Arrest in Brianna Denison slaying

Sparks, Nev., man held in killing of former Mendocino County student

STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

Published: Thursday, November 27, 2008 at 4:20 a.m.
Last Modified: Thursday, November 27, 2008 at 9:10 a.m.

RENO -- A 27-year-old pipefitter from Sparks, Nev., has been arrested in the slaying of a former Mendocino County student who was abducted while sleeping at a friend's house in Reno.
Brianna Denison, Former Mendocino County student was abducted and killed in early '08.

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Family members of 19-year-old Brianna Denison said they hope the arrest of James Michael Biela, also suspected in at least one other sexual attack, will start the process of closure that began when the coed was found dead in February, less than a month after being reported missing.

"Can you believe it?" the young woman's aunt Lauren Denison told the Reno Gazette-Journal. "The police said the DNA came back, and it's him."

"This is what we have been waiting for," added Bridgette Denison, Brianna's mother.

Both were present at a Wednesday press conference held in Reno by police to announce the arrest of Biela.

He was taken into custody Tuesday night and booked into the Washoe County Jail on suspicion of murdering Brianna Denison. He's also charged with the kidnapping and sexual assault of another woman in Reno a month earlier, Reno Police Chief Michael Poehlman said.

Biela was being held without bail. Washoe County District Attorney Dick Gammick said prosecutors have the option of seeking a death sentence in the case.

Biela provided a DNA sample that matched evidence found at the scene where Denison's body was recovered Feb. 15, Poehlman said.

Denison, a sophomore at Santa Barbara City College, was visiting her hometown during winter break when she vanished early Jan. 20. Authorities said she had been sleeping on a couch at a friend's rented home near the University of Nevada, Reno.

Her body was found in a brush-covered lot in south Reno. An autopsy showed she was raped and strangled.

Investigators said from the beginning they believed the suspect, who taunted police by leaving two pair of intertwined women's panties at the site where Denison's body was found, lived in the area.

Public records show Biela has lived in the Reno area since 2002.

Poehlman said Biela left the area in March as police efforts to find Denison's slayer intensified. He took a job in Washington state, but in September returned to Sparks.

Poehlman said Biela's girlfriend went to Washington in September to drive back to Nevada with him. She found some underwear in his car and mentioned that discovery to a friend, who in turn tipped police Nov. 1. That was one of more than 2,200 tips received by authorities since Denison's slaying.

Authorities said Biela was put under surveillance following the tip, was questioned Nov. 7 and was arrested Tuesday as he headed to a child care center to pick up his son.

http://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/20081127/NEWS/811270325/1350?Title=Arrest_in_Brianna_Denison_slaying
Denison was born March 29, 1988, in Reno to Jeff and Bridgette Denison. The family moved to Mendocino, her mother’s hometown, following the death of Brianna’s father when she was 6 years old, Lauren Denison said.

Brianna attended elementary school in Mendocino before the family returned to Reno about six years ago. She graduated from Reno High School in 2006. She then moved away from home to attend Santa Barbara City College, where she was a sophomore studying child psychology.

This story includes information from Press Democrat staff and the Associated Press.
The family of Brianna Denison praised the woman whose tip led to the capture of James Michael Biela, saying Thursday that without that tip more women could’ve been victimized.

“It was so incredibly brave of you knowing this could possibly be the guy,” said Lauren Denison, Brianna Denison’s aunt. “We are so grateful she had the inkling that wow, this behavior is weird and you had the courage to call Secret Witness. It’s remarkable.”

The anonymous friend of Carleen Harmon -- whose estranged boyfriend, Biela, was arrested Tuesday night on suspicion of killing Denison and kidnapping and raping another woman in December -- tipped off Secret Witness on Nov. 1. She reported that Harmon had found size small thong underwear in Biela's new truck, which he bought after selling his old truck when he moved to Seattle for work.

That tip led investigators to Biela, who was linked to the crimes through DNA after Harmon let police take a sample from the couple’s 4-year-old son. Biela had refused to give a sample when a detective first met with him on Nov. 7.

Lauren Denison said she was disappointed Harmon didn't call in the tip herself, but she did not lay blame.

"Love is blind and maybe she couldn't fathom he could be that way," she said. "She has got to have unthinkable emotions. She is the mother of his son, lived with him and had a relationship with him for six years. You would hope you would know someone."

"It's just disappointing we couldn't reach out to everyone after we had said 10 million times for women to really look hard at the men in their lives who fit the profile," she said. "But thank goodness she confided in her friend, and that friend was the vehicle that broke this case."

She said she also was disappointed that no one stopped Biela's behavior from becoming more violent after he was arrested for threatening a former girlfriend with a knife. The woman, who had dated him for four months, said he stalked her after she started dating someone else.

