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FEATURED

# Joel Hardin helped make tracking evidence more prominent in the courts

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Lauren Kronebusch, The Daily News

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From left, search and rescue volunteers Ron Glaus, Dick Wilker and Carmen Kinch look for footprints staged in the sands near the Talley Way industrial area as part of a training exercise.

In the summer of 1981, 77-year-old Fannie Slotemaker was found raped, stabbed and beaten to death in her Whatcom County home.

A few hours after finding Slotemaker's body, police called in Joel Hardin, the most senior tracker with the U.S. Border Patrol. They asked him to follow bloody footprints out of Slotemaker's house and advise them who to look for.

Hardin followed the footprints for a half a mile, across Slotemaker's lawn, a plowed field and a driveway, and through rows of raspberry vines. He found small items taken from the victim's home and, it appeared to Hardin, accidentally dropped, as if the killer had fallen as he fled.

Hardin told officers to look for a young Hispanic man, 5-foot-7 or 5-foot-8, and 140 to 160 pounds. The man was familiar with the raspberry bushes and had been approached by a dog, which he reassured, Hardin surmised.

A few days later, 24-year-old Mario Ortiz was arrested on unrelated charges and subsequently charged with Slotemaker's murder. After three trials, Ortiz was convicted, and Hardin's testimony was upheld.

On Wednesday, Hardin brought his expertise to Cowlitz County. He trained a group of search and rescue volunteers who are attending a statewide Search and Rescue conference hosted in Cowlitz County this weekend. It is drawing hundreds of attendees from around the nation and the world.

Hardin, 76, is a revered longtime master tracker, a person who follows suspected criminals and missing persons by their footprints, often in thick wilderness, without a dog, with little or inaccurate information about the person he's searching for, and with just a stick to measure the person's strides.

He's been hired by federal and local law enforcement agencies to assist in suspect searches and some 100 criminal investigations. He's testified in about 25 court cases like Ortiz's and trained Special Forces. He now runs his own company, Joel Hardin Professional Tracking Services, in Washington and trains future trackers, many of them search and rescue volunteers.

He helped win more recognition for tracking evidence in courts and has helped train a multitude of new trackers. Before he began testifying in the 1970s, Hardin said tracking evidence was rarely admitted in court.

"It's not that the crime investigators don't see what we see. They don't recognize what (the signs) mean," Hardin argued. "The average person only is conscious of about a fifth of what they see. We're increasing their total consciousness."

Hardin does that by teaching his trainees how to recognize the meaning of what they're seeing. A track can tell you, for example, whether someone was familiar with the environment or whether they were running in panic.

"We don't teach people to see things they didn't see before," Hardin said. "We teach them to recognize and understand what (tracks) mean."

Experienced trackers like Hardin can pick out tracks even after rain has scrubbed them away or snow has hidden them. He can pick out the tiny footprints of an abducted child among a scramble of footprints on a busy city sidewalk.

As part of their three-day training, volunteers searched for the paths of footprints Hardin laid out in the sand pits south of the Talley Way industrial area in Kelso.

A trio of trainees set out Wednesday from their cars and walked several yards along the dead-end road, surveying the gravel for footprints. They held their tracking sticks out from their hips and let the sticks' shadows guide where their eyes focused.

After 20 minutes, the trio of trainees placed eight tall orange sticks in the ground to mark the eight footprints they've been able to pick out from the hard-packed gravel, sand and soft mulch.

Under one, a sandy depression was surrounded by hard-packed gravel, indicating a disturbance. Under another, a tuft of moss had been flattened by a heel. Under another, footprints were outlined by deep depressions in the soft brown mulch.

“Tracking is a very simple process of seeing what’s in front of you with understanding so you’re able to it explain to a jury with simplicity,” said Dick Wilker.

Wilker is a retired truck engineer and search and rescue volunteer from Idaho who’s known Hardin for more than 30 years, since he took his first tracking class from Hardin’s late mentor, Ab Taylor, a legendary tracker and former U.S. border agent. Since then, he’s trained with Hardin, whom he admires immensely.

Indeed, without the more obvious footprints in the mulch, a novice tracker would miss the trail entirely, as Carmen Kinch almost did.

Kinch, a retired U.S. Forest Service agent, and fellow trainee Ron Glaus, a retired criminal psychologist from Salem, retraced their steps to retrain their eyes to detect the footprints they missed on the first go.

When she returned to the beginning of the foot path, Kinch announced that she had found a new footprint. It turned out the footprint was a fresh one made by Wilker, however.

“I’m glad you made it because the first time we did this I didn’t see” the first footprints, Kinch told Wilker.

“You want the experience of finding the track,” Wilker told her. “It reinforces (that) yes, I can do this. I believe in myself.”

And even the master acknowledged he’s still learning.

“I have learned a lot more about what I do by teaching others,” Hardin said.

Contact Daily News reporter Lauren Kronebusch at 360-577-2532.

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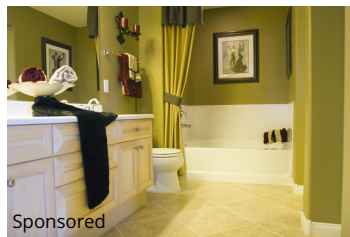
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