

Tsuji case still an unsolved mystery

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ANOTHER L.O.O.K

APTOS — The physical evidence in the case of Arlene Tsuji, the 24-year-old woman plucked from an Aptos street two years ago tomorrow, consists of a broken piece of cassette tape player.

Authorities have equally few leads.

"I wish I could tell you something," said Rick Smith, special agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which conducted an extensive hunt for the popular Aptos High graduate in the days following her disappearance in 1991.



Arlene Tsuji, then 24, was last seen on Oct. 24, 1991, in the Aptos neighborhood where she normally took a nightly walk.

"She was abducted ... We don't think it (looks) good," Smith said.

FBI officials liken the difficulties of solving the

Tsuji case to the Oct. 1 abduction of 12-year-old Polly Klaas in Petaluma.

Just three weeks after Klaas was removed from her home by a knife-wielding man, investigators are fast running out of clues, despite a worldwide effort to find the girl's abductor, said Smith.

"This case is just another example of how difficult these things are to solve because there's very little physical evidence, no extortion attempts, no demands," he said.

"Although on some occasions the victim is released by the perpetrator after the event, every day

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that goes by you worry more and more about the fate of these people. ...

"This isn't something that happens in a gang fight," said Smith. "This is somebody who is taken off a street or taken from their home — the classic case of an innocent victim."

Tsuji was last seen Oct. 24, 1991, between the hours of 7-8 p.m. in the Vienna Woods/Thousand Oaks neighborhood where she took a nightly evening walk. The most tangible piece of evidence is the shattered piece of tape player, perhaps dropped in a struggle near the top of hilly Haas Drive, about a half-mile from the Wilshire Drive home she shared with a friend.

When Tsuji didn't come home, and failed to show up at work the next morning, friends alerted authorities, setting off a month-long series of searches and exhaustive interviews by federal and local police.

County sheriff's investigators borrowed a California Highway Patrol search plane equipped with infrared scanner to comb the expansive brush country between Cabrillo College and Forest of Nisene Marks State Park.

The FBI's National Center for Violent Crime prepared a detailed psychological analysis of the crime, concluding that Tsuji "most likely knew the person(s) responsible" for her disappearance.

On a tip from a psychic, friends and co-workers of the former employee of a Capitola travel-tour company even searched backwoods as far away as the county's North Coast. But no sign of Tsuji.

The Sheriff's Office has a file full of letters from psychics claiming to know what happened to Tsuji, said Detective Mario Sulay. "But there's nothing ever specific enough to match. There's nothing we can do with broad information, like, 'She's in a field somewhere,'" said Sulay.

"She's been placed from Mexico all the way up north into Washington by psychics," he said.

There were false reports that Tsuji fled to Japan, or to Australia to secretly rendezvous with a pen pal. "From what we know, she's not gone voluntarily," said Sulay.

"She has been abducted. Without any informa-

tion to indicate exactly what happened to her, we know that she's not missing of her own free will."

The investigation has quieted considerably in the last 12 months, he said.

"We haven't had any sufficient opportunities or any substantial leads to follow up on in this past year," Sulay said.

Investigators have made some "second-thought" follow-ups of previous investigations and have recently probed the "personal lives of other people" for possible connections to Tsuji's disappearance, said Sulay.

"But as far as anything that leads us to a suspect, no," he said.

Sgt. Bruce Lindsay of the Scotts Valley Police Department is no stranger to the frustrations of a missing-persons case.

Lindsay and a procession of investigators have been trying for 3½ years to determine the fate of Cindy Fawcett, a 32-year-old bartender who disappeared from a Scotts Valley street.

When the skeletal remains of a woman were found in Scotts Valley earlier this year, "of course everybody's immediate speculation was that it was Arlene or Cindy," said Lindsay.

But the body was that of an elderly woman who walked away from from a Scotts Valley care home, and no foul play is suspected, he said.

The possibility exists, however slight, that the disappearances of Tsuji and Fawcett are somehow linked, said Lindsay.

"It's impossible to rule it out," he said. "There are similarities, obviously, but is there a connection? That's a long shot."

Sulay hopes that investigators will some day get the break they need to solve the Tsuji mystery.

"It could be next week, next year or next century," said Sulay. "It's not uncommon for (leads) to open up (long after the crime)."

In the meantime, authorities keep working.

"We've still got somebody assigned to the case," said Smith. "That way there's some hope."

Anybody with information about the disappearance of Arlene Tsuji is urged to call the county Sheriff's Office at 454-2311.