to watch, their grief still fresh. Though it's difficult to relive his death over and over again, they do it because they want justice for their son.

"I want people to know the truth—that he was a good person and not some 23-year-old child that got drunk and decided to pee in the river and fell in on his own," Pam, who started a foundation in her son's name, told The Daily Beast. "Someone did something wrong to him and we need to find the answer. It's not just about my son. It's about helping the other families out there that need the information." She and her husband say they have encountered nothing but roadblocks trying to get those answers. They were not allowed to view Dakota's body when he was found, just his ankle, which had a distinguishing tattoo, they say, and they didn't get the photos from

the autopsy until August 2018, 17 months after his body was discovered. That's when they saw what appeared to be ligature marks on his neck, said Wecht, the pathologist who viewed the photos.

The Allegheny County medical examiner, the police, and the district attorney would not respond to questions about these specific issues, instead saying they say they are open to any new information Gannon and his team find. Pam has asked Allegheny County Medical Examiner Karl Williams to meet with her and Wecht, but so far that hasn't happened.

"Dr. Williams has met with the family in the past," his spokesperson, Amie Downs, told *The Daily Beast* via email. "He has directly, as well as through intermediaries, indicated that he will be happy to review any additional information that the family wishes to provide—up to and including the determinations made by Dr. Wecht. To date, that information has not been provided."

The so-called Smiley Face murders first burst on to the public scene in April 2008 when Gannon, Duarte, and Gilbertson held a news conference in New York City about the deaths. Back then there were 40 cases across 29 cities in nine states they thought were connected. In 2014, Gannon and Gilbertson published *Case Studies in Drowning Forensics*, a textbook analyzing 14 of the cases.

Today, they know a lot more about the group than they did back then, Gannon said.

"The level of sophistication of the group is a lot greater than we'd imagined," he said.

"Now we know they communicate with each other on the dark web. We know there's surveillance and counter-surveillance."

Each city has its own cohort or cell, said Gilbertson, a criminal-justice professor and gang expert in Minnesota.

"There might be 12 in that cell and they go out one night and five of them do this," he said.

"The next time it's a different five. The way it should be conceived is that it's the cell that's the serial [killer] part of it, not necessarily the individuals. Because over time the individuals in the cell will evolve. Some will age out and just keep their mouths shut. Who wants to go to prison?"

That's why he wishes law enforcement would reinvestigate these cases.

"If they did, the network will start to fall apart," he said. "Someone will squeal or snitch. But there's no reason to now. Everything's going fine for them."

"They're constantly recruiting," he added.

"Years ago, we were on their dark-web webpage but it was asking us to turn on a video camera so they could see who was about to type in the password and there's no way we were doing that. And we didn't even have the password. We'd just been given their URL, so went to it because we were told that's how they communicate."

The motives for the murders range from gang initiation to hate crimes, Gannon said.

"They're targeting the best of the best,"

Gannon said. "These kids are the best students. They're the best athletes and they come from the best families."

Added Gilbertson: "These are upstanding young men. So why precisely do they hate them? Because maybe they're succeeding. Maybe it's the haves and the have-nots."

They say they have suspects in three of the six cases their show is featuring. All are allegedly members of the gang.

He believes they stalk their victims and the incident Shelley described with Dakota could have been one of two things. "They tried to abduct him, and he escaped, or they were doing a test run," he said.

For Gannon, it all began in February 1997 when he was a detective in New York City investigating the disappearance of Patrick McNeil, 20, who vanished after a night out with friends at a bar in Manhattan's Upper East Side. His body was found two months later about 12 miles downriver, floating near a pier in the East River near the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn.

The cause of his death was ruled a drowning, but the manner was undetermined. Gannon's investigation quickly turned up information that pointed toward murder. Witnesses told him a car with a man and a woman was double-parked outside the bar when McNeill emerged and followed him, inching along, as he walked down 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue toward 90th Street, where he turned left. So did they.

"They were good witnesses," Gannon said.

And access to the river isn't easy there.

"I walked that whole area," he said. "There's hardly any way to get access to the river there."

McNeill would have had to walk several blocks and climb over a fence to urinate. Why would he do that when he could pee anywhere?

Gannon also checked with the NYPD's harbor patrol and they said there's no way, with the currents the way they are, that a body could go into the East River where he vanished and end up where it did.

Two more men around the same age vanished in New York City over the next 15 months. The body of one of them was found near where McNeill's body was found. The third was found in the Hudson River around 138th Street.

Gannon retired in 2001 and enlisted his former partner, Anthony Duarte, to help him investigate the cases. The following year, he saw a report on CNN about similar suspicious drownings in the Midwest and began looking into them, eventually teaming up with Gilbertson, a criminal justice professor and gang expert at a university in Minnesota who had been studying the Midwest drownings for years.

In 2006, the team began traveling across the country to all of the sites where the victims were found, which is how they discovered similar graffiti (smiley faces and 12 other symbols specific to the gang) either where the men were put in the water or where they were found. Many were on bridges. By then it was too late to check the New York City cases or the earlier ones in the Midwest. Too much time had passed.

"Our critics say there is lots of smiley-face graffiti around," Gannon said. "I've been on hundreds of bridges. There aren't as many as you think. But we only include it if the other symbols specific to this group are present, too."

And, Gilbertson added, sometimes just the other symbols are there and no smiley face. Though it's been 22 years, Gannon hasn't forgotten his promise to Patrick's mother, Jackie: that he wouldn't stop until he found out who killed her son.

Gannon "is amazing," Jackie, 73, told The Daily Beast. "On the anniversaries he'll call and say,

'I'm thinking about you.' I consider him a good friend."

And she's still holding out hope she will finally get some answers.

"I want to know what happened to Patrick," she said. "I need to know what happened to Patrick and I want to know who's responsible. It's hard living every day not knowing."