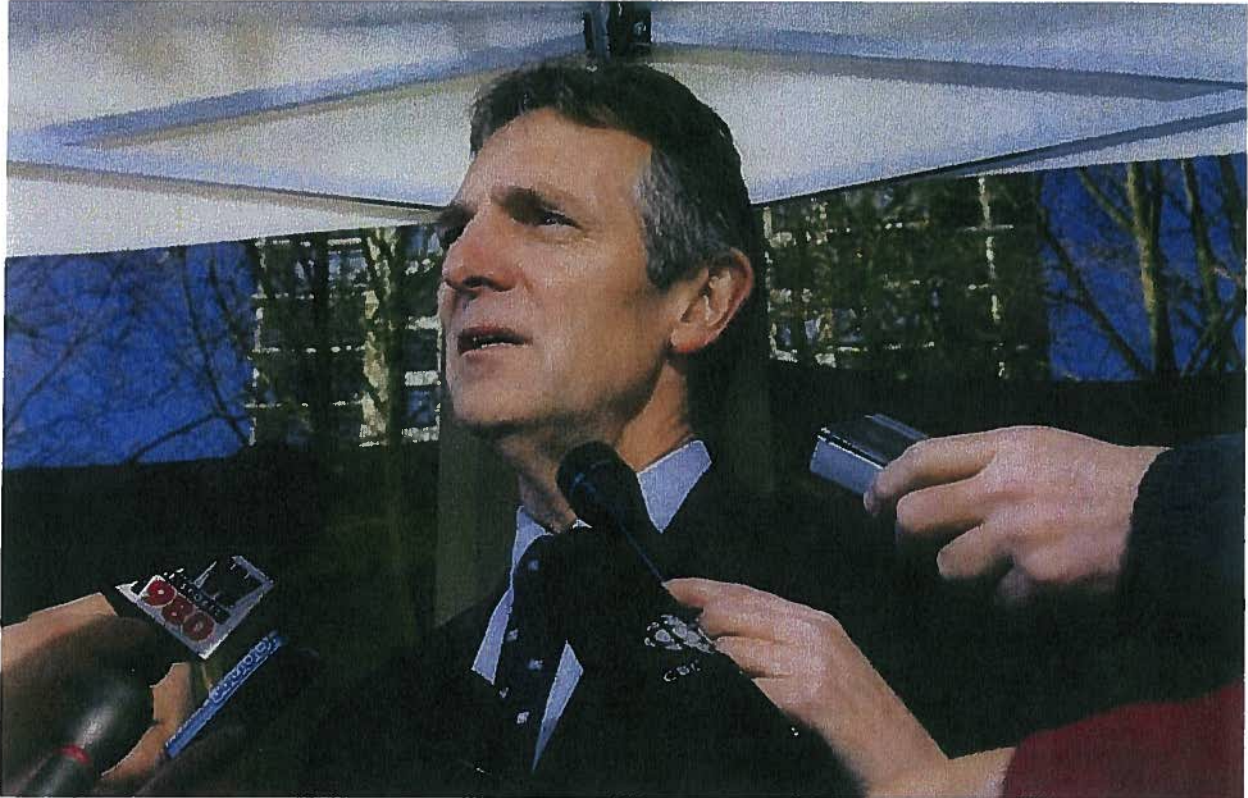


Top Robert Pickton cop in his own words

The former head of the missing women task force speaks out exclusively to The Vancouver Sun, defending his team in response to this summer's scathing review of the Robert "Willie" Pickton case. Read his letter below.

BY DON ADAM, VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 27, 2010



Don Adam, former head of the Missing Women Task Force, in a 2007 photo, speaking to the media outside the New Westminster courthouse about the Pickton trial. This week, has spoken on exclusively to The Vancouver Sun about the Robert Pickton case.

Photograph by: Ward Perrin, PNG

My name is Don Adam. I was an RCMP officer for 34 years. I was in charge of the Vancouver Missing Women Task Force (Project Evenhanded). Part of that Project was the investigation of Robert "Willie" Pickton.

When Pickton was convicted in December 2007, I made a public commitment that when the court restrictions were removed I would answer to and be responsible for the actions of our Task Force.

When the Supreme Court of Canada dismissed Pickton's appeals in the summer of 2010, it seemed like the time to answer questions had arrived.

Members of Project Evenhanded visited the victims' families to explain our investigation and the evidence we had located relative to their loved ones.

Vancouver Police then released their internal assessment of their force's actions, those of the RCMP and an assessment of the early investigation (prior to Pickton's arrest) of Project Evenhanded.

The "Pickton investigation" is now being described in the media in most negative terms: either merely botched, or the possibly the worst investigation in Canadian history.

I don't know the impact these criticisms have had on the victims' families. Project Evenhanded had asked them to trust us — that we both cared and were going to do a good job.

I do know the impact these statements have had on the men and women of Project Evenhanded. No one likes to have their efforts misunderstood.

Pickton would kill eight women from when Evenhanded took it's first steps until his arrest in February 2002. The issue of whether we made reasonable, effective decisions and efforts needs to be examined.

The RCMP asked me not to speak about the case and I initially agreed. I realize now that was the wrong decision. Organizations, governments, the courts are designed to wait for answers, often for years. People aren't. The victims families need to hear a response from someone that their faith in Evenhanded was not misplaced. The men and women of Evenhanded need to hear someone stand up for them and say, 'No that's wrong, they did a good job.'

I am the person who needs to do that. I was responsible for the creation of the Evenhanded Task Force and choosing the direction the investigation would take.

My goal is to explain what we did — explain it fully so people can understand the reasoning behind our decisions and actions. Our job was to serve the victims, their families and the public. We either did that well or we didn't.

I am going to take you through the entire story.

I will start with my impressions and thoughts when I was first introduced in January 2001 to the problems being faced by Vancouver Police Sgt. Geramy Field. She was the homicide investigator in charge of Vancouver Police's Missing Person Review Teams.

Understanding the magnitude of the missing persons situation was a challenge in itself, which I will detail, as well as our decisions on how to move forward. I will take you through the paths we chose and how the investigation evolved. This will take you right to Pickton's arrest in February 2002.

This section will answer questions about why we never choose to conduct surveillance on Pickton or make him a discreet target of our investigation.

