A serial killer’s survivor takes the next big step

Life, work shaped by 1980 racist attack that killed two black friends.

By Peg McEntee | The Salt Lake Tribune

First Published Jul 07 2013 01:01 am • Last Updated Jul 07 2013 05:28 pm

Nearly 33 years ago, Terry Jackson-Mitchell was jogging with two young men near Liberty Park when rifle fire killed the men and sent shrapnel into her arm. The two men were black; their murderer was Joseph Paul Franklin, a racist serial killer now on death row in a Missouri prison.

For many years, Jackson-Mitchell remained silent about her presence at the murders. But her memories were not silent; they haunted her, sometimes tortured her, and guilt lived within her.

Today, though, Jackson-Mitchell is an artist and something of a mystic who has all but conquered the nightmare of Aug. 20, 1980, when Ted Fields and David Martin were cut down. Her first show, small but growing, is at Art Access.
Jackson-Mitchell emerged from her self-imposed anonymity in August 2010 when a dog walker found a letter, a candle and a bit of rose quartz on a small plaque in Liberty Park commemorating Fields and Martin.

At last she spoke publicly about that night, about how so many people blamed her for being a 15-year-old white girl with young black men, about Franklin’s trial at which she testified, about her years of exile when her parents sent her out of state for her own safety and about her guilt.

In the ensuing days, Jackson-Mitchell and her parents reunited with the families of Fields and Martin at a gathering in Liberty Park to commemorate Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech and to remember the two sons and friends lost to them.

Since then, Jackson-Mitchell has conducted her own crusade against racism and hate speech. She enrolled in Salt Lake Community College, where she took a course on race and ethnicities. Since her mother is half Hispanic, her father is white and the people who embraced her are black, she didn’t see a place for herself.

Then she thought: “My father’s white, my mother’s half Mexican and my children are half black. And one reason my children’s father is who he is is because of his grandparents, who embraced me and accepted me right after Ted and Dave’s murder.

"And that taught me this racism thing didn’t begin with you, honey. This isn’t your fault,” she said.

Jackson-Mitchell took classes that revealed her artistry. Even so, she has suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. She’s had sleepless nights.

But she also has a wonderful second husband, two daughters and two granddaughters. A week or so ago, they were at Art Access for the debut of her small but growing collection.

Jackson-Mitchell always remembers the news reports at the time, which she believed cast her as the white girl whose run with Fields and Martin led to their murders. The reports also noted that she had been raped by a black man a month before the murders. And for 10 days, she said, the newspapers used her full name and address, exposing her to harm and infuriating her to this day.

So, for the show, she created a collage made of copies of those news reports and splattered red paint on it. She made a metal cross, supported by eight .30-caliber rifle bullets — the caliber used by Franklin when he killed the young men.

There’s also a mask of a human face that she covered with more recent stories about her, which she said had helped her to walk out of the darkness she has endured for so long. There were other pieces, including a painting of a brilliant paper lotus bursting from its frame. She plans more artwork, not just for the show, but for herself.
Since 1981, Jackson-Mitchell had put a letter, a crystal, and a candle on that plaque in the park every year, including that day in 2010. She hasn’t done so since. “I don’t want to believe that Ted and Dave’s spirits are stuck in that place.”

Instead, she goes somewhere she considers sacred, like southern Utah, the Green River or the Uinta Mountains. "I feel their energy there."

These days, Jackson-Mitchell also thinks about Franklin, who reportedly suffered severe physical abuse as a child from his parents that may have had a role in his murderous rampage.

She plans another art piece: a little boy wrapped in barbed wire.

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Editor’s note: Peg McEntee was a columnist in 2010 when she was contacted by a reader about a letter, a candle and a bit of rose quartz left on a small plaque in Liberty Park. McEntee wrote about it and, later, about Jackson-Mitchell. Those columns have been incorporated into the art show, which Jackson-Mitchell has dedicated, in part, to McEntee, who recently returned to reporting.

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John_St_John

Well written piece Peg and a hat tip of epic proportions to Ms. Jackson-Mitchell.

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jenjenjjen

Brava!

Yesterday 4 likes

peej

Thank you Ms. Jackson-Mitchell for sharing your art with the public. I imagine that creating your art has been cathartic; and I hope you will continue to tell your important story.

15 hours ago 2 likes

formersaltlaker

I remember that terrible story in 1980. I was barely older than the kids involved. I am impressed by what Ms. Jackson Mitchell has done and I will go see her show.

13 hours ago 0 likes
What a heartwarming story...hope to be able to see her newest piece of art, featuring the little boy.

32 minutes ago 0 likes

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