

The System_105

Disclaimer 00:00

The System contains adult content and may not be suitable for all audiences. Listener discretion is advised.

News Clip 00:12

30 year old Kevin Keith was arrested at his home in Crestline, halfway between Bucyrus and Mansfield by both of those police departments. Police were led to him by the partial imprint of a license plate number left in a snowbank after the getaway car ran into it, as it left the scene of the crime. He is charged with three counts of murder for allegedly killing...

Charles Keith 00:32

The car did not lead them to Kevin. How did he get in jail 15 days before he even found the car? And that started me to investigate and ask questions and everything and when a car hit into the snowbank it left an imprint of the plates. And those plates came back immediately to someone else. That same day of the murder, it came out Rodney Melton, 1979 Chevrolet Impala. They had the zero, four, three, there was never any mention of it. And once they got a hold of Melanie Davidson, zero, four, three, just popped out all over the place. And they used that zero, four, three, to pin that on him and let the other guy go. And I just, I just couldn't believe all that. Why wouldn't they do a thorough investigation? I couldn't answer those questions. You know, I really couldn't answer those questions. I said it's got to be some mistake. When I heard Quanita, the little girl come out and say daddy's friend Bruce, I immediately knew who Bruce was and I know what Bruce does. And I also know his brother Rodney. Everybody was afraid of him. So how did the car lead them to Kevin Keith? It was, it's impossible. It's impossible.

Kim Kardashian 01:49

As we've heard before, seven year old Quanita Reeves identified the gunman as her daddy's friend Bruce. And it turns out there was in fact a friend of her dad's named Bruce living in the area, Bruce Melton. Rodney and Bruce's names circle this crime, in documents and police tape. Rodney was at the scene on the night of the crime, saying his car was broken down so he had to get a ride from Mansfield. The name Bruce was brought up by one of the surviving victims. The numbers in the snowbank match Rodney's car. You'd think with all these possible connections, investigators would have pursued these leads heavily. So did they? Is there more here? Or is it just coincidence in a small community? I'm Kim Kardashian. And this is The System.

Lori Rothschild 03:00

Rodney and Bruce are brothers. We know Rodney Melton has a history of violence because he was found to be guilty of a murder at the age of 17. He shot a boy outside of a school dance.

Kim Kardashian 03:10

This is Lori Rothschild again, a TV producer and innocence advocate.

Lori Rothschild 03:17

I did pull the police reports and they were at a school dance and Rodney came out there was an altercation. He got a gun and shot the kid. Rodney has a history with violence. And it's you know, it's it's recorded. It's not like you know, anybody has to make it up. And it's not a suspicion. It's it's true because there's there's a murder that happens when he's 17. He's able to shoot someone and kill someone at the age of 17. And, and his affiliations with different circles of crime goes on throughout his life.

Kim Kardashian 03:53

Kevin, as we've covered didn't have a particularly violent criminal record. He did have a robbery on his record, a purse snatching, where he knocked down a woman to steal her bag. But as we've just heard, another suspect in this crime did have a record of violence, murder to be exact. And that person is Rodney Melton. Of course, this isn't a reason by itself to believe the wrong person is behind bars. It's just context, perhaps important context, that didn't really make it to trial or to the public eye. The murder Rodney Melton was convicted for was years ago when he was 17. But Rodney was involved in a crime right before the Bucyrus Estates murders, something that didn't come out before trial.