Once Pickton was arrested as a result of an unrelated search warrant, Project Evenhanded, which was already a significant task force, would expand into one of the largest project investigations in Canadian history.

After his arrest, we thoroughly investigated him, the people around him and his farm. There has never been an investigation quite like it. We spent 17 months searching his two farms and a site where a severed skull was found and then linked to his farm. The investigation of Pickton, and those close to him continued for years.

It is important for you to understand that I am explaining all of these matters from my perspective, my viewpoint. Every person, every officer, will have their own views. They will have acted or not acted, because of how they viewed the information they had and their experience. It is not possible for me, or perhaps anyone, to collect all of these views.

A public inquiry has been called. Former attorney-general and B.C. Court of Appeal justice Wally Oppal will conduct it. The inquiry will undoubtedly gather testimony from key people and will certainly come to a fuller, more synthesized view than mine. It will be Justice Oppal's view which will, in the end, tell this story best. In the meanwhile, I offer my perspective from inside the investigation.

Understanding the Missing Women and Pickton Investigation:

I have been immersed in these matters since 2001 and I am still learning bits and pieces about some of the history, it can be confusing. To give you some context I am going to give a very brief overview before I go into Evenhanded's role. It's goal is to give you some orientation.

When people talk about the missing women and the Pickton investigation, they should realize it was not one investigation. It was a series conducted by different police forces over many years. Initially there were women who started going missing from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside as early as 1985.

Then there were two sex trade workers murdered in 1988. Their bodies were dumped in alleys of Vancouver. We came to call these the alley murders.

In 1995 there were 3 women from the Downtown Eastside found murdered. Their bodies were dumped in the Mission mountains. These 3 murders were linked through DNA and other forensic evidence. We call these the valley murders. There have been no further recovered bodies nor DNA associated to this killer since 1995.

(There was an additional Vancouver sex trade worker's body found in the mountains above North Vancouver but she has never been linked to any of these cases)

It was also in 1995 that a bisected skull of a woman was found dumped beside the Lougheed Highway near Mission. (She would later be linked to Pickton's farm where other remains from her body were found. We call her Jane Doe — to this day we have been unable to identify her).

Throughout this time sex trade workers had been going missing from the Downtown Eastside.

In 1997 Pickton would attack a sex trade worker in his trailer. She escaped. Pickton was investigated by Coquitlam RCMP and charges were laid, but they were later stayed by Crown counsel and Pickton, therefore, never faced those allegations in court.

In 1998, Vancouver Police formed its Vancouver Missing Women Review Team — dubbed Project Amelia. Their goal was to find the women alive, or to find out what happened to them.

At that time there were 31 women missing. They were able to bring the list down to 27 missing.

Vancouver's review team received volumes of information on possible suspects. It had also received information on Pickton and in 1998/1999 jointly investigated him with the Coquitlam RCMP. (I will describe this in more detail later).

The belief of Project Amelia was that the disappearances had stopped sometime in late 1999. (This mistaken belief was not corrected until later in 2001, after the task force began operating.)

In late 2000, the investigations of Vancouver's missing women and the RCMP's valley murders were being conducted separately. Neither investigation had been able to lay any charges and neither investigation was progressing satisfactorily.

In November 2000, Sgt. Field, the team commander of the Vancouver review team, and RCMP Const. Paul McCarl, the file coordinator of the valley murder investigation, presented their respective

cases to a multi jurisdictional group of major crime investigators. Assisting them were two criminal profilers, then-Vancouver Insp. Kim Rossomo and RCMP Staff Sgt. Keith Davidson.

Following the presentations, the group consensus was that Vancouver's missing 27 women were in all likelihood the victims of one or more serial killers. They were also most probably linked to the valley murders whose victims also came from the Downtown Eastside. The group recommended a joint task force be formed to investigate the two cases.

On Nov. 21, 2000 — at a meeting that included Sgt. Field, Staff Sgt. Davidson, RCMP Staff Sgt. Doug Henderson of the Provincial Unsolved Homicide Team, Vancouver police Acting Insp. Gord Spencer and RCMP Cpl. Margaret Kingsbury — the cases were discussed again and it was agreed that a joint task force would be formed.

Evenhanded: Understanding the Missing Women and Valley Murder cases:

I had not been present at these meetings, nor had I been involved in any of the investigations which would form the basis for the creation of Project Evenhanded. I would receive an email telling me to get together with Sgt. Field and I was instructed to see if there was anything the RCMP could do to help advance the Vancouver police missing women investigation.

I arranged to meet Sgt Field, and anyone else she felt needed to be there, on Jan. 3, 2001. My first goal was going to be to try to understand something about what I was being asked to do. Then hopefully I might be capable of doing it.

I should explain something that might help you understand this entire story: The public may think from watching TV that the police have this pool of superstar serial killer investigators just waiting around for the big case. The idea that there is just the right person with the right background to understand the entire investigation, and then solve it flawlessly, is appealing but imaginary. That person doesn't exist.

I was a sergeant with 28 years experience. I had a solid background in investigations but had never worked a serial killer case,

When I was first briefed on the missing women by Sgt. Field and the officers she had invited to the meeting, the scope of their problems were so vast and convoluted they were difficult to take in all at once.

There were certainly some things that I "got" very quickly.

I got that we as a society had allowed the creation of an incredible area of lost souls — an area where drug addicted women needed to sell themselves to live.

I got that the human sharks, the predators, would come to that pool to prey on vulnerable women.

I got that it was easy for the police and society to ignore them

I got that labelling the women as “missing” destroyed the clarity of the situation. A body — a confirmed murder — brings focus and ignites a chain reaction. It brings the most seasoned investigators and the best efforts a department has.

In the past, a missing person, excepting unusual circumstances, would get relegated to the most junior officers. (Certainly this was true in RCMP jurisdictions in my experience). Those officers were usually busy dealing with so-called “real crime,” in other words crime that we can all see.

(This is no longer the case. The police have learned many lessons since 2001 and have constantly been adjusting their practices to provide the best service possible. Missing people are now an area that is watched very closely, in my experience.)

I understood Sgt. Field’s anguish and frustration that her investigation had gone as far as it could go and she was stymied. She needed help.

I was offended and angry that some animal was preying on our weakest citizens. It is our job as the police to protect people and clearly we were failing.

