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Suspect Held in Killings of Women in Buffalo Area in 1990, 1992 and 2006

By DAVID STABA
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BUFFALO, Jan. 15 — A factory worker was arrested on Monday in connection with three killings after forensic testing showed a match between saliva gathered at a restaurant where he had eaten and DNA evidence taken from the homicides as well as several rapes that occurred over 25 years, the authorities said.



Altemio Sanchez

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The worker, Altemio Sanchez, 48, of Cheektowaga, was picked up by the police shortly after he completed his overnight shift, and he spent the day being questioned by investigators at the Erie County Sheriff's Department in Buffalo.

Frank Clark, the county district attorney, said that Mr. Sanchez, who is married and has two adult children, would be arraigned on Tuesday and was expected to be charged with three murders. The statute of limitations prevents his prosecution in connection with the rapes of the women who survived.

Between 1986 and 1994, two women were raped and murdered and six others were raped by a man who came to be known locally as the "Bike Path Rapist" because of the remote locations of the attacks, some of which happened on

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Doug Benz for The New York Times
Altemio Sanchez was charged twice in the 1990s with patronizing prostitutes.

bicycle paths.

“This lifts a heavy cloud that’s hung over this campus and this community for 16 years,” said Dennis Black, a vice president of the University of Buffalo, who helped start an annual run named for Linda Yalem, a student at the university who was raped and murdered in 1990 while jogging near its campus in Amherst.

The same attacker was believed responsible for the death of Majane Mazur, who was raped and killed in 1992. Her body was found in a field in an industrial area of Buffalo more than three weeks after she disappeared.

Then, last Sept. 29, 16 years to the day after Ms. Yalem’s murder, Joan Diver of Clarence disappeared after going for a run on a rural bike path. Her body was found two days later.

All three women had been strangled.

In December, the police said that DNA testing showed a link between the three killings and at least five of the rapes. As a result, the authorities started a joint task force that included the New York State Police, the Erie County Sheriff’s Department and the police departments of Buffalo and Amherst.

Mr. Sanchez became a suspect after different teams of investigators that had been assigned different jobs as part of the task force came up with his name, the authorities said.

One group revisited unsolved rape cases and identified Mr. Sanchez as a suspect in a 1981 attack, after speaking again with another man, who was identified as “a person of interest” shortly after the crime, said Timothy Howard, the Erie County sheriff.

Another team compiled a list of men in the area who had been arrested since 1986 for patronizing prostitutes, as Mr. Sanchez was in 1991 and 1999. The authorities declined to discuss the disposition of those cases.

DNA testing on samples taken from the crime scenes in the murders and the rapes showed that the attacker was likely to be of Hispanic heritage, said Sheriff Howard, who did not provide further details.

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Mr. Sanchez was the only Hispanic man to appear on both lists, the authorities said.

The authorities gave this account of the events of recent days.

The police placed Mr. Sanchez under surveillance as he traveled around the area, including to and from his job at Outokumpu American Brass, a factory in Buffalo that produces copper and brass products.

On Saturday night, three undercover officers followed him and his wife to a restaurant, Sole. When they had been seated, the officers told the restaurant staff not to touch any of Mr. Sanchez's table settings after he finished, the restaurant's manager said, and the officers later removed the plate, glass and silverware he had used. "We had no idea why," said the manager, George Kotsis. "We didn't even suspect why they wanted it until the news came out today."

Sheriff Howard said that on Sunday, the county's crime lab matched DNA evidence gathered from the dishes used by Mr. Sanchez to evidence taken from the scenes of the three murders.

"Old-fashioned police work brought everything together, and the DNA sealed the deal," said Mr. Clark, the district attorney.

The authorities said the attacks had some common elements: all the women were attacked from behind on weekday mornings, and except for Mrs. Diver, each was taken to an isolated spot — in one case, a junked car in a scrap yard — and sexually assaulted.

"Most of the victims were led a short distance to a prepared rape site, where he'd have placed duct tape and binding material," Sheriff Howard said.

Mr. Sanchez was questioned by investigators from the time he was picked up on Monday morning until shortly before 8 p.m., when, the police said, his wife asked for a lawyer to represent him.

A short, stocky, bald man with a mustache, Mr. Sanchez bore little resemblance to what Mr. Clark called the typical profile of a suspect in a series of such crimes, the "maladjusted loner."

"Husband, father, solid work record, Little League baseball coach, churchgoer — he just didn't fit anybody's profile," Mr. Clark said.

Neighbors on the suburban street where Mr. Sanchez's family has lived for about 20 years were stunned by his arrest, describing him as a friendly sort who seemed to be constantly remodeling his two-story Cape Cod home and often gave backyard parties in summertime.

"We're just shocked that someone in our neighborhood could be capable of something like that," said Darryl Mesmer, who lives two doors down from the Sanchez home, from which the police carried cardboard boxes throughout the afternoon.

The DNA from Mr. Sanchez gathered at the restaurant was matched with trace amounts found in Mrs. Diver's vehicle, as well as semen that had been taken from the bodies of Ms. Mazur and Ms. Yalem and the rape victims who survived.

Some of those women also provided the police with a description of their attacker.

The district attorney said the biggest remaining question about the case, along with why Mrs. Diver was the only victim who was not sexually assaulted, was why so much time passed from the last in the series of rapes in 1994 to her murder.

Mr. Clark said the 12-year span between attacks initially had led him to doubt that the most recent case was connected to the others.

"My gut instinct was no, based solely on the gap of time," Mr. Clark said. "Historically, with serial people, there simply aren't gaps like that. It was just something that had me completely puzzled and I must confess, I'm just as puzzled now as I was then."

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