Lori Rothschild 04:36

In late 1993, pharmacies all over Ohio were getting robbed, all over, within an hour or two vicinity around Crawford County, but they were happening all over the state. And they were all basically being robbed the same way, where the robbers would go and cut the alarm lines. So that would be you know, their first act was to cut the lines, make sure the alarm doesn't go off. And once they were able to access the place, they would just rob them of all the drugs. Every state has what they call a State Board of Pharmacy. And this guy, Bill Padgett, who's at the State Board of Pharmacy, starts seeing how many pharmacies are being hit. Because it's a lot. It's a huge list. So he, he does a compilation of those pharmacies and there's a list in the report that he creates. And he sees that it's all within this certain vicinity, and he starts to investigate on his own. January of 94, there is a pharmacy that robbed in a town called Frazeyburg Ohio, which is about 90 minutes south of Crestline. There was a witness, this woman watched as these as these guys got into and out of a car. She's the one who called the cops and said, there's a really suspicious car that was outside. And she had the wherewithal to get the license plate. And she reported it. That information then went into the State Board of Pharmacy, and they linked that car to a guy named Russell Gardner. And when Bill Paget's contacts Crawford County, they're like, oh, yeah, we've been we've been watching those guys for months now. And Gardner is known to the police as being involved with this organized group that we're robbing the pharmacies. He was well known to the cops. Two people listed in that group was Rodney Melton and Bruce Melton.

Kim Kardashian 06:35

Along with the Meltons, there are a couple other names on the list that you may be familiar with, including Demetrius Reeves, Quentin and Quanita's father.

Lori Rothschild 06:45

Again, this was on the radar, this group of guys was already on the cops radar. The Ring is coming from Crawford County. And Crawford County had created a task force to follow these this robbery ring. And the quote from Crawford County was they were actively working on felony cases against individuals in the group. And that was dated August of 1993. August of 1993. It's been going on for a while, it's now January of '94. Right, here we are six months later.

Kim Kardashian 07:23

Remember how I said we talk about the other criminal activity happening in the Crawford County area. This was the other big investigation going on right before the Bucyrus Estates murders. And it was a much bigger deal than the small time drug dealing being done by Kevin Keith and the other members of the Keith family.

Lori Rothschild 07:41

The lead of the task force is a guy named Jerry Heckman and he's based out of Galion. Jerry Hickman is the guy who is now contacting Bill Padgett and saying I'm the guy that's doing the whole thing and gives lots of information to Bill Padgett. In fact, if you look at the report, Jerry Hickman gives daily updates to Bill Padgett and he tells him it's from the CI that he's working with

Kim Kardashian 08:07

By CI Lori means confidential informant.

Lori Rothschild 08:11

So Jerry Hickman gives the first report I think on the 18th of January. He identifies his CI as being the driver for the ring. We now know that that woman's name is Lynn McKee. So Bill Padgett from the State Board of Pharmacy anytime, a CI is referenced, he believes the CI is Lynn McKee. However, we now know based on looking back into what the task force was doing prior to the State Board of Pharmacy coming into the case, that Lynn McKee was not their CI at first, it was a guy named Rudel Chatman. Rudel Chatman was the original CI but when the State Board of Pharmacy came in, Jerry Hickman drops Rudel for reasons unknown and inserts Lynn McKee as the CI.

Kim Kardashian 09:01

Rudel Chatman was one of the two confidential informants for the police for this pharmacy crime ring. Remember, the murders were at the apartment of Marichell Chatman, Rudel Chatman's sister. According to Richard Warren, when the gunman entered Rudel sister's apartment, he said to the pleading victims, "you should have thought about that before your brother ratted on me." From everything we've read and heard, it's unanimous that Rudel was snitching on criminal activity in the area. And maybe he ratted on the Keith family. But we can see from Bill Paget's report that that wasn't the only thing Rudel told the cops about, and the pharmacy burglary ring was a much bigger deal in the grand scheme. When I first heard about this, it sounded almost unbelievable to me. Confidential informants? It felt like something out of a heist movie. I asked Kevin's brother Charles, for some context.

Charles Keith 09:55

See down there when you're an informant, all you got to do is tell on somebody. There's only so many black families so you just tell on somebody and you can keep rolling. That's all it was, family because you know, we have mutual relatives and you're talking to a very small community so I can be upset and I can tell on you and I can tell on my cousin. It's not like you know, you're talking as big gangs or like in the city a big gang will come out and get you. Down here your snitching on friends and family and that kind of stuff. That's all.