There is nothing unique about how I felt. Every good investigator I know has some variant of those feelings. What I can tell you is that the investigators cared. Geramy Field cared, the men and women of Project Amelia cared. The RCMP officers that I know from Coquitlam Detachment cared and Project Evenhanded cared.

Now, we needed to translate that caring into an effective plan and move forward, to find the killer or killers and bring them to justice.

The Missing Women Cases and Robert “Willie” Pickton

Initially, my goal was to get an overview of the investigations thus far. The detailed examination would take months to fully comprehend. Ultimately, I would come to view Evenhanded’s mandate as the complete investigation of all of the Downtown Eastside missing sex trade workers, including the valley murders in 1995 and the alley murders in 1988.

On Jan. 3, 2001, Sgt. Field and the investigators she brought to our first meeting gave me an overview of the first two cases, the investigative paths they had pursued and the obstacles they faced.

To simply say that each case — the missing women and the valley murders — was challenging is an absolute understatement. Each had investigative and systemic hurdles which needed to be carefully examined in a search for answers.

Each case had lengthy lists of suspects and had been pursuing their best suspects. The valley investigation had been able to eliminate people through DNA comparison with their crime scene suspect DNA. The missing women investigation had no suspect DNA nor any true means to eliminate anyone. (I will explain this in detail later)

In both cases it appeared that the murders/disappearances had stopped (the valley in 1995, and Vancouver's missing in late 1999). With the killer inactive, certain investigative actions like surveillance do not assist.

Both cases involved the same group of women taken from the Downtown Eastside. A very logical supposition was the valley killer, who had already taken pains to transport his victims deep into the mountains, had now perfected his method of disposal and the women had simply "disappeared". It was this thinking which called for the cases to be investigated jointly. It also called for the pooling of their suspect lists and then finding tools to refine what were hundreds of names.

There can be no doubt that this investigative belief was appealing. Without a potential DNA connection to the valley murders, Vancouver's case was brutally complex

That is because Project Amelia had no recovered remains, and therefore no crime scene, no forensic evidence and no true start place for the investigation.

The lack of remains coupled with the lifestyles of many of the missing made pinpointing the time and date of the crime difficult.

The reality of missing persons investigations is that the vast majority show up or are found quite quickly, as people do move away, start new lives, and die of natural causes. All of these factors blurred what was happening.

Because the issue of "missing" is so central to understanding all of these matters, I am going to take the time now to describe it's impact on our investigation:

As I listened to Sgt. Field and the other officers explaining their case, I viewed the problem of "missing" as an additional hurdle to overcome within the context of a homicide investigation (how it affected our ability to move forward to find clues about who did this, and how we would prove to the court the women were murdered).

I also understood that when someone said the disappearances had stopped, they might be wrong. After all, a person only becomes missing when someone makes a report to police.

My lack of understanding of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside made me think sex-trade workers would be a much more fluid group than the general public, perhaps disconnected from their families because of lifestyle and probably transient. Therefore, I thought, they would be harder to track when they disappeared.

(Transient lifestyles can occur with some sex-trade workers, but as Evenhanded investigated the missing women in this case we would later find these assumptions wrong. In many ways the Downtown Eastside, with its extensive support systems, was the only place many of our victims could function.)

At the end of January 2001, Sgt. Field advised us that the Vancouver police missing persons unit had received reports of three new missing women and would be looking into them. This became a piece of information that we needed to track and see what occurred with Vancouver's inquiries — would these three be found or were they truly missing?

I would make a decision that the search for these and any other reports of missing women needed to remain the responsibility of Vancouver Police or the department where they were reported missing. That decision, while logical and proper practice, would have a major impact on the file.

On May 5, 2001, Vancouver police missing person unit Sgt. Dan Dickout would tell Evenhanded that he now had five missing women that he was looking for. We were troubled by that news, so Evenhanded started trying to answer the question: exactly how many missing women were there? We continued to leave the search for the women to Vancouver police.

These efforts would take us into the summer of 2001.

RCMP civilian member Sylvia Port was searching for an answer to this question, conducting specialized computer searches. By Aug. 16, 2001, she would identify a potential nine additional missing women — which kicked off an intense effort by the task force to nail down the true picture.

Twelve days later, Evenhanded's new tally found that there a staggering 22 additional women that were potentially missing beyond the original 27 we were first made aware of.

Our immediate response was to obtain more people and actively start working with the Vancouver police missing persons unit to see if we could find these women (and gather information from their lives if they were murder victims). By late summer Evenhanded would have 8 officers working on this component.

The number of missing women would continue to grow, reaching 50 by February 2002 and today sits at 64.

Eventually Evenhanded would investigate in excess of 250 missing women who had any potential to fit our profile. We located over 100 alive. These investigations took up massive amounts of person hours and money.

Vancouver Police had developed detailed lists of inquires to both locate women and be able to describe them as "confirmed" missing. Evenhanded would refine this list even further. What the public should know is that these searches are not easy, quick or foolproof.

As a footnote before I leave this topic, as Evenhanded came to understand the weakness in policing around missing persons I let my superiors know. They had me speak at a BC Chiefs of Police meeting in the mid 2000s. Assistant Commissioner Al McIntyre took a personal hand in working to address these problems within British Columbia. I no longer know how far the police have come with missing investigations but I know they haven't been sitting on their hands.

The Problems with DNA:

In 2000, Canada did not have a Missing Person DNA bank. This meant that if a person reported their family member missing, they could not contribute their familial DNA to potentially link up with DNA from a recovered body or crime scene. (When a person goes missing we can obtain their DNA from their possessions, sometimes from medical samples they have given, but most times by obtaining samples from their families)

The inability to enter the missing women's DNA in the forensic lab's data banks was a major obstacle to the proper investigation of these offences.

Vancouver's Project Amelia, which had had collected as many familial samples as it could, learned of severed female limbs recovered in the state of Virginia and thought the victim might be one of their missing women. Unable to have the DNA developed here in Canada, investigators contacted the Virginia authorities who were willing to process Amelia's samples and compare them to the remains. Project Amelia anticipated the developed DNA would be returned to Canada, ready for

when there was a break in the case. But police would learn later the DNA processes used in the U.S. do not mesh with those used in Canada, so the developed DNA was useless to us here.

The BC Coroner's service also had a reputed 130 cases of found human remains in which foul play not suspected. These had never been typed for DNA. Of course, even if they had been, they could not legally go into the national DNA bank.

