

# In 1985, a gruesome double murder rocked Virginia. Was the wrong man convicted?

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By [Laura Vozzella](#) March 9

**Early one morning in October**, Chuck Reid stood inside a little office at Buckingham Correctional Center in Dillwyn, Va., waiting for the door to open. A retired county jailer and sheriff's deputy, Reid was not in the habit of visiting men he had once investigated for murder. But in this case, he had been summoned. And he obliged because 30 years after Jens Soering went off to prison, their lives were entwined once again in a way neither could have anticipated.

Soering's lawyer Steven Rosenfield stood with the former deputy. He'd assured Reid that Soering wanted only to thank him. Soering was serving two life sentences for the fatal stabbing of his girlfriend's parents in 1985.

Reid thought back to the first time he had laid eyes on Soering. Reid had called him in for an interview at the Bedford County Sheriff's Office. He wanted to know more about what Soering and the victims' daughter, Elizabeth Haysom, were doing the weekend of the murder.

One look at the baby-faced University of Virginia honors student, Reid recalled later, told him the brutal stabbings were the work of someone else. "This little 17-year-old kid walked in," he said. "I doubted seriously he'd ever been in a fight in his life, much less taken down two people and nearly beheaded them."

Soering, a German citizen and diplomat's son, said he had an alibi. He and Haysom had gone on a weekend jaunt to Washington. They had movie ticket stubs and hotel receipts to prove it. Then, a week later, Soering gave Reid reason to reconsider: The couple fled to Europe.

"Once they skipped out on us, I said, 'Well, apparently they're guilty. They're guilty of something,'" Reid said.

After that, the two men's paths diverged. Reid left the force to try to earn more money, then returned, but without a role in the case. From a British jail cell, Soering fought extradition to Virginia for several years. In the end, he was convicted of the murders and Haysom pleaded guilty to being an accessory before the fact. She is serving a 90-year sentence at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women near Charlottesville.

Over the years, Reid occasionally agreed to be interviewed about the case, which continues to fascinate the public. It was his participation in a recent documentary that led him to take his long-standing doubts about the outcome more seriously. Then evidence emerged last summer that convinced him of Soering's innocence.

His conversion put him in the company of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, a former Virginia deputy attorney general, a Catholic deacon in Richmond, the actor Martin Sheen and a German schoolteacher — all of whom have worked toward obtaining a pardon for Soering so he can return to Germany.

Even though Reid had come around to believing in Soering's innocence, he was not quite sure what to expect from their encounter at Buckingham. After a few minutes, the door to the office swung open and Soering stepped inside. Reid looked into the face of the now graying 51-year-old, comparing it to the adolescent version in his memory.

Soering, smiling, reached out to shake Reid's hand.

"It's been a long time," he said. "It's good to see you."

**Reid was fueling up his blue Plymouth Fury** patrol car late in the afternoon of April 3, 1985, when a call crackling over his radio sent him flying over 10 miles of rural road. He was one of the first to arrive at the stately home in the Boonsboro section of Lynchburg. Reid had already worked two or three homicides, but nothing prepared him for what was inside: two bodies sprawled on the floor in pools of blood, throats cut nearly to the backbone.

"I walked in and I said, 'Gosh, what kind of gang did this?'" he said. "You're talking about two people who was pretty much mutilated."

His "gang" theory stemmed not just from the damage to the bodies but to the relative order of their surroundings. "There's no furniture turned over," he said. "To me, it's enough people to take control to where there was really no big fight."

There were no signs of forced entry or robbery. The victims were Derek Haysom, 72, a former steel executive in Nova Scotia who'd lived and worked all over the world, and Nancy Haysom, 53, a socialite, artist and distant relative of Lady Astor, who had grown up in Lynchburg. Could it have been an international hit, tied to Derek Haysom's rocky relations with labor in apartheid-era South Africa? A cult slaying? The latter theory sprang from the V-shaped mark carved into Derek Haysom's chin, the fact that the victims and dining chairs all faced north, and what looked like markings drawn in the swirling, mopped-up remains of blood.