Lori Rothschild 10:23

The 21st of January this task force does a huge raid in a town called Crestline. Where the Keith family, small time drug dealers, drug dealers, but small time this is not heroin. This is crack. This is probably joints, things like that. But it makes the front page of the paper in Crestline, huge arrest of these drug dealers. None of the men associated in that arrest were any of the people involved in the pharmacy burglary ring. So Jerry Hickman does like a, by the way, we did a huge, you know, a huge raid on the 21st in Crestline, we got a lot of these guys down. That's what it looks like in the report. And he gives like, again, daily updates from there, the 21st, 23rd, the 25th, the 26th, the 27th, all of these reports are coming in from Hickman about Rodney Melton and this gang of pharmacy burglars. The 21st kind of happens, the Keith family drug arrest kind of happens. It's kind of like, yay, we got these guys, but that has nothing to do with the State Board of Pharmacy.

Kim Kardashian 11:28

When Kevin Keith was arrested for the Chatman family murders, he was out on bail for the January 21st drug raid. If you remember in episode two, Kevin described how he felt when he was being arrested for the murders. He says he was surprised when the police kicked his door in because he hadn't sold any drugs since his last drug arrest on January 21st. According to Kevin, he was laying low waiting out the pending drug charges.

Lori Rothschild 11:54

The State Board of Pharmacy is like who cares about those guys, right? And they move on. And then all of a sudden on the 11th everything goes silent. There is not one entry from the 11th until the 16th. The murders happened on the 13th of February. And in that next entry, in that next report, Hickman surveillance, like I said just went silent. And Hickman tells Padgett that it was unrelated and that Kevin Keith committed the crime. That that was it. That's that's he said they caught the killer, his name is Kevin Keith.

Charles Keith 12:31

Kevin's name came up from a police officer by the name of Jerry Hickman. He, at the scene of the crime was thrown around the name Kevin Keith as the possible person that did this because there was a case against Kevin with Rudel Chatman, one of the family members as an informant. So everybody already assumed well, here's a new kid in town. Big guy, fit the description. Let's get him.

Kim Kardashian 12:55

Charles is right about this. And it's recorded in police reports. Lieutenants David Dane and Jerry Hickman were at the Bucyrus Estates crime scene, on the night of the murders. Here's exactly what was written in the case file.

Voice Over 13:09

Lieutenants Dane and Hickman returned to the scene. They advise they had went to the hospital and spoken to Rudel who was still there, but ready to leave and go into hiding. Rudel told them that Rodney Melton had come to the hospital and told Rudel in front of other family members that this happened because Rudel was nancing on the people in Crestline. The officers advise the case involving Rudel involved Gene Keith Senior, Gene Keith, Kevin Keith, Demetrius Reeves and Roy Price. They advise that Gene Keith Senior had told someone that they were going to whack families in retribution for their arrests.

Kim Kardashian 13:49

When this police report and the pharmacy burglary ring reports were shared with me, I found them pretty shocking. The police maintain that there was a strong motive in this case. But the deeper I go, the more this seems like a gray area for me. There were so many people that could have had the same or similar motive, did the police give all of these potential suspects the same due diligence? Kevin was arrested only two days later. The two police officers that first mentioned Kevin's name had relationships with people in the community. They're quick to name Kevin, but it seems that was purely based on local speculation at the time. Not to mention, Rodney was also in the hospital that night, being vocal about the same motive. At this point, I really wanted to know why. If there were other viable suspects, why was Kevin Keith arrested just two days later? Why would there be such a push to arrest him? Was there a reason law enforcement would be rushing to solve this murder?

Former President Bill Clinton 14:48

Thank you very much.

Kim Kardashian 14:51

So it turned out there was pressure. There was pressure on everyone in local law enforcement to solve this crime because it had received national attention, coming all the way up from the White House.

News Clip 15:03

President Clinton spoke today at the Ohio Peace Officers Training Academy in London, Ohio, about his anti crime initiatives. Last year, the Senate passed the so called Three strikes and Out provision requiring life imprisonment for three time federal felons.

