

Virginia Politics

For a convicted double murderer long on famous supporters, basic detective work could be key

By [Laura Vozzella](#)

April 21 at 6:50 PM

CHARLOTTESVILLE — The phone rings in novelist John Grisham’s office, and the best-selling novelist is eager to take the call — from a prisoner, convicted decades ago of a brutal double murder.

Jens Soering, a German diplomat’s son and former University of Virginia honors student who claims he was wrongly convicted of killing his girlfriend’s parents in 1985, has never lacked for high-profile supporters.

For years, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, actor Martin Sheen and Richmond’s Catholic bishop pushed fruitlessly for his release. Grisham is a relative newcomer to the club. So is Jason Flom, a Manhattan music industry executive and founding board member of the Innocence Project, who joined the author in his Charlottesville office for the call, which they recorded for a [podcast on wrongful convictions](#).

Given that star power and political sway have so far failed to free Soering, his best hope may lie with a third man on hand for the podcast — a local sheriff offering old-fashioned detective work.

Albemarle County Sheriff J.E. “Chip” Harding and a former deputy have teamed up to try to reinvestigate the case, following leads that they say officials in rural Bedford County never pursued — or dropped once Soering made what he says was a false confession to cover for his girlfriend, Elizabeth Haysom.

Harding and retired deputy Richard Hudson have interviewed dozens of people, including former roommates and friends of Soering and Haysom. The sheriff traveled as far as the West Coast — on his own dime — to talk to a man Haysom had an affair with not long before the murders. The investigators have devoted thousands of hours to the effort, all unpaid.

“Once you’re convicted, at least in Virginia, in order to be exonerated . . . you almost have to prove who did it,” said Harding, who has turned his conference room into a Soering “war room,” with plastic bins filled with records, and crime scene photos and DNA results on the walls.

Harding, 68, said his eyes were opened to wrongful conviction cases by reading Grisham’s 2006 nonfiction book, “[The Innocent Man](#),” about a case in Oklahoma. After that, he took an interest in Innocence Project cases, [helping in 2012](#) to free Michael Hash, a Culpeper man wrongly convicted of a 1996 murder. He has tried — and failed — to rally law enforcement leaders throughout the state to create a justice commission to prevent wrongful convictions.

In Soering’s case, Harding and Hudson have gone down some intriguing rabbit holes, one related to a pair of “drifters” convicted of stabbing and mutilating a homeless man in the area around the same time.

They have shared their findings with state parole board investigators responsible for examining Soering’s long-standing pardon request and making a recommendation to Gov. Ralph Northam (D), whose office did not respond to a request for comment.

They also have run into roadblocks, because even a sitting sheriff cannot reopen a case from another jurisdiction.

Officials in central Virginia’s Bedford County have said they are confident that Soering’s conviction was just. They have refused entreaties by Harding and Hudson to revisit the case, retest evidence or grant them access to original investigative files. Bedford Maj. Ricky Gardner, who helped investigate the case as a rookie, has steadfastly stood by the outcome.

Soering is serving two life sentences for the slayings of Derek and Nancy Haysom, who were found stabbed and nearly decapitated at their home in central Virginia 34 years ago. Soering and Haysom, a fellow U-Va. honors student, were not initially considered suspects but fled the country months later as investigators closed in.

The pair were eventually arrested in London and Soering confessed. He later recanted, saying he was only trying to protect Haysom from the electric chair under the mistaken belief that his father’s position gave him diplomatic immunity. He was convicted in a sensational 1990 trial that drew international media and gavel-to-gavel coverage on local cable TV.

Haysom pleaded guilty to being an accessory before the fact, contending that she helped plan the murders but did not physically take part. She is serving a 90-year sentence at the Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women near Charlottesville.

Soering, confined at Buckingham Correctional Center in Dillwyn, Va., has won attention and believers over the years for writing a string of well-received books on his case, his conversion to Catholicism and prison reform.

His supporters have raised questions that his trial lawyer — who was later disbarred and acknowledged suffering from a mental impairment during the trial — did not. About how Soering got details of the crime scene wrong in his confession. About how prosecutors relied on the “junk science” of a bloody sock print said to fit Soering, but made no mention of a bloody shoe print in Haysom’s size.