For the first two months after the killings, Reid and a rookie named Ricky Gardner were joined by a small army of investigators from surrounding departments and the FBI. And in the coming months, they would explore those possibilities and more, even calling in two psychics before turning their attention to the couple's daughter, Elizabeth. At one point, Reid was dispatched to a Pic-Way Shoe Mart and Foot Locker with the measurement of a bloody shoe print from the scene: 9½ inches to 10 inches. Managers at the stores said it appeared to have been made by a tennis shoe in a woman's size — ranging from 6½ to 8 — or that of a small boy. Soering wore a considerably larger men's size 8½ to 9.

Investigators considered a female perpetrator. Elizabeth Haysom told them about a former fiancée of one of her half brothers, Julian, who blamed the parents for their breakup and had told a friend that “evil spirits” were after her. Authorities ultimately concluded the ex-fiancée was mentally ill but not the culprit.

Then there was a criminal profile conducted by FBI Special Agent Edward F. Sulzbach Jr., which concluded that the killer was female and knew the victims. Sulzbach believed the very “proper” Nancy Haysom would not have entertained a male stranger in her bathrobe.

When they questioned Elizabeth Haysom, she told the same story that Soering would later give them, about traveling to Washington in a rented Chevrolet Chevette. Reid pulled the rental car agreement and saw they had put about 700 miles on it. The trip from Charlottesville to the District and back was under 250 miles. The extra mileage could be explained by an additional trip — from the District to the Haysoms’ home and back. When pressed, Haysom said they’d gotten lost on the way.

A skeptical Reid called Soering in for an interview, which he conducted with Gardner, then 28 and newly promoted from road patrol. Reid played good cop, assuring Soering he was “99 percent” sure that the teen had not been involved. Gardner took the bad-cop role, asking for a blood sample, fingerprints and a footprint. Haysom had provided hers, but Soering balked, saying his family might be deported if he were tied to a murder case. Soon afterward, he and Haysom fled.

**Reid grew up in Bedford**, the son of a long-haul truck driver who died in a wreck in 1974, when Reid was 22. At the time, Reid had been trying to make a living as a drummer in a rock band called LL&P, short for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. They played a lot of Chicago covers. On keyboards was a classmate named Jim Updike, who became the commonwealth’s attorney who prosecuted Soering.

Reid was considering getting a “real” job when his dad died. The accident shaped his choices. It was not clear why the truck and car had collided at the end of a long, steep hill on Route 60 in West Virginia, killing three adults and two children in the car. Hoping to piece together just what had happened, he took a job with his father’s old trucking outfit so he could retrace the fatal run from Virginia to Cincinnati. Whenever he was near the crash scene, Reid would talk to state police about it. “Just a young man being inquisitive,” he said. “I never could find out anything.”

A few years later, he joined the Bedford County Sheriff’s Office at a salary of \$10,300 a year. He liked the work, but the money did not go far, even in rural Virginia. He had a young son, Jason, and a wife, Debbie, who worked in the cosmetics department at Green’s Drug Store.

In early April 1986, a year after the Haysom murders and six months after Soering and Haysom had fled, Reid left to take a part-time job on the loading docks for a local freight company. He hoped to move into a full-time slot making \$30,000 a year, with the generous health benefits his dad had enjoyed with the Teamsters. A few weeks after Reid left, Soering and Haysom were arrested in London. Ricky Gardner, who took over as the lead investigator, flew overseas to interrogate them.

Jail logs indicate Soering was held “incommunicado” for days. After that, he told Gardner he had gone alone to the Haysoms’ house and gotten into an argument, then a physical fight. He said he wound up killing the couple with a knife he had in his

pocket. Soering, however, got several details wrong, including the location and positions of the bodies. He said Nancy Haysom was wearing jeans and not the paisley bathrobe she was found in. He later recanted, saying he confessed only to save Elizabeth Haysom from Virginia's death penalty and because he thought his father's diplomatic status gave him immunity.