Our country now almost 10 years later still has not enacted missing person DNA legislation, but I understand it is close.

Adding to the challenges was the fact that, prior to 1997, evidence collected at crime scenes and forwarded to the forensic labs had not been developed for potential DNA unless the case had a suspect. The labs at that time were simply overwhelmed with requests and the development of the DNA profiles was laborious. So the exhibits would be sent back to the investigative agency to be retained in their exhibit lockers.

Additionally, the forensic laboratory's ability to detect DNA had improved 500 per cent in the last few years, so many exhibits which had been examined unsuccessfully in the past might reasonably now produce a DNA profile if resubmitted.

All of this information became extremely important when we started talking about suspects. Staff Sgt. Keith Davidson, a criminal profiler who was present at our meetings, had the most insight into serial killer investigations. He explained that we could not count on our killer(s) standing out as the worst of the worst. (This advice would later be reaffirmed by the Green River and Spokane Washington serial killer task forces.)

Project Amelia had masses of information, and in excess of 1,300 tips — a large percentage of which were on suspects and other "persons of interest." But resource issues and time spent on their highest priority suspects had precluded the team from fully assessing the information in their possession.

WHAT TO DO:

As we discussed all of these issues there was an evolving understanding that we needed to start by rebuilding some of the pieces of the investigation.

1. Most pressing was to get the forensic lab to accept our missing women into their data banks and process familial DNA or other samples from other sources, such as the BC Cancer Agency.

2. We needed to create a complete suspect pool which included not just those identified in Project Amelia or the valley murders, but of men who had murdered, abducted and brutalized sex trade workers from across the province.

3. Through our discussions we believed that the killer responsible for the missing women would in all probability have committed "lead up crimes", perhaps gone from attacking them to abduction then murder. Also, that the killer would have made mistakes: potentially left his DNA, be identifiable by a living victim, or had not disposed of a victim's remains perfectly.

4. We knew that there could be large numbers of suspect DNA from crimes like these being retained in exhibit lockers throughout the province. We believed we could review these files and identify suspects and collect the exhibits for development of the DNA.

5. We knew we needed to develop a screening mechanism that allowed us to categorize suspects from the most likely to be our killer to the least likely. We also knew from history that it would be very easy to be wrong and that the killer could slip into the background.

6. We needed to get as complete a list of missing women as possible and ensure we were hearing about any new disappearances.

7. We needed to look into the lives of the missing women and the murdered women from the valley to see if there were any suspects from their individual lives. We could not safely assume that all the women (except the valley victims) had been killed by the same person.

8. Finally we needed to put the massive amount of information in Project Amelia under a magnifying glass to see if we agreed with their investigational paths and conclusions.

Why did we choose to do these things?

I believe this is the point where I should take the time to explain our investigative thinking and certain decisions I made.

Even though it is out of chronological order I will try to answer the question I believe most people have of the Task Force: Why not immediately make Pickton the first suspect targeted?

1. In January 2001 the belief was that the disappearances had stopped, that the killer was inactive. If true, surveillance would have accomplished nothing. To have fully targeted Pickton at that time (or any of the top suspects) could not have been done in conjunction with a proper file review.

2. The entire purpose of a new task force was to look at what caused these investigations to stall. Were there mistakes made, clues missed, incorrect assumptions drawn? This can only be done by painstakingly reviewing each piece of work. I anticipated this would take several months.

3. It would be the review of the evidence and investigation conducted on Pickton and all the top suspects which would tell us if we could rely on the work done earlier.

4. Our discussions had already revealed that there were large numbers of suspects both within Project Amelia and the valley investigation who had never been properly developed and assessed. Without doing this work how would we know if Pickton was the most viable target? (By Sept. 2001, Pickton was in a group of 30 of our "worst people" and that list would continue to grow as we continued to research people.)

5. By April of 2001, Pickton's DNA had been developed by the lab and eliminated as the person who killed the valley women.

6. There had been no new information (tips, informants, sightings in Downtown Eastside, etc.) which would bring Pickton back to police attention, and cause us to key on him ahead of any particular suspect. Later we would key on a male who claimed to be the killer and tried to abduct a woman but he was not Pickton.

7. When everything in the Amelia files was known about Pickton, there was nothing which would have caused us to go out on him earlier as a target.

Understanding Homicide Investigation:

By explaining some of the processes we use in homicide investigations, you will be able to understand our thinking and decisions. The goal of a murder investigation is very straight forward: Prove there was a crime. Prove who did it. Take them to court.

The investigation facing the Vancouver Police was however so far from ordinary that it was an entirely different order of magnitude. That's because in a homicide investigation, there is normally a logical, chronological progression. The crime scene is almost always the starting point of the investigation as it tells us the forensic facts and of course supplies us with concrete evidence. It also gives insight into the killer, and the whys: Why kill this way, why in this place, why now and of course why this victim.

If you pictured a rock dropped into a pond, the investigation flows out from that epicentre much like the waves would. The crime scene is processed, neighborhood inquiries start and move out. In a more figurative way, the investigation will move back in time tracking the movements of the victim and later the suspect. It will move forward in time looking at actions which occurred after the murder. Witness will be discovered, statements taken, persons of interest will be surfaced. They will be investigated and eliminated or elevated to suspect status and the investigation evolves.

Project Amelia was in many ways operating blind. They could not "prove" there had even been a crime. They were forced to extrapolate murder from the fact that women had been going missing, but that was a shifting circumstance. They conducted their preliminary investigation in what I feel is the only way they could: They looked for men who had murdered, or were violent toward sex trade workers, they also set up a tip line where people could call in. They then went to work on who they felt were their best suspects. That is exactly what they needed to do at that stage of the investigation.

To have undertaken the extensive search for a complete list and then assess every reasonable suspect, like Evenhanded would later do, would have overwhelmed them. It was only when the efforts to develop evidence against their targets failed that the painstaking work we needed to do became palatable. When an investigation targets suspect after suspect to no avail, eventually it simply runs out of gas. For ease of explanation I will call that "stalling." That is my estimation of what occurred to both Project Amelia and the valley investigation.