Support for Soering picked up steam in 2016, when new blood analysis indicated that a man other than Soering was the source of the type-O blood found at the scene. The blood was the only physical link to Soering aside from the disputed sock print.

Harding and Hudson first took a look at the case around that time at the request of Soering’s lawyer, Steve Rosenfield, himself a volunteer. But the sheriff and deputy made it clear that they would not shy away from evidence that might implicate Soering.

“I’m all about justice, but if I find something that hurts you, I’m going to hurt you,” Harding said he told Rosenfield.

Some of what they’ve dug up seems to rule out a few suspects in the minds of Soering supporters. That includes a man Haysom had an affair with while she was also dating Soering. Now a doctor, the man voluntarily gave Harding a DNA sample and fingerprints, and Harding found no match to any publicly available evidence found at the scene.

“The thing more interesting to me are the people who *won’t* talk to us,” Hudson said, referring to Gardner and a Haysom roommate.

They had better luck with another college roommate who has contradicted one bit of evidence used to convict Soering. At the trial, a Haysom family friend testified that he noticed on the day of the funerals that Soering had a bruised face and bandaged hand — defensive wounds, the prosecution alleged, from the night of the murders. He was the only one claiming to have seen those injuries.

Harding tried to track down the man but he was dead. But the roommate clearly remembered a dinner with Soering and Haysom soon after the murders — and said Soering had no injuries.

One of their leads concerns two men convicted of another brutal stabbing from that time. Bedford County Deputy Sheriff George Anderson stopped William Shifflett and Robert Albright within a week of the Haysom murders, which took place March 30, 1985, and were discovered April 3.

Anderson questioned them — putting them by turns in the back seat of his car so he could talk to them individually. The men told Anderson they had been to Lynchburg “to see a girl” and were headed to Roanoke. He released them.

On April 6 in Roanoke, police say Shifflett and Albright robbed a homeless man of his wallet and killed him, stabbing him 26 times and amputating his penis. They were later convicted of his murder.

A week or two after he had stopped the men, Anderson found a Buck 110 folding knife in the back seat of his patrol car. The medical examiner who performed the Haysom autopsies said the knife was consistent with the type of weapon used in their murders.

None of this information was disclosed to Soering’s defense during his 1990 trial, although Anderson said he reported it at the time to an officer working on the Haysom case and to Roanoke authorities.

Soering’s team learned of it years later and used it to argue that his conviction should be reversed. Bedford Circuit Court granted Soering a hearing in 1996. But the judge was not persuaded that the disclosure would have changed the outcome of his trial and the state Supreme Court agreed.

Today, Harding and Hudson think that’s an angle worth exploring. Perhaps Elizabeth Haysom, an admitted heroin user, could have known the men through drug connections, they theorize.

“For me, they’re just persons of interest,” Harding said. “They’re two guys you’d like to rule in or out.”

To that end, they wrote to the men in prison. One wrote back saying he did not want to talk. The other did not reply.

Harding and Hudson also went to Roanoke to look through public case files on Shifflett and Albright. They would like to see investigative notes that would not be part of the court record but could not get access. Harding also wrote to the state Department of Forensics, asking that it compare the men's DNA profiles to those found at the Haysom crime scene. The response was that only Bedford County could make such a request.

“These guys knifed a man not far from the Haysom residence,” Harding said in Grisham's sleek office. “These two folks — one of them at least — involved in heavy drugs, as we believe Elizabeth was. DNA should be in the databank. We simply asked, ‘Would you take those profiles and compare them to the databank?’ ”

Harding was lamenting that roadblock in a conversation he recorded with Grisham and Flom, host of the podcast “[Wrongful Conviction with Jason Flom](#).” Soering phoned in from prison to recount details of the case and offer thanks to his high profile supporters trying to draw attention to his case as well as those quietly trying to crack it.

“We're not going to stop, slow down or be quiet,” Grisham said. “We are just going to get more and more vocal, and push harder and harder until we get justice.”

Laura Vozzella

Laura Vozzella covers Virginia politics for The Washington Post. Before joining The Post, she was a political columnist and food writer at the Baltimore Sun, and she has also worked for the Associated Press, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram and the Hartford Courant. [Follow](#) 
