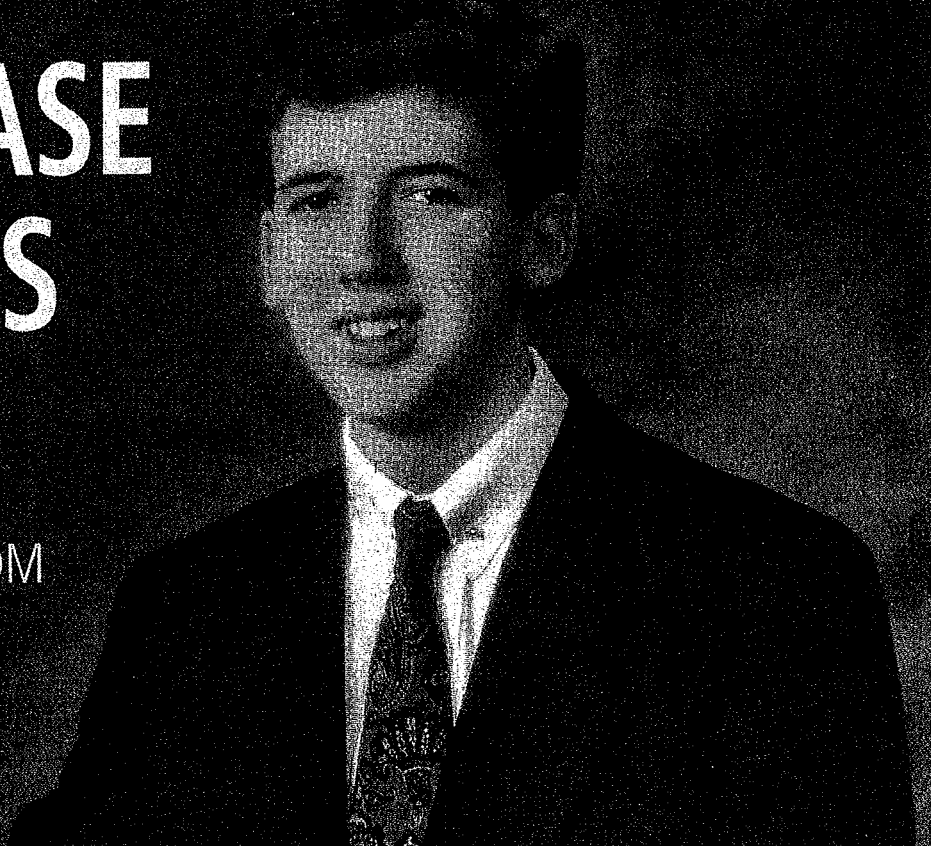


COLD CASE: WHO KILLED GREG FICKESS?

# 1993 CASE STYMIES POLICE

SEEMINGLY RANDOM  
ATTACK REMAINS  
UNEXPLAINED



A formal portrait of Greg Fickess.

**Jon Hand**  
Staff writer

Robbery was not the motive on July 22, 1993.

The murder of Greg Fickess, an accomplished young musician and University of Rochester sophomore from Perinton, wasn't about drugs, or a longstanding feud, or a dispute over a person's lack of integrity as other murders had been that month — the deadliest month in Rochester's history.

No one knows why Greg was killed.

Not his parents, who said the death of their middle-born son set them on a roller coaster ride of emotion, pain, acceptance and, eventually, forgiveness.

Or the investigators, who remember

## VIDEO

Watch investigators and Greg Fickess' parents talk about the case at **Democrat and Chronicle.com**.

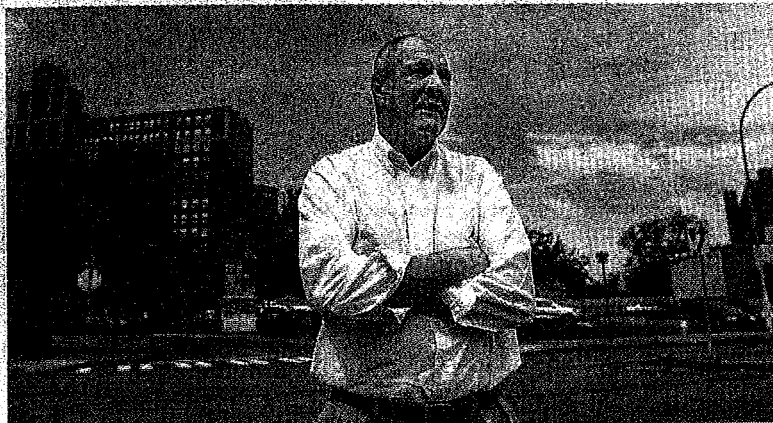
details of the case as if it happened yesterday, rather than nearly two decades ago.