The woman reported to police that one night, Biela was drunk, and with a knife, kicked in her door, grabbed her and kicked her dog. He later pleaded guilty to battery.

In 2003, he also pleaded guilty to driving under the influence. His former girlfriend received a protection order against him.
“He was already displaying this kind of violent behavior,” Lauren Denison said. “Someone tried to stop him when he was escalating, but it didn’t happen. How do you stop something that is starting? The signs were there.”

Soon after Biela’s arrest Tuesday night, police called Brianna Denison’s mother with the news. Bridgette and Lauren Denison were greeted at the Reno Police Department, told how the case unfolded and shown a photo of Biela. At the same time, detectives were questioning Biela, who was arraigned the next morning.

“It sickened me that I was actually looking at the person who took my niece’s life,” she said. “We have a name and a face of the person that has completely rocked our world. This guy basically put the community on notice and had us hostage in our own city.”

Lauren Denison also wonders if Biela had been following news coverage.

“I’m sure he drove by all the blue ribbons, posters and banners of Bri and read the newspaper,” she said. “He would have had his head in a hole if he didn’t. There’s no way he could have gotten away from it.”

“He really blended in, walking amongst us and no one suspecting him … just like the FBI profile said.”

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In this photo provided by the Washoe County Sheriff's Department, James Michael Biela, 27, is shown in a booking mug in Reno, Nev. Biela is a suspect in the January kidnapping and slaying of a 19-year-old college student who was abducted as she slept on a friend's couch. Biela was arrested Tuesday night Nov. 25, 2008 and booked on suspicion of kidnapping, murder and sexual assault. (AP Photo/Washoe County Sheriff's Department)

Police: Tip led to arrest of Reno rapist suspect
By SANDRA CHEREB – 1 day ago

RENO, Nev. (AP) — Early in their investigation into the kidnapping and slaying of a young college woman, Reno police were convinced the suspect they described as a serial rapist was a chameleon who blended in with a community grieving the loss of Brianna Denison.

"Likely he looks like somebody you would least suspect, but that is the person who is responsible for this crime," Deputy Police Chief Jim Johns said in February, a day after Denison's body was found.

On Wednesday, the profundity of Johns' words emerged when police announced the arrest of a 27-year-old construction worker:

James Michael Biela, a former Marine who trained in martial arts at an academy frequented by law enforcement officers, was arrested Tuesday afternoon while picking up his 4-year-old son from preschool.

"He seemed like a nice, normal guy," Cindy Stern, a neighbor of Biela, told the Reno Gazette-Journal. "I guess killers don't wear a sign."

Biela's arrest followed a tip, one of more than 2,200 received during a 10-month investigation, that came after Biela's girlfriend, Carleen Harmon, confided in a friend about the couple's relationship troubles and recently finding a pair of woman's underwear in his vehicle, police said.

Biela is charged with murder in Denison's death, as well as kidnapping and sexual assault for an alleged attack on another woman in December near the University of Nevada, Reno. That victim was able to give police a partial description of the suspect and a vehicle.

She also said her assailant kept her underwear.

Detectives said Biela initially declined to provide a voluntary DNA sample, but Harmon allowed police to take a DNA sample from the couple's son. From that, forensic experts determined the child's biological father could not be ruled out as the source of DNA evidence gathered from the crime scenes.

Police later obtained an arrest warrant for Biela and authorization from a judge to seize a DNA sample that investigators say matches crime scene evidence.

 Authorities have said DNA evidence also links Biela to another attack last November, when a woman was grabbed from behind and groped but managed to get away. No charges have been filed in that case.

Another attack in October 2007, when a woman was sexually assaulted at gunpoint in a garage where campus police park, may also be related, officers have said. But investigators said the victim in that case didn't immediately report the crime and no evidence was gathered.

Denison, a sophomore at Santa Barbara City College in California, was abducted while sleeping at a friend's house over winter break from school. Her purse and cell phone were not taken. Blood was left on a pillow.

Denison's body was found Feb. 15. An autopsy showed she was raped and strangled. At the scene, investigators found two intertwined pairs of women's thong underwear.

At a news conference Wednesday, Reno Police Chief Michael Poehlman said Biela left the Reno area in March to take a job in Washington state, and sold his pickup truck in Idaho along the way.

In September, his girlfriend traveled to Washington to help Biela move back to Sparks, where the couple share a home. Reno police Detective David Jenkins described their relationship as "tumultuous."

Police said when Harmon confronted Biela about finding a pair of woman's underwear in his vehicle, he claimed he had stolen them from a coin-operated laundry.

Biela, who appeared Wednesday in Reno Justice Court, requested a public defender. A
preliminary hearing was set for Dec. 10.