

Killer confesses to 1989 Peekskill slaying

By JONATHAN BANDLER

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NAPANOCH, N.Y. — Steven Cunningham knew it would come out someday. But for almost 17 years, he kept a secret from relatives, friends and law enforcement — a silence that sent a naive teenager to prison for more than half his life for a crime Cunningham committed.

In a jailhouse confession yesterday, the 46-year-old convicted murderer admitted that he killed 15-year-old Angela Correa in the woods behind Peekskill's Hillcrest Elementary School in November 1989 — four years before the slaying of a schoolteacher would land him behind bars.

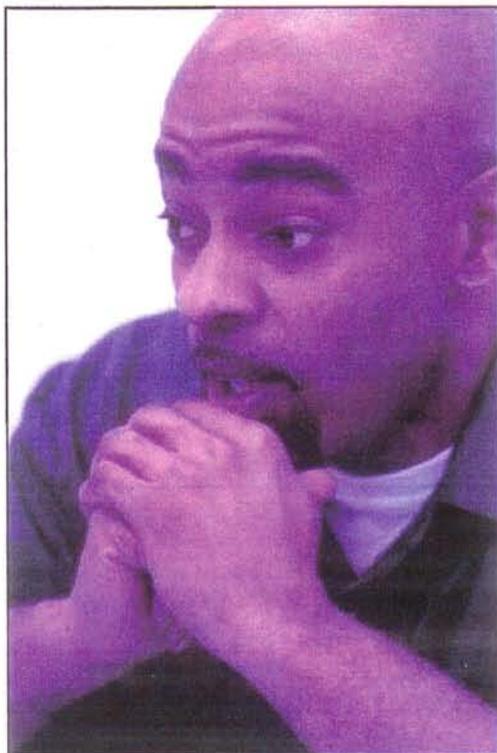
"I strangled her," he told The Journal News of Correa. "It was during (sex). Like a rage."

Two weeks ago, Correa's Peekskill High School classmate, Jeffrey Deskovic, was released from prison after a DNA match linked Cunningham to the crime. The inmate insisted yesterday that he had no idea anyone was ever charged or sent to prison for his crime, and that if he had, he would have spoken up sooner.

But Deskovic, now 32 and staying with a friend in Peekskill until he finds an apartment, said it was unfathomable that someone who remained in town in the wake of Correa's high-profile slaying would have been oblivious to the outcome of the investigation.

"I think that he's trying to minimize his culpability to the extent someone who killed two people can," he said, when shown part of Cunningham's interview. "I don't feel any sense of closure from what he said. He cost me all those years of my life. He cost me all those years."

Deskovic said his only consolation now is that any lingering doubt about his innocence



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Steven Cunningham: "Spiritually inside, I'm free."

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should be dispelled by Cunningham's admission.

Cunningham spoke at Eastern Correctional Facility, the maximum security prison where he is serving 20 years to life for the April 1993 slaying of Patricia Morrison, his girlfriend's sister and a mother of three young boys.

The prisoner said he was a different man today than the "monster" who was overcome by cocaine addiction when he committed those violent crimes. He expressed remorse at the lives he had taken and families he had hurt.

"Today, I'm a person that looks back on his life and sees how he ruined it, ruined other people's lives — destroyed them actually — tore them up, all because he wanted to enjoy a toke or smoke cocaine," Cunningham said. "Addiction to drugs is vicious. It's definitely a Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde type of thing."

Cunningham said he has still not told his mother, sisters or teenage son of the earlier killing.

"It will probably really, really destroy them. I can't look them in the eye," he said.

Correa's relatives could not be reached for comment. The District Attorney's Office would not discuss the case yesterday or confirm that Cunningham is their new suspect in the Correa homicide. When they supported Deskovic's release last month, prosecutors said they had gotten a confession from an inmate and would pursue charges against him. Cunningham said yesterday that if charged in the case, he would plead guilty to spare the girl's family — and Deskovic — another trial.

The significance that Cunningham is incarcerated for a crime that occurred more than three years after he killed Correa was not lost yesterday on the dead teacher's family.

"Yes, it means maybe she'd still be with us; it gets me upset just thinking about it," said her mother, Ann Morrison. "It's too late now to say he's a different man. I guess he thought he was going to get away with it."

But while Cunningham said he was surprised when the investigators showed up last month, he said he always expected the moment to come when he would be confronted with Correa's death.

"In my heart, I never knew I was in the clear. I just knew it was going to be a matter of time maybe before somebody came and spoke with me," he said. "It's something I kept for so long to myself. I never told nobody. I didn't know how to tell anybody."

Cunningham said he was getting high at The Pit, a popular spot in the woods near Griffen's Pond, when he saw Correa on the afternoon of Nov. 15, 1989. He said he didn't know her, had never seen her before, but they struck up a conversation that lasted more than 20 minutes. When he asked her age, she told him she was 21, he said.

When asked if he urged her to have sex, or if it was just something he decided he wanted, Cunningham said "being high made me decide."

He grew aggressive with her, and said there was nothing she did that sent him into a rage. Did he remember whether she yelled for him to stop?

"I blocked it out," he said. "She probably did, more than likely."

Cunningham's recollection of the scene did not match the testimony in late 1990 at Deskovic's trial.

Correa had left home that afternoon to take pictures for a photography class, but Cunningham said he did not see her with a camera. He also said the entire confrontation and killing occurred in the same location. He did not remember whether he covered her body, just that he dumped whatever drugs he had left in his pocket and ran. Police at the trial described three crime scenes, including one where Correa was raped and her torn bra remained, a second where her body was found under leaves and twigs, and a third where some of her belongings were found.

Deskovic gave a false confession after several meetings with detectives in which he offered his theories of the crime. Jurors relied on the confession to convict him of second-degree murder and rape, even though DNA evidence concluded that semen found on Correa's body was not from Deskovic. He was sentenced to the minimum 15 years to life in prison.

The forensic match to Cunningham came after lawyers from The Innocence Project persuaded Westchester District Attorney Janet DiFiore to have the county lab retest the evidence from the Correa crime scene and submit it to the national DNA databank. Cunningham's profile was there because he was required to submit a DNA sample as a convicted murderer.

Cunningham said he thought of the girl he killed "every night."

"It's been like this ever since '89," he said. "It's haunted me for that long."

He expressed relief that someone had finally confronted him about her death.

"This may sound a little selfish and heartless, but I'm happy. I'm really happy. I'm free. Spiritually inside, I'm free," he said. "I'm so happy right now that I can stand up and take responsibility for this. Because I damn sure couldn't do it then."