In an indelible moment that witnesses said lasted no more than 10 seconds, the 19-year-old was pushed to the ground, kicked and then abruptly ignored by two laughing, high-fiving young men who left him lying on Chestnut Street.

Greg stumbled about 50 feet to East Main Street and collapsed out of

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Former homicide investigator Mark Merklinger at the scene of Greg Fickess' 1993 murder on Chestnut Street. JAMIE GERMANO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



## ABOUT THIS SERIES

Since 1985, roughly 1,250 people have been killed in Rochester. Of those crimes, 550 have been solved by police — either with an arrest, the death of the suspect or some other way. Presumably, some of the murderers have been killed themselves, imprisoned on other charges, or moved away from the area. But just as likely is the notion that many of those killers still live among us. Homicide investigations remain open forever and investigators revisit them occasionally.

But with the passing of time, older cases get less attention due to new, more pressing violence in the city. Investigators retire, leads run cold. But the memories of the victims remain in the minds of families and investigators. The prospect of justice fades, but never dies.

This is the first installment in a monthly series in which the *Democrat and Chronicle* will profile in detail one case that has gone cold.

## CAN YOU HELP?

If you have information that could help investigators solve the slaying of Greg Fickess, call Officer Renee Nichols, coordinator of the Rochester Police Department's Major Crimes Unit at (585) 428-1329.

consciousness for the last time in his life.

And the two men disappeared down Scio Street, forever.

As the years have come and gone, Greg has become a cold case — never closed by investigators, but inevitably pushed deeper into a filing cabinet by newer murders.

He's one of roughly 1,250 people killed in Rochester since 1985. And like roughly 700 other murder victims, his killers have not been caught.

But despite the passing of time, the investigators and family members still want answers in cases such as Greg's, they still search for a lead, still long for justice.

### Little is known

Homicide investigators were overwhelmed in the summer of 1993, particularly in July, which was the deadliest month (14 homicides) in Rochester's deadliest year (70).

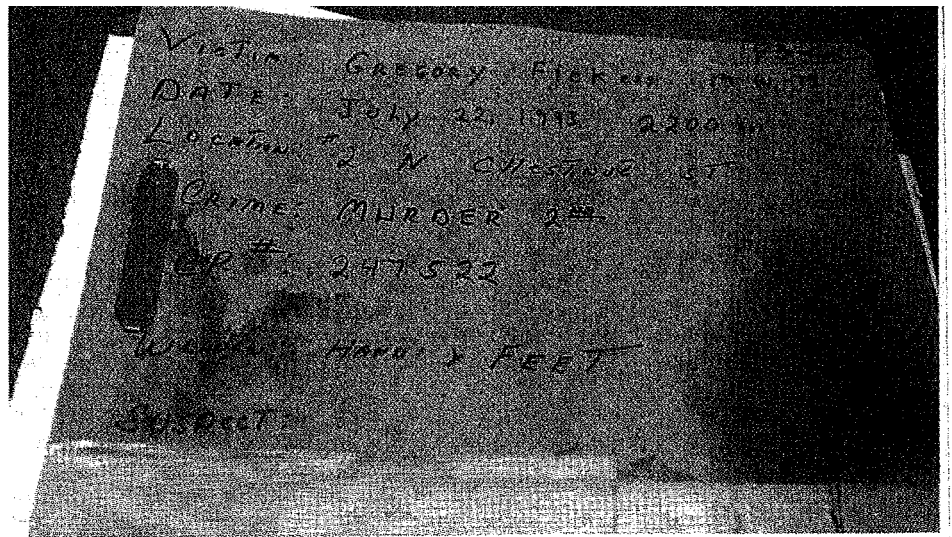
Crack cocaine and heroin were pouring in from New York City, accompanied by daily violence over neighborhoods. Civil rights problems in the department had patrol officers "on their heels" and not putting heavy pressure on street level sources, said retired homicide sergeant Mark Merklinger, who oversaw the Physical Crimes Unit investigators assigned to Greg's case.

The department's six homicide investigators, each working days at a time on dozens of cases, were stretched thin and close to burnout, Merklinger said.

So when Greg was attacked but not killed on July 22, homicide investigators were not called to Stillson and Chestnut streets. It was nearly two days later, when Greg succumbed to the kick to his brain stem, that homicide investigators became more involved.

Still, said Merklinger, Greg's case got the attention it deserved.

"It was just a crazy time. Some of the murders we had, they came up from New York and it'd



The file compiled during the murder investigation. JAMIE GERMANO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

take us four, five days to even identify them. We couldn't spend more than three days on some of them we were so busy, but not this kid," he said of Greg.

"This was a priority and we worked it," he said. "This poor kid who'd never done a thing wrong in his life."

The night of the attack, Greg had the day off from his job at a Friendly's Restaurant and drove his family's Dodge pickup truck downtown, probably to visit a friend who lived near the Eastman School of Music, or to listen to jazz music.