Haysom initially confessed, too, telling police: "I did it myself ... I got off on it." She then said she was being "facetious."

Soering and Haysom agreed on this much: During a weekend trip to Washington, one left and killed her parents while the other stayed behind to establish an alibi, buying tickets to several movies and ordering room service for two.

Haysom said Soering committed the crimes. She described Soering, wrapped in a bloody sheet, pulling up to her outside a Georgetown movie theater in the Chevette. She said he told her he had done away with her parents.

In Soering's account, Haysom left, telling him she needed to deliver some drugs to her dealer, a fellow U-Va. honors student, to settle a debt. He said when she returned, she admitted to killing her parents while under the influence of drugs.

By the time Soering's trial began in 1990, Reid was back in uniform. The full-time job on the loading dock had never materialized. His erratic hours kept him from seeing Jason play baseball and football. And he missed police work. But the only slot open was road deputy, leaving him with no role in the case except as a potential witness. The prosecution had summoned Reid to possibly testify because he had treated the Chevette with luminol, a chemical that detects blood. He had sprayed it everywhere, from the steering wheel to the tiny crevices on the gas and brake pedals, and swabbed all those areas for lab testing. Not a speck of blood showed up.

Reid thought that was odd. What about the bloody footprints that led from the house to the spot where prosecutors said the lone getaway car — the Chevette — had been parked? Or Haysom's account of Soering behind the wheel in a bloody sheet? Haysom's explanation was strange: She testified that Soering had her clean the blood off with Coca-Cola.

To Reid, the lack of blood suggested that another car — and, therefore, at least one other person — had to have been involved. But prosecutors never put Reid on the stand, so jurors never heard that. Jurors did hear other evidence that suggested multiple perpetrators, including an unidentified fingerprint on a shot glass at the scene. They also heard the testimony of a neighbor who had been out on a walk on the weekend of the killings and had seen several cars in the driveway, not the lone Chevette.

Reid found all those things puzzling. His gut told him Haysom had been at the scene. And he was not alone in that belief. One of her half brothers, Howard Haysom, testified that he believed she was there. Elizabeth Haysom maintains Soering killed her parents and in 2011 reiterated that in a letter to the Associated Press. To say otherwise would ruin her chances for parole, something that Gardner says she has earned. "If anybody is to be paroled, it's Elizabeth," he told WVTF public radio in 2013. "She testified against him. Doesn't whine and cry, and this and that. 'Oh, woe with me, and we didn't do it,' and all this kind of stuff. He shouldn't get any kind of a break and her not."

**Soering's defenders have always contended** there was more evidence to put Haysom at the scene than Soering. Her blood type, the far rarer type B, was found on a wash rag in the kitchen not far from her mother's body. Her fingerprints were on a vodka bottle near her father's body. Butts from Merit cigarettes — her brand, the defense said — were just outside the front door.

Of course, some of those clues could have been left on a previous visit. She had been at the house a week before the killings to steal some of her mother's jewelry. That visit could not, however, account for the bloody shoe print.

Only the jury did not hear much about the woman's-size print. Prosecutors focused instead on a bloody sock print they said matched the size of Soering's foot. His defenders dismiss the sock-print evidence as "junk science."

Reid found it hard to believe that Soering could commit the murders without leaving a single fingerprint at the house. Prosecutors contended Soering had carefully wiped everything he touched. Reid doubted Soering would have had the presence of mind to do that after stabbing two people to death. He recalled a life-or-death struggle of his own, in 1981, with a prisoner who managed to grab hold of his gun. Reid prevailed, but afterward was too shaken and exhausted to think straight. "From experience, believe me, your mind is like scrambled eggs," he said.