Former President Bill Clinton 15:21

The other day, I flew into Shreveport, Louisiana, and the front page of the newspaper had a letter that a teenage girl had written to me.

Kim Kardashian 15:29

Two days after the murders President Bill Clinton gave a speech in London, Ohio about his anti crime efforts.

Former President Bill Clinton 15:35

And her letter said this, "If I can meet the President, I would ask him to make his top priority crime. Crime is so bad, I'm afraid to go outside. I really didn't pay attention to crime until someone shot and killed my friend who was one of my church members. My concern is," listen to this, "my concern is I won't have anyone to marry,"

Kim Kardashian 15:58

In that speech, he indicated his support for the three strikes concept, which would make it easier for courts to sentence repeat criminals to life imprisonment. He also endorsed a federal death sentence to killers of police officers. In that speech, Clintons cited the Bucyrus Estates, murders by name.

Former President Bill Clinton 16:16

Over the weekend, four people were shot and a little girl was killed in an apartment complex in Bucyrus, not too far from here.

Charles Keith 16:25

When President Clinton came to London, Ohio to promote his crime bill speech, there was a murder that happened. And he mentioned that murder, while they didn't have anybody in jail at that time. So mentioning the Bucyrus murders, they're like holy shit, the President's mentioning this, we better do something. They went and grabbed Kevin, while the President was speaking, and boom, boom, boom, I thought they were gonna hold him for 48 hours. I said they're gonna at least question him. They never questioned Kevin to this day.

Kim Kardashian 16:55

President Clinton gave his speech to the Ohio Peace Officers Training Academy at 12:25pm on February 15. Later that same day, Kevin Keith was arrested in Crestline, Ohio.

Kevin Keith 17:09

Bill Clinton came out gave a speech, in London, Ohio. How he just happened to be in Ohio and gave that speech. I really do think the atmosphere really changed, where people wanted to help. I mean, you've got a president of the United States, and he's talking about a case and it's in their small town. And I really do believe that's why they said it was me.

Former President Bill Clinton 17:30

We have to look inside too. Yes, there's a role for the Congress. Yes, there's a role for the police. But there's a role for the American people too. You can't make me believe that we can't take our streets back and give our kids their futures back. And we're going to do our best starting with a crime bill, we want you to help us. Thank you and God bless you.

Kim Kardashian 17:55

The timing of President Clinton's anti crime speech in Ohio is remarkable to me. It seems like just another one of these strange odds stacked against Kevin.

Kevin Keith 18:25

Prior to trial beginning me and my attorney was just going back and forth, because I didn't have the money to pay the guy. I was making promises to him, and that was the situation. I had no money for no experts. None of that. All I know, I didn't do it. And I was standing on that.

Kim Kardashian 18:41

Which is why, like, your brother is like, so amazing and commendable that your brother spent so much time,

Kevin Keith 18:49

What do I think about my brother Charles, he done went through 100 pair of tennis shoes. I mean, everybody I ran into that's from Canton. The first thing they tell me is man, your brother. I see him walking on this side of town. I see him here, and all these talks about is you. And so he's a little bit obsessed. You know, really, I would like to talk to my brother sometime. But he's so kind of caught up. You know it, that's my brother. But I wanted some time, I want to call him and I want to talk to my brother. But he's been in this fighting mode for so long. When I've talked to him, I'm always talking to a supporter and advocate, and I just want to talk to my brother sometimes, like I need that sometimes. So.

Kim Kardashian 19:32

I understand. You also need that normalcy and that connection also, instead of just like focusing just on the case,

Kevin Keith 19:41

Or especially, especially with him, because that is my brother, older brother. And I can see it's kind of it's kind of it's kind of breaking him and it's kind of breaking him. So, you know, I could tell, I could tell its, this kind you know, its, yeah, it as affecting him in a way that I just wish he could kind of go on with his life too. Because 28 years is a long time and Charles has been at it 28 years. If I get on the phone with him right now. He's the advocate. He's not my brother.