Major investigations can run into problems in many ways. They can lose focus, not have enough resources to properly do critical work, be unable to develop quality suspects, or have so many quality suspects they bog down, or are unable to eliminate them. The masses of information which flow into high profile cases can often overwhelm the file coordinator and the team's ability to both categorize and properly assess the information they have.

The proper investigation of murder is not easy. There are very detailed legal requirements to many of the steps. If you mishandle them, you can critically damage your case. Additionally, unlike a TV show, there will always be pieces of the puzzle missing which makes the full picture unclear.

It is not the sign of a botched or failed investigation to run into problems. An investigation is an evolving process, under pressure mistakes will be made, clues missed, dead ends will be pursued. It is impossible that they wouldn't be. We don't get to know the answers then perfectly chart our course to a known conclusion.

When a case stalls we are trained to get help. The best way is having new eyes look at your case.

The job of those “new eyes” is to look at what has been done earlier: Put it under a microscope, critically assess every action and decision — and the suspects.

The police have, in the past been, guilty of wearing blinders. Investigators have made premature decisions that a certain person “must” have committed the crime — what I will call a rush to judgment. From then on, investigative efforts all work toward making everything “fit” that belief. The courts call this tunnel vision. Police are now specifically trained to resist our natural inclination to move in that direction. The courts quite rightly expect that we will collect and then investigate all other reasonable alternative suspects. The failure to do so become attack points for Pickton’s defence lawyers during his trial in 2007. Because of these things, a comprehensive review of suspects is always a requirement.

With the belief at the time that the killer inactive, no matter how professional a job we did we might not be able to pinpoint who he was or develop evidence sufficient to take him to court. With the strong potential that our case would be under investigation for years to come, what we needed to do was be absolutely meticulous in everything we did.

None of us knew what the future would hold. As the review of Project Amelia’s files were conducted, the answer might be glaring and obvious or infinitely nuanced — but those answers were only going to unfold by painstakingly doing the work.

Our Investigative Premise:

We believed there was a high probability that there would have been lead-up crimes, or botched crimes, perhaps the imperfect disposal of remains — that the killer may have left his DNA at these offences and potentially leads to his identity.

We discussed and decided that we needed to create a structured suspect pool which had the greatest likelihood of containing the killer. The crimes we felt were of interest to us would be the following:

- Murdered sex-trade workers, both solved and unsolved
- Attempted murders of sex-trade workers
- Abductions of sex-trade workers
- Sexual Assault causing bodily harm on sex-trade workers

— Aggravated Sexual Assault of sex-trade workers

— Sexual Assaults of sex-trade workers

Sexual Assault with a weapon on sex-trade workers

We also decided to include female hitchhikers who had faced the above crimes, as they shared the willingness to get in a vehicle with a stranger.

We resolved to review every such file in British Columbia for suspects and potential evidence which might contain suspect DNA. This material, collected during those original investigations, would be retained in police exhibit lockers throughout the province.

To give structure to our suspect pool we created three categories (priority one, two and three). The priority one suspects would be those we targeted first. A priority one suspect was a person who had:

A. a history of murder, attempted murder or had been involved in a serious assault or sexual assault of a sex-trade worker from the Vancouver area.

B. Any person who had frequented the Downtown Eastside, had been associated to sex trade workers and had a history of murder, attempted murder, serious assault or sexual assault of a sex trade worker.

C. Any person with a similar criminal history who had forcibly confined or attempted to transport a sex-trade worker to the Fraser Valley area.

D. Any person who fit one of the above categories and resided in the Fraser Valley area.

E. Any person of interest associated to the disappearance of a victim, as identified in the continuing review of the background of the missing women.

F. Any person of interest in relation to a series of homicides.

We were reviewing the files of extremely bad people from all over the province, and were trying to address several different possibilities to make sure we didn't ignore the killer.

One of these priority one suspects was, of course, Robert Pickton. While Pickton had never been convicted of any of our target crimes, neither Project Amelia nor Evenhanded were prepared to act as if the attack on his victim in 1997 hadn't occurred. That event alone made him a priority one.

Evenhanded's officers were aware that there had been tips, in the form of second hand information, received by Project Amelia. Two people had reported that their friend Lynn Ellingsen had told them she had walked in on Pickton in his slaughterhouse while he was killing a woman. We also knew there had been a joint investigation of Pickton by Project Amelia and Coquitlam RCMP in 1998/1999 to address this story. And we knew that when confronted by investigators, Ellingsen had denied both seeing anything like that, or saying those things to anyone.

(There had also been information that Pickton should be a suspect in the disappearances in mid-1998 but there was no concrete evidence of a crime — we were unaware of this initially but now that I am aware of it retroactively it would not have changed our direction. Pickton already was a top suspect.)

We knew there was considerable differences of opinion about Pickton as a target. As one of Amelia's top suspects, he was high on our list to assess. People may believe that someone with a history like Pickton is unusual or he appeared unique back in 2001. That is untrue, as the actual number of men who brutalize sex trade workers is staggering.

The importance of Ellingsen lying to the police cannot be overstated. Pickton's history, the attack in 1997, Vancouver's tips about women's clothing and purses being sene on his farm, put him in a pool of top suspects. A witness confirming that she had seen a murder would have been the match which ignited a focused investigation, which I don't believe he could have withstood. With that information unproven, it is clear investigators were divided on his stature as the key suspect.

I know that the other efforts they made did not assist them in making a decision on what to do with Pickton. In 1998/1999, investigators showed Pickton's picture to, I believe, around 100 sex-trade workers who didn't identify him as coming to the Downtown Eastside and did surveillance on him which showed nothing of interest. I don't profess to know the entire story about the 1998/1999 probe into Pickton, but I strongly believe we should be hearing from everyone involved before we pass judgment or hold them responsible for Pickton's continued killing spree. Which seems to be the opinion that some hold right now.

Evenhanded Time Line:

The first meeting with Sgt. Field of the Vancouver police department was held on 3 January 2001. There were a number of them as we clarified the situation. By the beginning of February I was preparing the first operational plan and checking with her to see if we were in agreement. Sgt. Field was satisfied with our plan.

The plan however was not to the liking of the Sergeant who was the Team Commander of the valley investigation. By prioritizing Vancouver's work he felt we were making the wrong choices, because he thought the cases were linked. He felt Evenhanded's sole function should be to pursue the Valley suspects. This sergeant is one of the best investigators I have ever met, and his opinions were not to be taken lightly. The cost, however, of prioritizing the valley suspects is we would not advance the Vancouver case if their killer was a different person. We ended up disagreeing, but the decisions on the file were mine. People should understand, though, we were working in the dark and tough decisions were having to be made without knowing if we were going to be right.

