



Steve Van Keuren

“He definitely had the eyes. That desperate look.”

— Washington County Deputy Kyle Olson, describing Steve Van Keuren as he arrested the knife-wielding man who had just attacked former girlfriend Teri Lee.

Could this man have stopped a killer?



JEAN PIERI, PIONEER PRESS

Washington County Sheriff's Deputy Kyle Olson says that in the days after he arrested Steve Van Keuren in July 2006, he considered dropping by Teri Lee's house to reassure her that her ex-boyfriend was in jail and couldn't harm her. In a way, Olson says, he's glad he never did.

ARREST, RELEASE, MURDER



PIONEER PRESS FILE PHOTO

JULY 29, 2006 Steve Van Keuren, 46, of River Falls, Wis., breaks into the West Lakeland Township home of former girlfriend Teri Lee, 38. He has a butcher knife in each hand and attacks her. Washington County deputy Kyle Olson arrests him in Wisconsin. Lee tells police she fears Van Keuren will kill her if he is freed on bail.

AUG. 1, 2006 Van Keuren is released on \$75,000 bail and ordered to have no contact with Lee or her children.

SEPT. 22, 2006 Van Keuren breaks into Lee's home again and fatally shoots Lee and Timothy Hawkinson Sr. Van Keuren is shot by officers and hospitalized.

In 2006, Deputy Kyle Olson faced an armed and desperate Steve Van Keuren. He didn't shoot. He didn't even draw his gun. And the standoff ended peacefully. Two months later, though, Van Keuren murdered two people, and Olson was left to ask, What if?

BY ALEX FRIEDRICH PIONEER PRESS

The hindsight that picks at Washington County Sheriff's Deputy Kyle Olson could drive a cop mad:

If he'd shot Steve Van Keuren dead during a pursuit in July 2006, the man never would have gone on to murder two people two months later.

The thought hits him from time to time. But it plagued him Sunday night, when he watched victim Teri Lee's family — her sister, nieces and her orphaned children — get a new house on “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.”

It was a heart-wrenching show, and Olson couldn't stop watching.

“I would have laid down my life if I'd known it would save them,” he said in an emotional phone call during the show. “What those kids have gone through. I'd give up anything to change those things.”

Last month, the 37-year-old deputy received the Medal of Honor — the highest award in the sheriff's office — for his peaceful arrest of Van Keuren under dangerous circumstances. Olson's account of the arrest shows he was up against an unstable man with a violent temper.

Olson was on patrol the morning of July 29, 2006, when he was sent after Van Keuren.

He got a dispatch saying Van Keuren had just attacked his ex-girlfriend in her Ninth Street home in West Lakeland Township and was heading toward Wisconsin.

The deputy drove across the Interstate 94 bridge, where he spotted the maroon Corsica that matched the



Teri Lee



Timothy Hawkinson Sr.

What if?

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description of the car police were looking for. He checked in with dispatch and then followed with his lights and siren activated.

Van Keuren didn't speed away. Instead, he cruised along, stuck out his arm and signaled to Olson to follow him as he turned off the interstate.

That made Olson a bit nervous. Such behavior was unusual. "I thought, 'This guy is going to force a standoff — some sort of suicide-by-cop thing,'" Olson recalled.

Also, Olson's radio wasn't working. He was out of his patrol area, and didn't know the Wisconsin roads.

They made their way to River Falls, where Van Keuren turned down a dirt driveway.

Olson recalled thinking, "Is this an ambush?"

Van Keuren finally pulled up outside a farmhouse. He got out of the car. In one hand was a big knife, in the other a gallon-size jug of a chemical, which turned out to be acetone, a flammable liquid.

"I knew it wasn't good," Olson said.

The deputy got out of the squad and drew his gun.

"Get on the ground!" he recalled yelling. "Get on the ground!"

Van Keuren froze. He looked at Olson.

"He definitely had the eyes," Olson said. "That desperate look. The eyes."

At that point, he added, everything "is unfolding in a second. I think, 'Do I shoot him?'"

Van Keuren turned around and made a beeline to the front door of the farmhouse.

Olson quickly exchanged his weapon for a Taser.

Van Keuren made it to the front door and disappeared inside.

Olson pursued, not knowing what lay behind the door.

"I thought, 'What am I getting into? Is there a shotgun on the other side?'"

The entranceway led into a kitchen, where Olson found Van Keuren standing behind an older man — possibly a hostage — seemingly using him for cover.

The deputy still had a Taser, but had his hand on his pistol, ready to draw it.

"Put the weapons down! Put the bottles down!" Olson yelled repeatedly to Van Keuren, who was dodging back and forth behind the man, apparently

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Kyle Olson,
Washington County deputy

unsure what to do.

For moments, it was a standoff. But Van Keuren finally broke down. Sobbing, he gave up. Olson then learned the man was Van Keuren's father.

Other law enforcement officers soon arrived, and they took Van Keuren away.

At the hospital, Olson asked Van Keuren why he'd carried the knives and chemicals.

He recalls Van Keuren's reply: "I wanted you to think about it."

The way Olson interprets that statement, Van Keuren was trying to get the deputy to shoot him.

In the days after the arrest, Olson considered dropping by Teri Lee's house to reassure her that her ex-boyfriend was in jail and couldn't harm her.

In a way, he's glad he never did.

Van Keuren eventually made his \$75,000 bail and got out — something Olson never learned of.

He allegedly violated a court order by stalking Lee's daughter at a school volleyball game on Sept. 20.

He was spotted, but through a series of procedural snags, law enforcement officials never pursued him over the border into Wisconsin.

Just two days later, Van Keuren broke into Lee's West Lakeland Township house in the early morning and shot her and her boyfriend dead.

That morning, Olson reported in for his regular shift. The department was buzzing that morning with all the work being done on the murders.

When Olson asked about the killings, another deputy told him: "It's your guy on Ninth Street."

THE RIGHT DECISION

One could argue that Olson would have been justified in shooting Van Keuren that day, considering the knives, explo-

sive chemicals and Olson's thought that Van Keuren had a hostage.

And someone will occasionally tell him, "Ah, you should have shot him when you had the chance."

It frustrates Olson that the public doesn't understand the complexity of the situation and that he doesn't "have a crystal ball"

He stands by his decision. But he's not immune to doubts.

Those are feelings that law enforcement officials deal with on a regular basis, Sheriff Bill Hutton said.

"We can play those games forever — coulda-woulda-shoulda," he said "It doesn't do anybody any good."

Olson is "an exceptional deputy, very intelligent and intuitive," Hutton said. "He handled it the best way at that moment. No one should second-guess here."

Olson said he's trying not to, and has gone to counseling for help.

Still, he said, "I can't say it doesn't hurt. I'm not a robot."

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