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Biela had trouble with women, law

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The 27-year-old suspect in the January rape and slaying of Brianna Denison -- and the sexual assaults of two other young women last year -- apparently lived his life wearing two faces, said family, friends and acquaintances.

Friends described James Michael Biela as a funny guy at a tavern or party, a young man who blended in at a Reno martial arts school where he trained beside police officers, even as those officers last year searched for a rape suspect who turned killer.

Biela also was described as a quick-tempered bully drummed out of the Marine Corps for drug use and under a restraining order from a former girlfriend who said he threatened her neighbor with a knife. Police said Biela had a volatile relationship with his current girlfriend, the mother of his 4-year-old son, who allowed the boy's DNA to be taken and tested against DNA left by Denison's killer and the man who sexually assaulted two other women last year in Reno.

Police arrested Biela as he arrived at a day care center Tuesday to pick up his son.

He remained in custody without bail on charges of murder related to Denison's death, and first-degree kidnapping and sexual assault charges related to a Dec. 16 attack on another college girl. Biela is being held in the jail's infirmary and on a suicide watch.

Biela's father, Joe Biela, said Wednesday he had not seen his son for years, but said he was upset after hearing the news of the arrest. He said he knows police have DNA evidence.

"He's still my son," said Joe Biela, a wire-thin former Marine and truck mechanic who lives on disability benefits. "He's my blood. I will always love him and back him up. But I can't help him. He did it to himself.

"I had no signs that he could do something like that, no signs at all."

Suspect's early life

James Michael Biela was born on June 29, 1981, in Chicago.

He was the fifth and last child born to Joe Biela and Kathy Flanigan Biela. Their first born, Joey, died in infancy.

Kristi Jackson of Spokane Valley, Wash., is the second child, followed by Jeffrey of Verdi, Kimberly Eastman of Salt Lake City, and James, called Jimmy.

In 1990, when James was 9, the family moved to Reno.

"I came to Reno to find a job," said Biela, a truck mechanic.

Washoe County School District officials could not determine immediately what schools James Biela attended.

His parents divorced and his mother remarried. Kathy Lovell now lives in Spokane Valley, Wash. She could not be reached for comment.

Joe Biela said it was "fun to be a father" and said he is proud of his children. But he said he has had mental problems and been in fights. Records show Joe Biela pleaded no contest in 1999 to a gross misdemeanor charge of "obliterating the serial number of a firearm."

He pleaded no contest to the charge and served a year in jail.

Return to Reno

James Biela lived with his mom in Spokane and graduated from West Valley High School there in spring 1999. He joined the Marine Corps and took basic training in San Diego in fall 1999, according to reporting in the Spokane Spokesman-Review.

He was stationed at Fort Lejeune, N.C. promoted to the rank of lance corporal and discharged in 2001, his father said.

"It was a dishonorable discharge or an (unfit for military service discharge)," Joe Biela said. "He got busted, kicked out for doing drugs."

James Biela returned to Reno in 2002 and quickly came to the attention of authorities.

He was arrested for threatening his former girlfriend's neighbor with a knife. The girlfriend filed for a protection order against him.

Biela pleaded guilty April 23, 2003, and was sentenced to DUI school and ordered to have no contact with the victim, Angi Carlomagno, for one year.

Since the charge was a misdemeanor, no DNA sample was taken.

A new father

In 2004, James had a son with his girlfriend, Carlene Janae Harmon. They lived in Sparks.

Cindy Stern, 59, lives across the street from the couple. She said they moved in about three years ago.

"He seemed like a nice, normal guy," Stern said. "Isn't that what the neighbors normally say?"

In September of last year the couple applied for a marriage license, but no record of a wedding could be found.

Biela worked as a pipe fitter and occasionally trained in martial arts classes.

Gary Grate, owner of Charles Graci Jui Jitsu in Reno, said Biela trained sporadically at the dojo and attained the rank of blue belt, one step above beginner.

Jui Jitsu is a self defense art based on grappling and emphasizes joint locks and choke holds to control attackers.

"He was just a guy in a big group of students," Grate said. "He was under the radar. Police officers trained next to him but nobody noticed anything about him that was peculiar."

Grate said Biela hasn't come to class for about a year. That was about the time police were investigating sexual assaults near the University of Nevada, Reno.

In October, Reno police investigated a sexual assault at UNR. On Nov. 13, 2007, a man attacked a UNR coed on College Drive. On Dec. 16, 2007, another female student was kidnapped and raped.

Brianna Denison, a sophomore at a Santa Barbara, Calif., college was abducted Jan. 20 as she slept in the living room of a friend's home at 1395 Mackay Court, a block from the UNR campus. Police said Denison's sleeping figure would have been visible through a glass door.

Blue ribbons, symbolizing Denison's favorite color, were displayed on cars, telephone poles and buildings throughout the Truckee Meadows. Police said they recovered DNA evidence at the scene that would link a suspect to the crime. The DNA samples also linked Denison's killer to two of the other three attacks.

In March, James Biela went to Spokane, Wash., to work as a pipe fitter.

He returned to Reno in September.

"I just had a beer with him, sat right next to him, the other night," said a Reno man who said he has known Biela for about four years. "He's the last person I'd think of as doing (murder). He's a really likeable guy. He's funny, great to be around."

Someone in the community left a tip with Secret Witness saying that James Biela may have been involved in the slaying of Brianna Denison, according to the affidavit for his arrest warrant.

After a Secret Witness tip, Reno police Detective Adam Wygnanski recently met with Biela, but he declined to give a DNA sample.

He also said that his girlfriend, Carleen Harmon, could provide an alibi for him during the time of Denison's disappearance.

Harmon was interviewed but said she couldn't account for his whereabouts on that date.

"She could not account for his whereabouts on the early morning hours of either Dec. 16, 2007 or Jan. 20, 2008," the affidavit said.

She also said she and Biela has "a tumultuous romantic relationship" and it was common for him to leave for days.

She said while visiting Biela in Washington, she found a "petite sized women's thong style underwear/panties inside his vehicle," the affidavit said.

Harmon provided a DNA reference sample from her 4-year-old son to be compared with DNA evidence found during the investigation.

The Washoe County Crime Lab matched the sample with Biela.

Joe Biela said his son rarely visits him.

"A couple of years ago he comes here with his girlfriend and baby and says everything is OK," Biela said. "But it wasn't."

"Why did he do this to this lady?" he asked.
