

# Local News

## Was Son of Sam also the Westchester Dartman?



**CIRCLING BACK ON OUR MOST POPULAR STORIES**

**Mark Lungarelli**  
Rockland/Westchester Journal News  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Through early January, reporters will be looking back at and following up on stories and topics that were the most popular with our readers in 2017, according to metrics on lohud.com. This story is part of that series.

In the darkness, a sniper was watching.

It was June 1976, the year before panic set in over "The Son of Sam" serial killings in New York City, and a pregnant woman was washing dishes near an open kitchen window in her Hawthorne apartment. Without a sound, something pierced the screen and a sharp pain smacked her collarbone like a large insect bite.

In the sink, sprinkled with her blood, a steel dart with a feather lay among the soiled dishes.

"Is somebody trying to kill me?" she thought. "Why?"

Her husband ran down from the second-floor apartment into the yard but found no one. For weeks after, she couldn't shake an uneasy feeling around windows at night.

"I started putting blinds down because I kind of felt like I was exposed," she said this week.

In a year-long stretch in the 1970s, at least 22 women were attacked in the same fashion in Westchester — with a final attack across the Hudson River in Rockland County.

Most of the victims had been standing in ground-floor apartments in garden complexes and were hit in the head and neck. Only one was seriously injured, when the dart pierced an artery, leading to a reported hours-long surgery in White Plains.

The Westchester Dartman, or Westchester Darter, as the sniper became known, was never caught. The attacks stopped abruptly.

The Son of Sam killings were ramping up at roughly the same time that the trail of the Dartman started going cold. When David Berkowitz was arrested for the killings, on Aug. 10, 1977, it was in Yonkers — the city where most of the dart attacks happened.

Now, 40 years later, there's still speculation the timing and proximity aren't a coincidence.

**Starting small**

Anthony Scarpino, the Westchester County district attorney, is among those who think Son of Sam and Dartman could be the same person. He admits it's a game of speculation and said he doesn't view the mystery as a law enforcement issue — the statute of limitations would've long passed on any dart-related charges.

But Scarpino said the Dartman attacks intrigue him because they could fit the psychological profile of a disturbed person who is working his way up to larger crimes. For example, some serial murderers abused animals before becoming killers.

"It's elementary that they generally start to do acts of a lesser degree of criminality and they gradually progress to a more serious one," Scarpino said. "They just don't start by committing the homicide."

Prior to the killings, Berkowitz had quietly been one of New York City's most prolific arsonists. Three stenographer notebooks found in his apartment after his arrest documented a whopping 1,488 fires he set between September 1974 and December 1975, according to the book "Son of Sam" by Lawrence Klausner.

Berkowitz told police that he'd stabbed two women in the Bronx in December 1975 before he graduated to shooting his victims. Despite his increasingly disturbed behavior, there's no evidence other than circumstantial evidence that links Berkowitz to the Dartman.

No dart gun was found in his apartment after his arrest and he's never



Westchester District Attorney Anthony Scarpino shown at his office in White Plains on Dec. 20. RICKY FLORES/THE JOURNAL NEWS

tacks, where Berkowitz walked up to young couples in cars and opened fire with a .44 Bulldog revolver. The first three shootings were spread out — July 29, Oct. 23 and Nov. 26 — at the end of the Dartman's reign.

By the time Virginia Voskerichian was killed in Queens, in the fifth shooting, in March 1977, city police admitted a serial killer was on the loose. It wasn't until Alexander Esau and Valerina Suriani were killed in the Bronx a little more than a month later that police found a note from the killer in which he called himself "son of Sam," a reference to his neighbor with the barking dog.

"GO OUT AND KILL! COMMANDS FATHER SAM," the letter stated, in part. It was signed, "YOURS IN MURDER MR. MONSTER."

When he was arrested 40 years ago, the dart victim from Hawthorne was sure they'd also caught her sniper.

"I was kind of disappointed that they didn't find any dart guns in his place because it would've been nice to know that they caught the guy," she said.