Vancouver Police supplied the first two task force members in late February 2001. Both of these were excellent officers from their Homicide Unit. Sgt. Jim McKnight would become Evenhanded's primary investigator. Jim McKnight probably more than anyone else was the glue that helped hold everyone together. With Jim working with the investigative team and later RCMP Staff Sgt. Randy Hundt in charge of the farm searches, what could have been a pressure cooker which broke our people was kept in check.

Two other absolutely critical players in the investigation would be RCMP Sgt. Wayne Clary and RCMP Cpl. Margaret Kingsbury, who were responsible from the beginning of 2001 until the present for quality control. The thoroughness with which every piece of work Evenhanded would do for eight years has been their responsibility.

Project Amelia had now folded and Evenhanded was going to start reviewing their 1,300 tips. One of the problems of course is we had no way to know what they contained and no way to know if something in them might need urgent follow up. It would take months of reading to get through the files. Once reviewed of course there was a huge amount of follow up work required to even be able to assess the subjects named.

There is always something of a problem when a new investigative team comes into an existing file. There is a bit of a tendency for the original unit or force to wipe their foreheads, glad to be rid of the problem. That simply could not occur in this situation. It was critical that Vancouver police and the RCMP detachments continue to monitor and investigate their missing sex trade workers and keep us in the loop. As well for the short, term each unit needed to follow up hot tips and pass them on to us.

I met with Insp. Al Boyd of Vancouver homicide, and he completely understood Evenhanded's limitations.

It may be topical right now to speak of fragmented policing systems, the need for Regional Policing, and lack of communication/coordination between police departments. I cannot add my voice to that discussion. I found absolutely no problems with Vancouver nor with any of the municipal departments. Quite the contrary: their people and their desire to help was outstanding.

A Missing Person DNA Bank:

The problem of the Missing Person DNA Bank needed to be resolved. We needed those profiles available when we found a crime scene or recovered remains. We met with the forensic laboratory manager. He very much wanted to help but advised his hands were tied by the legislation. There simply was no provision for missing persons.

I was mystified and asked him if he was able to put in DNA if they found a murdered body. He answered yes. We then told him that all our women were murdered and we simply hadn't found their remains yet.

That was it. The roadblock that had confounded Project Amelia was gone. The lab from then on took all our DNA and were outstanding partners.

Later, by formally advising Victim Services that our missing were actually murder victims, they were able to free funds to support the victims' families. They too went to extraordinary lengths to try to help the families through what was a long painful process.

May through July 2001

The public statements on the new Task Force were that we were a review team, but we were much more than that. I deliberately downplayed in a 2001 media interview what we were doing. I did not want our investigation to get stamped by the press, public, or our own organizations.

In addition to reviewing Project Amelia and the valley investigations, our people were out scouring the province for additional suspects.

While the task force was conducting its provincial review, Vancouver police assisted by Evenhanded personnel threw their people into the monumental task of reviewing their sex files. Sex assaults are not categorized as having been perpetrated on a sex trade worker so each case needed to be reviewed manually. I believe there were in excess of 5,000 files. Again, this was feeding the Forensic Lab and putting suspect DNA into the pool.

Our belief that there would be suspect DNA undeveloped on exhibits throughout the province proved completely true. Through our review we sent in scores of exhibit for testing; by the time we were finished we had surfaced 13 murder suspect DNA profiles for homicides involving sex trade workers.

We also located innumerable sex assault exhibits, which the lab developed — creating DNA profiles for over 130 new suspects, 8 of which were serial offenders (they had attacked women in more than one jurisdiction or time).

By the end of summer 2001, much of our provincial review work was complete. Sgt. McKnight and Acting Sergeant Little had been working on the suspect reviews and had a pool of 30 priority one suspects (including Pickton), but still a huge number of people to assess. The rest of the investigative team of course just kept adding names. Some of these suspects looked so good Jim talked to me about targeting them. My mantra was that we needed to complete the review. I knew that once we hit the street working suspects it would consume our world and we would never come back to complete the job. Pickton by the way was not one of the people Jim felt we should target right then.

August 2001 was a watershed month for the task force, when it was confirmed that there could be 22 additional missing women beyond the 27 we were first told about. We realized we needed to get involved in the missing investigations of Vancouver and the RCMP detachments. It was critical we know quickly if women were still being killed.

On Aug. 30 I briefed upper management from Vancouver Police and the RCMP on the potential that women were currently going missing from the Downtown Eastside. I requested additional resources to urgently do the research to confirm if these women could be found. We were now working on the belief that the killer was in all probability active again. Our request for additional officers was given the highest priority.

Throughout September and October Evenhanded continued to grow. The priorities remained the same, searching for and identifying any missing, then obtaining their DNA. We were treating the historical missing women as homicide cases, trying to find any suspects or leads from their lives, and obviously from their lifestyles.

I have explained meeting with the Green River Serial Killer Task Force and Spokane Task Force in the short explanation presented to The Vancouver Sun newspaper. I will repeat that explanation here. Meeting with these task forces and gaining their insight was a key turning point in my mind on how we were going to stop our serial killer.

No one on the Task Force inclusive of myself had ever been part of a serial killer investigation. In early November we were able to meet with Seattle's Green River Task Force and Spokane's Robert Yates investigators.

They offered us some excellent police wisdom and experience.

The first would not drive my thinking until we were on Pickton's farm. The Spokane Investigation, when they arrested suspect Robert Yates, obtained a warrant for his house and yard. They spent 2 months searching both. When they were finished they turned it back to Yates's family. When Yates chose to cooperate rather than face the death penalty (not an option for the Pickton Investigation), he took them back to his house and showed them where he had buried a victim deep beside the foundation and covered her with a flower bed. It was a horrible moment for them. When the Pickton search was underway, we vowed we would never have Willie Pickton taking us on his farm to show us something we had missed.