He parked near a lot on Chestnut and Stillson and was coming out of the lot when the two men approached. Witnesses in their cars coming down Stillson to where it ends at Chestnut caught the attack in their headlights — a woman and her 16-year-old daughter would later provide a composite for police; a physician in his BMW called 911 about the attack but did not stop.

Merklinger believes the attack on Greg was spontaneous. Police found his wallet and \$20 in his pocket, and the keys to his family's Dodge pickup. He had no known enemies and there was no indication of an argument leading to the attack.

"They might have just walked away, thought all they did was hit him once, that an ambulance might not even be called. I don't think they talked about it for a couple days because there wasn't much to talk about," Merklinger said.

"Just two bullies see this poor slight kid, and think 'ah, let's push him down and whack him around for fun.' As bad as that sounds."

Greg's mother, Debbie, assigns more nefarious intent, such as a gang initiation.

"I believed it then and I still believe that because it was unprovoked," she said.

### Forgive, not forget

There is a portrait-sized photo of Greg hanging in the Fickess home. He's dressed in a suit and tie.

"I used to kid Greg that this was his 'chairman-of-the-board' pose," said Greg's father, Ed Fickess.

There was much reason in 1993 to believe that Greg would have been a CEO or a doctor or priest or a success in whatever field he chose.

Of the 800-plus freshmen in his UR class, Greg had been identified as one of 17 Venture Scholars — students recognized for their above-average potential. The middle child in a family of five children, in 1992 he was named the best high school trombone player in the state and was a "superb writer. He wrote like Dave Barry or he could write a serious piece," his father said.

"He was a star all his life," his father said. "His wit and wisdom has been missed at every holiday."

In the year following his death, Greg's parents became vocal advocates for crime victims. They

helped form Partners Against Violence Everywhere, a volunteer program to help teach things such as parenting skills to break the chain of violence.

A \$35,000 reward was established for help leading to the capture of his killers, but little came from it.

"A couple shakedown attempts," Ed Fickess said. "They'd say 'If you give me \$2,500 bucks I'll tell you who killed your son.' Really low-life type stuff."

And "Jim from Mars." "He lived in Mars Hill, Pennsylvania," Debbie Fickess said with a small laugh. "He'd send us strange things. The police had to go to the post office to put a hold on his letters so they didn't come anymore. He was a very weird person."

In the two years following the death, the couple was hit with deep despair and serious physical ailments; Ed with stage three bladder cancer, Debbie with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The couple healed together, they said, both physically and emotionally, and with a heavy reliance on their religious faith, they were able to forgive whomever killed their son.

"One of the processes you have to go through to survive this is really to forgive whoever did this or otherwise it would eat us alive," Debbie said.

"We initially functioned. We're living now."

That forgiveness led them to create the Lord's



Ed and Debbie Fickess have relied on their faith to help them deal with the 1993 murder of their son Greg in downtown Rochester. JAMIE GERMANO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

"Forgiving is one thing. Justice is another. But they go together, they are both a spiritual virtue."

#### DEBBIE FICKESS

House, a small ministry house on Smith Street where they continue to hold meetings on Wednesday nights with young men in their late teens and early 20s — roughly the age Greg's killers were believed to be.

Perhaps they have steered someone away from committing an act like the one inflicted on Greg.

Perhaps they have actually helped one of the men who killed their son.

"Occasionally, I have wondered 'Wouldn't it be interesting if we were giving away food or helping someone who killed Greg?' I don't know," Debbie said.

"That would be all right," she explains. "Whoever killed Greg, at that point in their lives something was really wrong."

But forgiveness was a personal decision and journey; the desire for justice does not go away.

"Forgiving is one thing. Justice is another," Debbie Fickess said. "But they go together, they are both a spiritual virtue."

#### Faith in justice, people

As the anniversary of her son's death came and went this year, Debbie Fickess realized her son

he was alive, 19 years.

Despite the length of time, she and Ed believe there is still a chance her son's killers will be caught. But that will likely only happen if there has been a transformation of some kind.

"All things are possible," said Ed Fickess, an ordained minister. "People may have a change of heart. They spiritually have a change of heart and want to ask for forgiveness. It hasn't happened here, but anything is possible."

Merklinger agreed. "Maybe a family member or the suspect themselves, now 20 years later, thinks 'Let me make a call and let them know that this was not my intent.' People change and get older, whether you find God or come to your senses, or you become vulnerable and you're about to meet your maker and you're older now, they think 'let me drop a dime and tell someone.' It happens."

Years ago, when asked by a reporter to send a message to the men who killed her son, Debbie Fickess declined.

"Nothing you could say could make a difference," she said then.

Today, she will.

"The best thing they could do with their life at this point is to come clean with what they did and ask forgiveness and turn their life in another direction," she said.

"Whether justice comes on earth, which we hope it does, but even if it doesn't, God deals with people."

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