Charles Keith 20:12

I got divorced. I don't even remember what year. It was a few years might have been five years after but everything in our life had turned to Kevin The floors were full, packed with papers. There was stuff on the walls and that's all we talked about. You know, she wanted to go have a good time, normal things that a couple wants to do well, all that had died with us, actually with me. And I didn't feel like doing any of these things anymore. She was helping me and it just got to be too much for it wasn't her brother, it wasn't her passion. So you know, we got divorced. And I never even thought about the divorce because that wasn't the worst thing happening. You know what I mean? And it gave me an opportunity to really go mad crazy and dig, dig, dig, dig, dig, I could stay up all night, I could go anytime I wanted. I mean, I could do all the things that I needed to do. But had I had a family it would not have gone like that. We actually had to fire the first attorneys that we had, they did nothing, they did not talk to me. I had all these documents. And every time I went down there to show him one day, we'll take him make a copy of it so that you guys don't have this stuff. And I found out that they didn't have any of it. Kevin says Chuck, I'm not gonna die with these attorneys. So he fired him. I think he went like maybe six months or more without an attorney. After that, the Ohio Public Defenders Office got involved and they gave us

Rachel Troutman, you know, and she told me that Kevin had no more appeals left, which those first attorneys made sure that they were burned, there's no more appeals. And once you have no more appeals, they're about to set a date. The only thing that we can argue is actual innocence. And that was the first time I've heard of that, and I said, well he is actually innocent. I says here, you can have all the evidence that I have, I brought boxes, you can have it, it's not gonna do me any good. So I went home and about three, four months later, they called me and they said, "Hey, can you come down here."

Kim Kardashian 22:09

After Kevin was convicted in 1994, Charles worked tirelessly with his brother on this case, even when it seemed like Kevin's legal counsel wasn't getting anywhere. In 2007, Kevin finally got represented by Rachel Troutman. She began researching Kevin's case, but it took until 2010, the year Kevin's execution for significant movement.

Charles Keith 22:32

When they were getting ready to execute him, and they were going to take him, he says "Chuck they're getting ready to move me." That's the only time I've ever kissed a man on the lips. It was a kiss of goodbye. I can see it plain as day, damn, take my brother out. And it didn't happen. He got no, he didn't even make the ride to Lucasville. He says, dang man, I mean, the clemency came through. And I would have bowed at Rachel's feet, I'da kissed her feet, for what she had done for me. Because I mean, it was a nightmare of like, here we are. If she loses this clemency, it's over. There's no second shot. And that's one of the things that scares me about this. You get one shot at everything, one shot.

Rachel Troutman 23:22

Everything at that time, it was just so kind of harried. It was like you were waiting any day now he was supposed to get an execution date.

Kim Kardashian 23:31

This is Rachel Troutman, Kevin's current attorney.

Rachel Troutman 23:35

When I first started to help out on the case, it felt very kind of not hopeless. But it just the odds of of something good happening, it just felt very, it was very uncomfortable because it felt like everything was laid out there for the jury. And there are all these these pieces of evidence that should have somewhere along the way, caused a court to say this is the wrong person and granted a new trial. But that hadn't happened. It had been argued it had been presented, it was laid out in front of how many judges. And so when we when I first started to help on the case, it was like what do we do here? You know, everybody's heard it and they don't care. One of my go to things was I would read through old newspaper articles, because there are a lot of people who would speak to a reporter who didn't end up testifying at trial. And so I was kind of curious to see what that looked like. And our office maintains kind of a database of old newspaper articles. And so as I'm going through these old articles, one of the witnesses that Kevin's defense attorneys had called was this guy, Rodney Melton. So his name was in one of the newspaper articles referencing Kevin, and also in that newspaper article it referenced in a pharmacy burglary ring that was that a bunch of people had just been arrested for you know, they're rolling and robbing a bunch of pharmacies across Ohio. And it listed the name of the pharmacy board

investigator who had kind of put it all together. So I reached out to that pharmacy board investigator and I asked for all of his records concerning that, that investigation for the pharmacy burglary ring, starting from before the time that the crime occurred, the one that Kevin is convicted for, and ending after. Because this person Rodney Mountain was the alternative suspect. And so if he was under investigation through that time period, even if that investigation had nothing to do with with Kevin in this case, maybe there'll be something in there demonstrating where he was during the time that these murders occurred. Then I saw in those materials that two weeks before the murders occurred Rodney Melton had told a confidential informant that he was paid \$15,000 to essentially commit this crime.