The second piece of advice from the U.S. task forces was that with an active serial killer, the police will always be behind him. The investigation will spend it's time processing crime scenes, looking into the histories of the victims, following up on hundreds of tips — and while they are doing this the killer will be out planning his next attack. The investigation needed to get out ahead of the killer and be in his hunting ground waiting. The U.S. investigators had placed a team of 2 officers on their stroll.

I absolutely got their point. We were spending our resources trying to decide who would be the best suspect with a list that would always be brutally long. None of our suspects were surfacing in the Downtown Eastside so at that point there was nothing to cause us to key on them. We were investigating the backgrounds of the victims which needed to be done but we needed to do more.

We added three new priorities to our existing list:

1. We needed to involve ourselves in any new missing reports of sex trade workers as soon as they were reported. We would treat them as potential homicides to ensure we got any leads and every piece of information.
2. We needed to create a proactive team of 12 officers working the Downtown Eastside. They needed to connect with the sex trade workers and the support agencies. They also needed to track the "Johns" frequenting the strolls. The Washington officers felt there was a good chance our killer would be viewed as a "good trick," not someone whom the women were afraid of. Finally we needed to know which women were working so if one went missing we would have an opportunity to be aware of it immediately.
3. We also needed to insert our officers in any investigation or situation which looked like it might touch on our area of interest.

Vancouver Police and RCMP management agreed with the creation of the 12 person Proactive Team and staffing units went to work to obtain the correct resources. We needed very good officers who would be able to relate with the women and support groups in the Downtown Eastside.

(We would end up encountering Taylor when she showed up at Pickton's farm and we made the connection between her and the suspect.)

On Dec 17, 2001 the forensic laboratory called Margaret Kingsbury. Two of the files we had reviewed for suspects and forwarded exhibits to the lab had just been processed for DNA. They were both murdered women from the Downtown Eastside and their bodies had been found dumped in alleys in 1988. Suspect male DNA had been found in both of them and it was the same male. He was not the valley killer. We now had two serial offenders. We would call this case the alley investigation.

Early 2002

By the 7th of January 2002 there had been five more historic missing identified. Our list of missing women now stood at 50.

The teams working with the victims' families and the BC Cancer Agency had done an amazing job collecting samples to give us DNA profiles for the missing women. When Pickton was arrested we would have 47 developed DNA profiles for our missing women. It was the access to these profiles which allowed for the identifications and his arrest.

The suspect prioritization was still underway, and by the end of January the priority one list stood at 39 names with hundreds of persons remaining to be reviewed.

Throughout the life of the task force there had been no new information on Pickton, no street checks, cruising the strolls, or new tips. But he was very much someone we knew about, and we needed something to separate him from the crowd.

Evenhanded fully believed we were going to catch the killer. We had prearranged with our top forensic identification personnel what our protocols would be. The forensic lab had continually been adjusting the scope of work they would do once we made an arrest. We anticipated a house or a vehicle as our crime scene and had researched and selected an exhibit computer system which we felt would be robust enough to handle what we felt would be extensive exhibits.

There were 32 team members and everyone was focused and committed. I felt we were ready but I would be in for a rude awakening.

On Feb 4, 2002 Const. Nathan Wells, a young member with the Coquitlam Burglary Section, had been dealing with a confidential source who was supplying him with information on Willie Pickton

having weapons on his farm at 953 Dominion Avenue, Port Coquitlam. Nathan was obtaining a search warrant.

A senior officer from the Burglary Section contacted Sgt. Wayne Clary of the task force to advise him of the search, as Pickton was a person of interest to the task force.

Wayne assigned Det. Phil Little and Const. John Cater to attend and observe the search to see if there was anything of interest to the task force occurring.

The search was conducted on the 5 Feb, 2002. Det. Little and Const. Cater were completely knowledgeable on the missing and recognized the names of Serena Abbotsway and Heather Bottomley as two of our missing. An inhaler and identification had been located in Pickton's trailer bearing their names. John Cater contacted Wayne Clary who asked Coquitlam to halt their search and standby while Evenhanded obtained a murder search warrant.

On the strength of those two pieces of evidence we ordered a fence be put around Pickton's entire farm. We committed ourselves to what I believed at the time would be several months of searching. (It turned out to be 17 months.)

News of Serena Abbotsway's inhaler and Heather Bottomley's identification was leaked to the press. Pickton immediately started explaining to everyone that he was in the vehicle demolition business and had obtained a car from Vancouver Police impound yard (where he had a contract) that he had brought these items into his trailer from the car.

We waited to hear from the search teams whether we had overreacted. Within days the results started coming in. Within two weeks we had connected Pickton to 12 of our missing women anreceived charge approval for 2 counts of first degree murder.

From then on it was a matter of thoroughness — we owed it to the families of every missing person to find if Pickton was the person who took their lives. In the end we were able to identify 33 women to the farm forensically. There is also Jane Doe whom we have never been able to identify, and jewelry and other articles with blood in the slaughterhouse. From that blood DNA has come back to women whom we have never been able to identify, whom we believe he has killed as well.

We ended up having to search a second Pickton farm on Burns road in Port Coquitlam because someone had planted evidence there in an effort to obstruct our investigation. We were never able to develop sufficient evidence to prove who it was.

We also did an extensive search along the Lougheed Highway near Mission where Jane Doe's bisected skull was found. We needed to be sure Pickton was not using that area to discard the body parts he didn't want to take to the rendering plant for fear they would be identified as human.

I would hope that the public doesn't believe that the moment we obtained enough evidence to charge Robert Pickton we turned a blind eye to others who might be involved. We exhaustively collected the names of everyone we could who had ever been to 953 Dominion. We obtained hundreds of DNA samples. Particularly we focused in on people who had been there over a long time and who had spent time near where we found the evidence. That investigation was the most exhaustive in Canadian history. What it did not produce was evidence to charge anyone else.

We also completed our investigations into the other high potential suspects to ensure they had neither been to the farm, nor was there evidence of their murdering any of the missing women.

The public should not forget that the approach Evenhanded took to this investigation was put through an extensive trial. Pickton's defence team, arguably one of the strongest ever assembled to defend one person, put all of our actions under intense scrutiny. They worked extensively to try to shift the jury's focus away from Pickton.

Because of the thoroughness with which we had collected our evidence, and our objectivity in pursuing any and all viable suspects (inclusive of Pickton's brother, Dinah Taylor, everyone close to Pickton, and all of our priority suspects) they were forced to produce a very narrow list of alternatives.

