

Serial Killer in the Library  
By Paul Hawkins, Director  
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On February 25, 2005, Dennis Rader was stopped near his Park City, Kansas home and taken into custody by law enforcement officials. Among the locations searched that day to obtain evidence in the infamous "Bind, Torture and Kill" (BTK) murders was the Park City Community Public Library.

Dennis Rader was a husband, father, former Scout leader, president of his Lutheran church congregation, Park City compliance supervisor, and a local public library user. He was also the BTK killer. After his arrest, Rader detailed his torture and strangulations of ten people including seven women, one man and two children during the period from 1974 to 1991. For thirty years, BTK evaded and taunted law enforcement officials, sent messages about his crimes to local media and terrorized the citizens of metropolitan Wichita, Kansas.

Dawn Pilcher, Park City Community Public Library Director remembers February 25, 2005 as "the strangest and most bizarre day of my life. It's a memory that I will never completely forget, but it's also a memory that I don't relive often," said Pilcher.

As Director of the South Central Kansas Library System, I advised Pilcher during law enforcement officials' search of the library. Because of the sensationalism surrounding the BTK story and continuing issues regarding confidentiality, neither Pilcher nor I have commented publicly about the events. Now that five years have passed since Rader's arrest and conviction, we decided to share our experience in the hope that it may prove valuable to others in the library community. Additional information in this article about the BTK murder investigations derives from various books and newspaper articles about the crimes.

"When you pull into the parking lot and see several police cars you know something is going on and that it's serious," said Pilcher. A few minutes earlier, a team of officers from the Wichita Police Department and Kansas Bureau of Investigation pulled over Rader as he drove home for lunch. Rader surrendered without resistance.

According to Pilcher, "When I walked into the library, I was overwhelmed by the number of officers there. Some were in uniform and some in plain clothes and they all looked like they had revolvers. One of them showed me his identification and then they checked my ID. They showed me a copy of the search warrant and I read it immediately. They asked me to identify what each computer was used for and they also checked to see if he had a library card. At this point, I didn't recognize the name 'Dennis Rader'".

Having met the standards of proper identification and a legal search warrant, Pilcher complied with the requests of law enforcement officials. Unlike a subpoena to appear in court, the search warrant was immediately executable when Pilcher was served with it. The officers directed her to close library until further notice and not to reveal any

details of their investigation to the public. During the next five hours, Pilcher cooperated with the search, but tried to make sure that only the records identified in the warrant were produced and no other records were viewed or copied.

“My main concern was that I comply with the law, assist as needed, but not compromise anyone’s confidentiality.” Pilcher said.

BTK murders investigations and Dennis Rader’s confession reveal that the serial killer used the public libraries in Wichita and Park City. In 1974, the earliest letter from BTK was left at the Wichita Public Library and thirty years later in 2004, staff at the Wichita Public Library discovered another BTK communication in the book drop. Then in February 2005, a floppy disc used by Rader at the Park City Community Public Library became the key clue in his identification as BTK.

According to various sources, Rader had always used print as the means to communicate about his crimes with law enforcement and local media. But in 2004, he began digitizing and storing drawings, pictures and writings about his murders in electronic formats. “Rader 2.0” had access to computer resources at his residence, city hall workplace, church where he was congregation leader and at the public library located a few blocks from his home. One source attributes the public library as the place where Rader “often did much of his research for his final barrage of communiqués to police.”

On February 17, 2005, Wichita detectives received a new communication from BTK which included a purple 1.44 megabyte floppy disc. Immediately, a forensic specialist loaded the disc into a computer, clicked into the “Properties:” field and read the name “Dennis.” In addition, metadata indicated the disc was registered to Christ Lutheran Church and had last been used at the Park City Community Public Library.

Accounts of the investigation describe a simple Google search of the terms “Christ Lutheran Church” resulted in the first connection between serial killer BTK and new suspect Dennis Rader. Dennis Rader was listed as president of the church congregation. Police immediately began surveillance of Rader and they were later able to match DNA evidence to him. Rader was never tried for his crimes because he eventually admitted guilt and was sentenced to ten counts of first-degree murder. Pilcher was never called to testify and evidence obtained at the library was never presented in court. On August 18, 2005, Rader was sentenced to a minimum of 175 years without chance of parole and is currently incarcerated at the El Dorado Kansas Correctional Facility.

During the five-hour closing and search of the Park City Community Public Library in conjunction with Rader’s arrest, library director Dawn Pilcher and I were able to communicate using our cell phones. Given the directive by one of the investigators not to discuss any of the details of the situation, Pilcher felt constrained to talk.

“Paul’s reassuring me that the officers had correct documentation and other professional advice was helpful. He was encouraging and coached me on responses to law enforcement officials and the media,” said Pilcher.

As news spread of the arrest of a suspect in the BTK murders, local media and sightseers began converging on Park City. Two helicopters could be seen overhead and a local television station truck set up for a live broadcast directly in front of the library. A reporter and camera person were turned away from the library and Pilcher refused a request for an interview.

“My standard reply was ‘yes’ the library was part of the BTK investigation and ‘no’, I can’t discuss it,” remembers Pilcher.

In the days following Rader’s arrest and public awareness of his connection with the Park City Community Public Library, Pilcher continued to uphold user confidentiality. “We had policies in place regarding confidentiality, but the events caused us to re-examine and create new ones especially in regard to media relations.”

Library Director Dawn Pilcher did everything right when law enforcement officials closed the Park City Community Public Library to execute a search warrant in the BTK murder investigations. Fortunately, Pilcher valued and understood the importance of patron confidentiality. She had the training and support from the South Central Kansas Library System to competently address inquires by law enforcement. Her library protected users’ privacy by having the appropriate policies covering print and electronic records.

In hindsight, if officers had not already presented the search warrant and the investigation been in process, I would have advised Pilcher to have legal counsel review the document. However, on the basis of our discussion during the investigation, we felt reasonably assured that the search conformed to the terms of the search warrant. Nevertheless, it is such strict adherence to policy and procedure that must be expected regardless of whether a local suspect has just been arrested in a thirty year serial killer investigation, an armed law enforcement presence has closed your library, two helicopters are droning overhead and a media circus is assembled in the parking lot.

I commend Park City Community Public Library Director Dawn Pilcher for her professionalism and courage. Under the dramatic and stressful circumstances surrounding the arrest of a suspected serial killer, she didn’t fall apart or compromise library ethics. Although the library had only recently been established, the Board of Directors of the Park City Community Public Library deserves credit for having adopted appropriate confidentiality policies. At our best, the library community trains and strives to uphold the values of confidentiality and intellectual freedom, but those ideals will be necessarily challenged in criminal investigations of serial killers such as BTK.

### **Additional Resource**

For additional information about the BTK Strangler visit the Wichita Eagle newspaper archive at: <http://www.kansas.com/btk/>

## **Biographical Statement**

Paul Hawkins is Director of the South Central Kansas Library System (SCKLS). SCKLS provides grants, consulting, continuing education and support to 147 member public, school, academic and special libraries in twelve counties. During the past 25 years, Hawkins has advised member librarians and library boards on numerous confidentiality and intellectual freedom issues. He knows from experience that librarians often face ethical dilemmas and that we all need someone with whom to discuss such matters in confidence.

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