The brutality of the murders also nagged at Reid. Whoever killed the Haysoms kept hacking at their bodies long after they expired, Reid said. "Somebody hated both of those people enough to do that," he said. "Jens Soering no way had that kind of hate for these people."

Haysom would have had that rage if she had been sexually abused, Reid believes now. While searching the house, investigators found naked photos of Haysom that her mother had taken of her. Shot from the side, they showed her reading a Shakespeare book in the nude. "We thought they were a little strange," he said. "It was told to us, Mrs. Haysom was involved in art. She went to an art class."

Soering's trial lawyer, who was later disbarred and acknowledged suffering from a mental impairment during the trial, chose not to raise the issue of sexual abuse as a motive for Haysom.

Haysom, diagnosed with borderline personality disorder by doctors in London, and described by a half brother in court as a habitual liar, has given contradictory accounts over the years about her drug use and abuse by her mother. She declined an interview request from The Washington Post. Her brothers didn't respond to interview requests. At her sentencing, she said there was no abuse. Last year, however, she told the Richmond Times-Dispatch the abuse allegations were true and the reason Soering had killed her parents. "He was there because he was angry, and because of me," Haysom said. She said she felt compelled to counter what she called a "juggernaut of propaganda." "Things are getting further away from the truth," she said. "I feel like he is playing the system. That's bad for people who really are innocent."

**Suggesting that Soering was wrongly convicted** is not the easiest thing to do in central Virginia, where the case still looms large. When Bedford County Commonwealth's Attorney Wes Nance was sworn in last summer, he told the local paper

that his career choice had been inspired by the case, which drew gavel-to-gavel trial coverage on cable TV when he was in high school.

Ricky Gardner has presented the case as a model of good police work to Liberty University forensics students, among others. He thinks it's as solid as ever.

"In recent years, some people have based their feelings of Soering's innocence on what-ifs and vague hypothesis and not on the facts/evidence presented at his trial," Gardner, now a major with the Bedford Sheriff's Office, said in a brief email. He said he could not comment beyond that while the pardon request is pending.

Gardner has defended the Soering conviction over the years in a string of true-crime TV shows about the case. (One was called "Southern Fried Homicide.") Reid has appeared in many of the same shows, often recalling his initial doubts about Soering's guilt based on his first impression of the nerdy-looking student. But Reid never considered himself at odds with his former partner until last year, when a documentary film crew from Germany dug more deeply into the case and homed in on the FBI profile conducted by Sulzbach.

In the documentary, called "The Promise," Gardner says the profile was never conducted. Reid insists that it was. Gardner happens to call Reid to discuss the matter while the film crew is at Reid's home. Over speakerphone, Gardner is heard saying that they would never have withheld such a profile. "Chuck," he says, "if we had've done one of those, that would have been exculpatory evidence."

The documentary makers tracked down the profiler, Sulzbach, who died in April 2016. In the film, he confirmed that he had conducted a profile and that it had concluded the killer was a woman.

Copies of the profile have not been found. But Reid, digging through old case files in a plastic storage bin in his basement, found a reference to Sulzbach's profile in an affidavit given just days after the murder.

"The lord was on my side on this one," Reid said of his find. "Ricky's been going around telling people I'm out of my mind."

Regardless of whether the profile would have made a difference for Soering in court, the episode shook Reid's faith in Gardner's credibility. Reid said he never had any beef with Gardner as they worked side by side on the case, and has had little contact with him since. "Ricky worked as hard as I did. We all worked day and night on this thing," Reid said. "It's just this mind-set. ..."

"Over the past 30 years, Ricky has pushed this so much. ... I think it's more about people's reputations than it is fair and equal justice." In an email response to The Post's questions, Gardner did not comment on Reid's criticism.