### A cult conspiracy persists

The shockingly random nature of the Son of Sam attacks and the references to demons contributed to a media frenzy and a tabloid war that fanned the flames of panic while Berkowitz was at large. The country was in the midst of an obsession with the occult and Satanism — "The Exorcist" hit theaters in 1973 and "The Omen" came out in 1976, depicting the anti-Christ as a young child in England.

After Berkowitz's arrest, that atmosphere and the media's continued obsession with the Berkowitz trial led to articles and talk about the killer being part of a cult that met in Untermyer Park, not far from his apartment in Yonkers.

Reports of mutilated animal remains and other evidence of rituals there fanned the flames of rumor. The book "The Ultimate Evil" by author Maury Terry, outlined an occult conspiracy that Berkowitz didn't act alone. He also tied the cult to a number of unsolved crimes in the area, including the dart attacks, saying darts held a historical significance.

David O'Gorman, who lives on Pine Street across from Berkowitz's former residence, said he believes it's all one story.

"It's the same neighborhood," he said. "This was going around here, the same thing with dead German shepherds and fires."

Carl Denaro, who was shot in the head in the second Son of Sam attack in October 1976, has come to believe it wasn't Berkowitz who shot him. Denaro told The Journal News/lohud that he doesn't see a lot of evidence linking the dart attacks to a conspiracy, but thinks conflicting witness descriptions of the shooter and his car are part of the evidence that there was more than one shooter.

### The aftermath

But Klausner, the author of the book, said talk about a cult and linking Berkowitz to the Dartman were all part of "yellow journalism" looking to cash in on the hysteria. In the five years after his arrest, there was much speculative journalism linking Berkowitz to a number of unsolved crimes or attributing letters to him that he never wrote.

The dartman theory came up in print in the Yonkers Herald-Statesman, a Journal News predecessor, just days after the arrest. An article that ran the same day mentioned a possible link to rapes in the area.

"The aftermath — anything they came up with — sold newspapers," Klausner said. "It's very easy to assassinate people by word, you don't have to use a bullet."

Berkowitz never documented or spoke about the dart attacks, Klausner said.

Another theory floated by former police investigators to the paper in the past was that they had identified four suspects. One investigator, looking back in 1990, said police were pretty sure they knew who was behind the dart attacks but didn't have enough evidence to make an arrest.

Aware that police were watching, the sniper never took another shot.

Twitter: @marklungarelli



The front page of The Journal News from Aug. 11, 1977, when David Berkowitz was arrested. THE JOURNAL NEWS

fed up to the attacks. Berkowitz didn't respond to an interview request. Now in his 60s and serving time in Shawangunk prison in Walkkill, Berkowitz was recently hospitalized for a heart condition.

### Timing is key

The Dartman attacks started in February 1976, then stopped in December of that year. They took place in Yonkers, New Rochelle, White Plains, Greenburgh, Eastchester, Dobbs Ferry and Tarrytown, according to The Journal News archives.

There was a final attack, in Nanuet, Rockland County, in May 1977 but some authorities told reporters for Gannett Westchester Newspapers, a Journal News predecessor, that wasn't likely the work of the Westchester Darter.

Berkowitz moved to Westchester from the Bronx in early 1976, living in an

apartment above a garage at 174 Coligni Ave. as a tenant of Jack and Nann Casara. He was adopted as a child and spent time in the military, but was troubled by voices in his head and tormented by the Casaras' dog barking, which he felt kept him awake at the behest of demons.

He left that lease and his \$200 deposit after a few months.

From there, he moved to 35 (now 42) Pine St. in Yonkers, a high-rise building near the Hudson where he lived on the sixth floor and blocked out the outside world using sheets to cover the windows. He was again tormented by a dog — this time of his neighbor Sam Carr. Berkowitz shot that dog, but it survived and continued to torment him. He came to believe he was being told to kill by demons in his head.

The Son of Sam killings between July 1976 and July 1977 were all in New York City and mostly lover's lane-style at-