

NURSING HOME DEATHS CALLED DIFFICULT TO PROVE AS MURDER

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Death is never far off at the Alpine Manor Nursing Home.

It hovers quietly in carpeted corridors, descending frequently -- 46 times in the first six months of 1987 -- and surprising nobody.

Catherine May Wood and **Gwendolyn Gail Graham**, working together as nurse's aides at Alpine Manor, knew death well.

Kent County authorities allege that they also caused it, suffocating nursing home patients who were asleep in their beds. Police said the pair, then lovers, may have killed as many as eight critically ill patients between Jan. 18 and May 1, 1987. Last week, Wood and **Graham** were charged with murder.

Those Kent County authorities admit that one of the chief difficulties they face in prosecuting the case against Wood, 26, and **Graham**, 25, will be to convince a jury that there was even a single homicide committed at Alpine Manor.

The initial findings from autopsies performed on two of the alleged victims, whose bodies were exhumed, can't prove murder, said Walker Police Chief Walter Sprenger.

The only two eyewitnesses to the alleged crimes are the suspects, said Kent County Prosecutor William Forsyth.

And much of the prosecution's case is based on sometimes incredible statements made by the alleged participants and those they confided in, including:

* Wood's ex-husband, Kenneth, who was in the process of divorcing his wife because of her lesbian affairs when the deaths occurred. Kenneth Wood told police that his ex-wife told him in August 1987 that she and **Graham** had killed six patients, selecting their victims in part on initials that would spell out the word "murder."

* Catherine Wood herself, who suffered an apparently bitter breakup of her relationship with **Graham** around the time she made the alleged admissions to her ex-husband, and who told police in October that she watched as **Graham** committed the murders.

"The direct evidence is not there," said Grand Rapids lawyer Christine Yared, who represents Catherine Wood. "It's possible that no one was killed."

That also is a possibility almost as bizarre and puzzling as the accusation of murder.

Why would two apparently dutiful nursing home employees kill the people they were paid to care for? And if no one was killed, why would anyone make up such a story?

Sprenger and Forsyth have declined to outline their theory of the motive in the case.

"Obviously, if we thought they made it up we wouldn't have charged them," Forsyth said. "With any type of crime you try to look for an explanation of why it happened. But people do strange things for strange reasons. You can't always understand."

Catherine Wood, in her initial statements to police in October, said **Graham** killed for "emotional release," except in the instance of one patient who was in pain and killed for mercy.

Mercy killing is a frequent defense in cases involving the alleged murder of critically ill nursing home or hospital patients.

William Whalen Jr., a Cincinnati lawyer who represented Donald Harvey, a nurse's aide convicted of killing dozens of patients in Ohio and Kentucky hospitals, said his client said he acted out of a sense of mercy.

"But obviously they weren't all mercy killings," Whalen said.

"In at least one instance, it was a violent act. He was angry with the patient."

Whalen said Harvey, and others similarly accused, are frequently people from troubled backgrounds, with limited education and opportunity.

"The people that are commonly committing these crimes are those that are rejected by society or feel rejected," Whalen said.

"The only people less powerful than they are . . . the only people they can lash out at are the people they care for."

Wood and **Graham** came from broken homes and fit that general profile. But so do many nursing home and hospital employees who perform non-medical patient care, jobs that require little training and that pay barely more than the minimum wage.

Relatively few of them are as well regarded on the job as was Wood, described by a nursing home spokeswoman as "a model employee." **Graham** also was well liked, the spokeswoman said.

Now, Wood is awaiting a preliminary examination. **Graham**, now living in Tyler, Tex., is awaiting an extradition hearing.

Wood, who worked at Alpine Manor for more than three years until the police investigation began two months ago, was respected by her colleagues and well liked by patients, said spokeswoman Ginny Seyferth.

"That's the most difficult thing for everybody to understand," Seyferth said. "They all trusted her and they are very hurt. And some of them are just very skeptical; they don't believe it really happened."

CUTLINE:

Catherine May Wood

Gwendolyn Gail Graham

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