Soering and one of his pro bono lawyers, Steven Rosenfield, figured the documentary findings — including the withheld FBI profile — could form the basis of a new appeal to Gov. Terry McAuliffe (D), who had declined Soering's request to return to Germany in 2015. The last time they had come close was in 2010, when Gov. Tim Kaine (D) had granted the request. His

successor, Robert F. McDonnell (R), rescinded it. While digging through old case files last summer, Soering's defense stumbled across a new line of argument.

DNA testing was not widely in use at the time of the trial. But in 2009, the Virginia Department of Forensic Science conducted DNA tests on evidence from the case as part of a broad post-conviction testing program. Out of 42 samples tested, 31 were too small or degraded to yield results, including the lone sample of type B blood — Elizabeth Haysom's type — found on a wash rag in the kitchen, close to Nancy Haysom's body. The 11 successfully tested samples excluded Soering and Haysom. But no one made too much of that in 2009 because the report, which identified the samples by where they were found in the house, not by blood type, indicated the blood could have come from one or both victims.

No one had compared the 1985 and 2009 reports side by side until July, when a schoolteacher in Germany, who is a supporter of Soering's, dug up the 1985 serology report from some case files she had been keeping for him in her attic.

The 1985 report showed five samples of type O blood that were collected at the murder scene. The 2009 report showed that two of those five were successfully tested for DNA. Rosenfield said that Shelley S. Edler, who conducted the 2009 DNA test for the state lab, confirmed in a telephone call with him that, "as a matter of science," Soering was eliminated as a possible source of the two samples. Edler is prohibited as a matter of policy from publicly discussing her work, a department spokeswoman said.

Four DNA experts reviewed those findings for The Post and concurred with Rosenfield's contention that the DNA analysis eliminates Soering as the source of the two type O blood samples.

"In the DNA report, it does eliminate him," said Elaine Pagliaro, a forensic scientist at the Henry C. Lee Institute of Forensic Science in West Haven, Conn. "It looks like someone else with O-type blood. ... On the face of it, that's what it would indicate."

In the fall, Soering and Rosenfield made another discovery: The Department of Forensic Science reports indicate that a man with AB blood was present. Until now, all of the AB blood was presumed to have come from Nancy Haysom. But the DNA testing indicates that some of it came from a male. Rosenfield said it was proof another man had been at the scene.

The DNA experts who reviewed the defense's claims for The Post were not as confident. They said if a male's blood got mixed with Nancy Haysom's, it could falsely indicate that the AB blood was male. They said they would need more information before drawing a conclusion.

**The DNA testing on the Type O blood** does not, on its own, exonerate Soering. It indicates only that an unknown male with that blood type was present. But for Reid, that was enough to say publicly that there was "nothing that puts Jens Soering in that house as far as physical evidence." Soering, through his lawyer, asked Reid to visit him so he could thank him. At Buckingham, "he told me how sorry he was and crazy it was that he wasn't honest [in his first interview with Reid]," Reid said later.

Soering said Reid seemed “a little shy and diffident,” something he appreciated. “He was doing what a good detective should do, which is kind of hold back and observe, instead of charging into a situation and imposing your will and imposing your opinion on [it]. That’s exactly what did not happen in London in 1986. They were all sure,” he said.

But he found the visit painful. “[Reid] quit the sheriff’s department in early April 1986, and I was arrested at the end of April in 1986. It was literally a question of weeks, and my entire life would have been completely different, because if he had been the one who came to London, I would never have spent a day in an American prison.”

Reid doesn’t go quite that far. He says he, Gardner and the prosecutor, Updike, were under intense pressure to solve the case and that law enforcement did what it could with the information it had available all those years ago. But he thinks the case deserves a new look now.

“We did our best. And 30 years later that [DNA] comes out. ... That’s what the system’s all about,” Reid said. “It’s not about me. It’s not about Ricky Gardner. It’s not about public opinion. ... It’s about due process and fair and equal justice. ... We need to pursue it. That’s the bottom line.”

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