Pickton's counsel did an amazing job of weaving a picture about these people which ignored incredible amounts of evidence to the contrary. It is still left in the minds of some Canadians that Pickton was mentally handicapped and must be the "front guy" for a larger conspiracy.

(Pickton's defence team conducted themselves throughout our investigation and the trial with the highest degree of professionalism. I have described them as magicians. We (Crown and Evenhanded) went into the trial with 26 counts of first degree murder and an unassailable array of evidence. We walked out with six second-degree murder convictions. At a personal level I will never forget the gut wrenching impact of Pickton being found not guilty of first degree murder and I will never get over my belief that our court system had failed the missing women and their families)

What the public should also realize is that Project Evenhanded has not quit, they are still following up leads, working their case.

Summary:

In trying write this explanation I have edited it continually, realizing that I had been unclear or left out important pieces. I also found personal observations creeping in. I am trained to keep those out of reports and was going to remove them, but I am not going to. The Vancouver Sun has been extremely gracious in allowing me space both in their paper, and by attaching this document to their website. Excepting one other time after Pickton's conviction I have kept my own counsel, after this article I very much intend to go back to that practice. But I have decided that if I am going to speak out I might as well say what was on my mind. These are my observations and represent no one else's.

I have discussed the earlier investigations in this explanation because there has been such a dark picture being painted about their efforts I could see no fairness in it. It may seem utterly simplistic to use that term, but it is something I believe in.

Earlier I mentioned what I learned about the Downtown Eastside — the conditions of the sex trade workers, the missing women, their being prey to the predators which that area draws — angered and offended me. Part of that was my own knowledge that I had been completely oblivious to their condition while I led an entirely comfortable life. I could see no element of fairness in what had happened. That's why I chose the name Evenhanded, to me it was a commitment to fairness. It was a way to pay back a debt which we owed these women and their families for ignoring them.

I believe the men and women of Evenhanded kept that commitment. I do not believe any honest examination of their efforts could come to any other conclusion.

The paths we chose will be examined in detail. It is critical they are. Pickton is not the last monster our country will see.

Lessons have been learned.

My lack of experience with serial killer investigations slowed my response. My experience running Evenhanded, and later being involved until this year (2010) in major investigations throughout BC, has taught me quite a bit. As a person it is difficult not to be defensive but I think it's important for me to try to apply that experience as objectively as I can to our investigation.

Looking back now I know that suggestions we should have directly targeted Pickton in March 2001 flowed from people not fully understanding how we needed to proceed with what we knew at that time. (If that is still unclear I will be able to fully articulate it at the provincial inquiry).

Not choosing to select Pickton later when we were coming to believe that a serial killer was still active (October 2001- February 2002) was the correct investigational decision. As I have said, by then there were over 30 priority one suspects and no new information on Pickton being active in any way. I believe the proactive team, our investigation of the missing as murder victims, and our involvement in any breaking cases or information were the correct response.

Where I was wrong — where with more experience I could have done better — is in the area of the unfolding understanding of how many missing there were, and the move to the Proactive team.

Leaving the investigation of missing sex trade workers in the hands of Vancouver's Missing Person unit initially was not only correct but the only action we could take. But as I came to doubt whether the missing had stopped (this evolved over months but by the end of August I knew things were potentially drastically wrong with our earlier beliefs) I should have inserted the task force directly into those investigations sooner. I asked for and was given additional resources and used them to search for missing women but it was only in mid to late November that Evenhanded became a primary investigative force in new missing cases.

The proactive team was a critical piece to help focus not only Evenhanded's efforts but those of the other Vancouver Police units who's duties touch the Downtown Eastside. The fact that half of that unit and their leader were experienced Vancouver police officers gave them great personal connections into not only the specialized units, but with the patrol officers who are the heart of any police's operations. A lack of experience again made that decision too slow. It should have happened earlier.

Moving Forward:

The police have learned from Evenhanded. The lessons we learned are taught nationally in a Major Case Management course. They are not being forgotten.

Project Kare, the Alberta serial killer investigation, was absolutely textbook in their operations. When they were forming their task force, they visited Evenhanded to assess our operations. Approximately a year into their investigation they called in experienced serial killer investigators from across North America and presented their case and operations, seeking input on ways to do things better. Brilliant.

There are still however incredible obstacles to overcome. The public have absolutely no idea of how massive the information collection/disclosure machine for court is. It has the potential to completely derail major investigations. Just after we arrested Pickton, the Task Force exploded in size. We

knew we needed to separate the court preparation and disclosure from investigative duties or we would fail.

We tried to be as aggressive as I could imagine and hired 23 new full time people to do nothing but get our case out the door to Crown and defence. I thought that while it was extremely expensive the cost was justified and the job of catching up would be done in six months or so and we could downsize. That team was still working full out 5 years later right up to and including the trial. Quite unbelievable.

Major investigations being rolled out today are being hamstrung by some of these problems and every major investigation has to leave behind valuable resources to work on disclosure often for years. There is a very real cost to each new investigation when we do this. It is like an army which continually leaves regiments behind after each battle, eventually they will start losing, and losing badly.

Final thoughts:

We don't call for public inquiries to look into what went right. The timeline of the inquiry ends when Evenhanded went on Pickton's farm. The inquiry will never look into all of the background efforts that allowed us to be successful but it is an absolute story of adversity overcome by dedication and cooperation.

The Provincial Crown were phenomenal in their efforts and commitment, the Coroner Service and Public Service Canada in getting us what we needed, nationally Police Forces sent forensic identification resources to help get the job done. The Provincial government, strapped financially, unstintingly gave us what we needed. Police leaders within Vancouver and the RCMP fought the battles they needed to fight to keep us moving. Across that entire array of organizations and institutions there has been no hint of scandal, excess or coverup. We may not like the money it cost, but it was spent wisely and many long term benefits have flowed to the Canadian people.

It is my fervent hope that my explanation brings some clarity on why we did what we did for the victims' families. They have known the officers from Evenhanded since late 2001, from our first family meeting. They have seen us during the investigation before Pickton was arrested, and through the search of his farm. They have seen us in the court during the trial. They will have made their own judgments on what type of people we are, but I would not want them to be misled about what type of job we did.

As I have said before I welcome the inquiry, and I hope it brings the families the answers they seek.