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Police work on piecing together life of accused murder

By Jill Fahy
 Free Press Staff Writer

Burlington police Wednesday focused on piecing together the life of the man charged with the brutal slaying of Laura Winterbottom.

Tracking the habits, acquaintances and lifestyle of 33-year-old Gerald Montgomery could provide police with the answer to a glaring question: What led to the alleged encounter between a convicted sex offender with a violent criminal past and a 31-year-old graphic artist and sports enthusiast from the New North End?



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"We feel we made tremendous progress in learning about Laura Winterbottom -- her affiliations, lifestyles and interactions," said Deputy Burlington Police Chief Walt Decker. "Mr. Montgomery's been leading a lifestyle that's not completely open. We're learning more about him, but we haven't built a biography on him."

Montgomery, who lived in the Old North End with his wife and children, was arrested Monday and charged with first-degree murder and aggravated sexual assault in the March 8 killing. He is accused of raping, beating and strangling Winterbottom, whose battered body was found in her car parked behind an unoccupied Old North End residence. DNA evidence has linked Montgomery to the killing.

Tuesday, he pleaded not guilty to both charges and is being held without bail at the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility in South Burlington.

Assembling a profile on the transient life of Montgomery is a formidable task, Decker said. Court records show Montgomery has been in and out of jail. He also never lived in one place for long.

With a murder suspect in custody, Burlington residents Wednesday tried to make sense of the crime. They also discovered more about the comings and goings of a man who worked a string of part-time jobs in Burlington -- one of which included a volunteer position coaching a basketball team of first- and second-graders.

Between December and early this month, Montgomery was a parent/volunteer for the Parks and Recreation Department's youth basketball program. The city department, which doesn't do background checks on its employees or volunteers, needed a coach and reached out to parents. Montgomery, whose stepson was on the team,

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volunteered, said Wayne Gross, director of the city program.

Montgomery coached weekly practices at H.O. Wheeler Elementary School and played games each Saturday at three locations in the city, Gross said. Montgomery, Gross added, was always accompanied by a paid parks and recreation staffer during practices and games.

"It was the first time we had any contact with him in all our programs," he said of Montgomery. "We were totally shocked. We didn't have any basis for even thinking this kind of behavior would have been out there in his background."

Gross added: "We received no complaints from kids or parents about any inappropriate activity at all." A background check policy for the Parks and Recreation program has been in the works and will go into effect this summer, Gross said.

As part of the policy, the department will contract with a private company to conduct a national background check on all volunteers and any employees who would have contact with children and senior citizens. Each check would cost between \$10 and \$15.

According to court records, Montgomery worked an array of short-lived, part-time jobs -- as a cook, car washer, stock person and phone service worker. He also worked for a short time in The Burlington Free Press mailroom, and spent about a month last summer delivering furniture for Rent-A-Center on North Street.

"He was sent to us from an employment agency," said Juan Iaria, an account manager for Rent-A-Center. Iaria said deliveries were always made in teams and Montgomery was never working alone.

Bess Robertson, who lives in the Old North End, said she remembers Montgomery coming to her house as a Rent-A-Center employee.

"It's just creepy knowing he was in my house and, now, here he is being accused of this murder," Robertson said.

Montgomery's employment at Rent-A-Center was through Adecco Employment Services of Burlington. He was an employee of Adecco through January, said Wilson Cleveland, an Adecco spokesman. Cleveland said he was unable to comment on Adecco's background check policy.

Two days before his arrest, Montgomery was working a different part-time job, this time as a janitor at J.P.'s Pub on Main Street. Brennan Thabault, who operates his own cleaning service, hired Montgomery and sent him to J.P.'s for the three-day cleaning stint -- this past Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Thabault said he assessed Montgomery as an ex-con who seemed eager to work.

"I help people get jobs," he said. "I wanted to help him out."
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