

HIGHLAND FARM MURDERS

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TAKE 1

Pharanee Deters had left Highland Farm and Gibbon Sanctuary early on the morning of May 10, 2002 on a routine trip to Bangkok. By feeding time that night, five of six people on her isolated farm lay dead, each shot twice in the head. The gibbons cried out for their food and the lone survivor lay huddled in a closet.

Today, almost two years later, Pharanee is haunted by memories of the brutal killing spree that left her husband Bill, two farm workers, their cook Ratchanee and Ratchanee's three-year-old daughter dead, victims of a disgruntled former employee. But she is determined to pick up the pieces and keep the non-profit sanctuary open.

Pharanee and Bill Deters never intended to run a shelter for abused and injured gibbon apes. But since settling on their farm, located near the Burmese (Myanmar) border in a remote corner of Thailand's Tak province, they somehow became a haven for the long-legged, long-armed apes that call the jungles of Southeast Asia home.

"We didn't have a dream to be a big sanctuary," Pharanee says. "We just wanted to take care of the 'kids' we kept getting."

The first gibbon, a baby, came huddled inside the jacket of a Hmong hilltribe person looking for a quick sale. They purchased her for 500 Baht (\$12US) -- the first and only gibbon they paid for.

"We'd never had a pet before and it was so cute, we just couldn't resist," remembers Pharanee with a smile. "Her hand was cut from the fall out of the tree when the man probably shot her mother. We just thought it would make a good pet."

And there began the Deters' unexpected love affair with gibbons.

"About 1995, we started the sanctuary because more and more people started bringing us gibbons they couldn't care for.

The problem is that when gibbons are about seven years old they reach sexual maturity and start to bite.

"People then realize they're not meant to be pets and don't know what to do with them," explains Pharanee while holding George, a seven-year-old gibbon who's missing one limb and suffers from polio.

As the years went by, the Deters learned how to care for their new residents and their lives soon revolved around these primates in need, caring for them with funds from Bill's pension. It seemed this was what they had been meant to do.

Sitting at her kitchen table, Deters recalls the day of the murders. It started out like any other at the gibbon sanctuary. The songs of 37 gibbons that call Highland home would have filled the air, anxiously anticipating feeding time.

But on this day, there would be no dinner. Around 3:30 p.m., as their food baskets sat on the lane filled with food, 10 shots rang out.

"I was in Bangkok at the time picking up two dogs to bring to the farm," Pharanee says, tears in her eyes. "It was May 11th and my aunt called and told me that something terrible happened at the sanctuary. I called a General who lives near our house and asked him if it is true and he said yes. I tried to control myself as I drove the 450 kilometres back home and just hoped it wasn't true. I tried not to feel pain, but it really hurt. I got home very late, went to the police station and they took me to the farm." When she got home, the farm was swarming with roughly 30 police officers, soldiers and media hunting for clues and information.

The senior investigating officer took Pharanee inside her house.

"I came to look, but they had already moved all the bodies," she says. "In the house there was a big mess in the kitchen; it looked horrible. I can still see the scene, the spot where Bill fell down. There was still a lot of dry blood. It was terrible."

Two days later, the police had their man. As is often the case with such crimes, the suspect knew the victims well. Maung Htwe (Tui), 19, originally from Burma, had worked at Highland Farm on and off for four years as a general labourer; he quit shortly before the murders. Tui quickly confessed to the crimes, saying he'd simply gone to steal Bill's guns, to sell them on the porous Thai-Burmese border. During the robbery, he claims to have unexpectedly run into Bill, panicked and shot him. He then methodically killed the others – all former co-workers -- to cover his tracks. Pharanee says the police told her the details of Tui's confession.

"The first one killed was Bill in the kitchen. I think he probably didn't see him coming, because if he did he would have fought," Pharanee says of the man she first met at a gas station in Los Angeles. Noticing Pharanee's exotic beauty, Bill walked up and used the best line he could think of: "Where do you come from?"

Pharanee fell hard for the former military man, an American who'd spent more than 25 years in various parts of Asia. They married in 1974.

"He wouldn't let him do that to him," Pharanee says. "He was a fighter."

Pharanee imagines Bill was in the kitchen making himself a cup of tea, because the cook Ratchanee Sonkhamlue, 25, was outside feeding the peacocks. At her side, as always, was her three-year-old daughter Athitaya Anuwongworavej (Noon). They were the next victims.

"Tui told the police he killed Noon because she called him by name when she saw him," Pharanee continues in a quiet, strained voice.

"The fourth victim was Nailang, a Hmong person from a nearby village who we'd hired to do some welding and help feed the animals. The fifth and final victim was a very nice carpenter who'd been building a new guest residence here. "Tui shot each person two times in the head with two different guns. That's what they (police) said but I don't believe it," she says.

Pharanee does not believe Tui acted alone, in part because of the chilling account of the lone survivor, Bram Osterloh, a 25-year-old volunteer from Holland. Osterloh, who has not spoken about the murders since the investigation, had been volunteering for less than a week at Highland when the killings occurred.

"Bram said he saw a man with a gun, then he ran away and hid in the closet of the main house," explains Pharanee. "He hid in the closet until nighttime. When he came out he said he saw three or four flashlights outside, which means Tui had many people to help him move the guns.

Osterloh then huddled behind a bathroom shower half-wall until early morning. When he felt it was safe enough to emerge, he fled the house and the farm, running along the road until a passing motorist took him to the police station.

Bill had also had several unpleasant incidents with neighbours over the years. In 1997 a neighbouring farmer dammed up a stream that flowed through the Deters' property. When Bill confronted the farmer, Pharanee says he pulled out a gun and threatened to kill Bill. The second incident, in 1999, involved a neighbouring rose farmer whose pesticides often blew onto Highland Farm's property, greatly angering Bill, who was very protective of his gibbons. One confrontation between the two men left Bill hospitalized after being hit over the head with a crowbar.

"Even the police said that one person carrying two pistols to shoot at the same time is strange because one gun was a .22 caliber and the other one was a .357, quite a big gun," Pharanee says.

"They said a .357 is very difficult to shoot. You have to use two hands to handle that gun unless you're a professional and Tui was not. It doesn't make sense. If it was only one person, the others would have heard the shots and run. The official line is that it was only Tui, because he maintains he was the only one. A lot of people don't believe it, but the police said that's how it was."

Pharanee has not seen Tui since his last shift at Highland Farm before the murders and doesn't have plans to. She prefers to concentrate on the future. "I moved back here about a month after the murders," she remembers while visiting her gibbons in their enclosures.

"Bill was protecting Highland Farm and the kids. It's all he cared about. I think if he were here today he would say, "Fight for your life, your beliefs and your dreams.""

Pharanee is trying. Today, she runs the farm with the help of a full-time employee, a Thai woman with many years of experience in animal rescue and care. Three Thai men come daily from a nearby village come to work regular daytime hours, and a range of volunteers stop in to help out.

"It's our home, our gibbons" Pharanee says with a shrug. "If I move, who is going to take care of them?"

In early 2003 a Thai court found Tui guilty of murder, and sentenced him to death. He currently awaits execution by lethal injection in a Thai jail. Two of his brothers have each been sentenced to eight years in prison for helping to sell the stolen weapons in neighbouring Burma.

Highland Farm and Gibbon Sanctuary remains open for business.