Kim Kardashian 26:03

When I heard this, I couldn't believe it. In the pharmacy burglary report, Rachel found documentation of Rodney Melton threatening to commit a violent crime. There's actually a paper trail of this, and yet it was never presented in court during Kevin's trial. According to the report, Rodney had told Hickman's confidential informant that he was paid \$15,000 to cripple the man who was responsible for the raids in Crestline, Ohio last week. This report was logged on January 31, 1994, meaning Rodney was referring to the Keith family drug raid. We've already heard that Rudel was the informant for that drug raid. If we're putting two and two together here, that means Rodney would have been threatening Rudel with this statement, Rudel Chayman, whose sister is victim Marichell Chatman, a victim of the Bucyrus murders. Remember, the shooter said, "You should have thought about that before your brother started ratting on people." Whoever opened fire on apartment 1712 B was looking for Rudel.

Rachel Troutman 27:04

When I started to investigate and when we first found that the Pharmacy Board file the day I got it the the moment I think the moment I saw that quote about Rodney Melton being paid \$15,000 to commit the crime. I emailed my boss, I still have the email and said, I just became convinced that I'm gonna win this case. And I was.

Charles Keith 27:34

I mean, even if you have Kevin as a suspect, you still have Rodney as a suspect? You have all those guys that Rudel supposedly snitched on, all nine of those, you have everybody that was involved in the pharmacy burglary. I mean, these are all suspects. Now, it's funny because as we sit here, right now, we haven't said a whole lot about Kevin, who Kevin is I mean, all the stuff. We're talking about everybody else, because that's what I saw that like, this ain't even nothing to do with Kevin. They just inserted him. That was it.

Kim Kardashian 28:09

Despite the possibility of other suspects, Kevin was the only one ever arrested and charged with this crime. Was this case investigated thoroughly? The more I hear the more I'm skeptical. And the more I feel there's at least reasonable doubt about Kevin's guilt. If every avenue wasn't explored, who's at fault for that? Who's ultimately responsible for the mismanagement of a case like this?

Eric Sandy 28:42

You know, it's really hard to say what the specific motivations of some of these police officers were. But I don't think it's too hard to imagine that some short term gains related to power on a very small local level, were enough to entice them to do what they felt they had to do.

Kim Kardashian 29:02

We'll get into this more next time on The System.

The System: The Case of Kevin Keith is a Spotify original series produced in partnership with Big City TV and Tenderfoot TV. I'm Kim Kardashian, your host and Executive Producer. From Big City TV, Executive Producer is Lori Rothschild Ansaldo. From Tenderfoot TV, Executive Producers are Donald Albright and Payne Lindsey. Lead Creative Producer is Meredith Stedman. Production, editing, and sound design by Tristen Bankston and Cameron Tagge. Production Manager is Tracy Kaplan. Music by Makeup and Vanity Set. Mixed and mastered by Cooper Skinner. With additional support by Devin Johnson. Additional sound design by Cooper Skinner. Associate Producer is Jaime Albright. Voice work by Miles Agee. From Spotify, Executive Producers are Julie McNamara and Liz Gateley with support from Podcast Executive Lila Benaissa. Senior Program Manager is Jessica Dao with support from Program Associate Matt Greene. Special thanks to Dawn Ostroff, Tracy Romulus, Christy Welder, Ollie Ayling, Travis White, and all the cross-functional teams at Spotify that helped bring this program to life.

Visit the link in our show page or in the episode description for more resources on this case. New episodes of The System: The Case of Kevin Keith, come out every Monday only on Spotify. Be sure to hit the Follow button so you never miss an episode.