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BODY:

The widow of a black code enforcement inspector killed and dismembered in a racially motivated hate crime feared the murderer would never be fully punished and could one day kill again.

"I was just running out of gas, close to insanity," Frances Wright said of her years-long battle for justice.

Then, she met Steve Parker, a dogged federal prosecutor who started his career as a Memphis police officer.

"I saw an answer to my prayers unfolding before my eyes," she said. "Steve was just like a gladiator, 'You can sit down, calm down. We got this.'"

Parker retired in December after three decades with the U.S. Attorney's Office in Memphis, where he earned a national reputation winning difficult cases ranging from public corruption and white collar crimes to sex trafficking and hate crimes.

He led the prosecution of an organized ring of Mexican brothel owners who forced girls ages 13-17 into prostitution, earning the team a rare recognition at a ceremony in Washington, the Attorney General's Award for Distinguished Service, the U.S. Department of Justice's second-highest honor.

During his tenure, Parker secured convictions against more than 50 corrupt officials, ranging from Memphis police officers and deputies to a police chief and sheriff, a state lawmaker and a state judge.

Once a Memphis police patrolman, vice squad investigator and training academy instructor, he has dodged bullets while near officers who were killed by suspects.

"I think it's one reason I have no tolerance for crooked cops," he said. "There are people who gave their lives."

Parker was lead council, partnering with the Securities and Exchange Commission, to prosecute David I. Namer in a case the SEC ranked in the Top 10 nationally in 2002. The complex seven-week trial, contained in more than 600,000 pages of documents, involved \$34 million in securities fraud, money laundering and tax evasion -- largely victimizing senior citizens who

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thought they were shoring up retirement funds.

Parker helped investigate Whitewater and the suicide of associate White House counsel Vincent Foster.

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Washington officials also sent him to New Orleans from 2012-2014 to help shepherd through a consent decree forcing a widespread overhaul of the city's police force. The assignment required Parker to quell tensions between skeptical residents and officers and to best city officials in court in legal battles over funding the reforms.

"My job was to lower the temperature, to make peace and get the job done," Parker said. "It was stressful, but I thrive on certain levels of stress."

The work netted him the Department of Justice's highest award for litigation.

"Steve is someone who is smart and passionate and has an incredible ability to get along with almost everyone," said Roy L. Austin Jr., deputy assistant to the President for the Office of Urban Affairs, Justice and Opportunity at the Domestic Policy Council.

"He gained the trust of the civil rights community, the mayor of New Orleans, the police department and the court monitor. It just became so critical to have him there."

Parker recently has helped analyze police practices in Ferguson, but said he can't discuss any findings in a probe still pending. He said he was evaluating search and seizure protocols and use-of-force, verbal de-escalation techniques.

Prosecutors, judges, police, federal agents from several agencies and even some defense attorneys gathered Thursday to tout Parker's many successes during a send off at Central BBQ downtown.

The code enforcement inspector's widow, who remarried and now goes by Wright-Moore sat at Parker's table along with one of her sons and Parker's wife of 36 years, Jackie, a petite and feisty retired Fed-Ex courier.

"He's Superman," the widow said, fighting for the underdog in a criminal case plagued with problems, including the absence of the victim's body.

When Mickey Wright, a 46-year-old Shelby County code enforcement inspector, was murdered on duty in 2001, it took three years before police arrested the killer, Dale Mardis, a white Memphis car lot owner, on charges of premeditated murder.

The victim's family waited three more years before Mardis was set to go on trial and they were outraged when state prosecutors offered him a plea deal in 2007 to reduced charges of second-degree murder in exchange for a 15-year prison sentence.

"My level of distrust was way up there," said the widow. "I didn't trust any of these white guys.

"I thought, 'This is the South. They're not going to do anything. Mickey's just another black man and they don't care.'"

Wright-Moore said she then met with a "dream team" of FBI agents and federal prosecutors who decided to bring federal hate crime charges against Mardis.

She said she instantly sensed a resolve in Parker, who is white.

"I just knew I could finally sleep," she said. "He was just there with open arms. It was more than a case to him."

It would be the first murder case of the U.S. Attorney's Office's newly created Civil Rights Unit and it would be Parker's first, but not last, successful prosecution without a body.

Parker teamed with FBI Special Agent Tracey Harris Branch, to reinvestigate the Mardis case, also hindered by reluctant witnesses.

Branch said the case exemplifies Parker's tenacity and skill getting nearly anyone to talk.

On a sultry summer day, the duo sat for hours chatting with one of Mardis' friends outside the man's home in a rural area.

As mosquitoes swarmed, Branch said she grew frustrated and anxious to leave, doubtful the man would discuss the crime.

Parker wouldn't relent.

After hours discussing old cars and hunting, the man emerged as a key prosecution witness after admitting that Mardis confessed to murdering Wright.

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"Steve has that uncanny ability to connect to anybody, extracting information to build his case," the veteran federal agent said. "I've never seen anything like it."

Through their probe, federal officials also linked Mardis, a former gun dealer, to the unrelated 1998 murder of child psychologist Henry P. Ackerman. Mardis beat Ackerman with a hammer during an argument over a debt and burned the body in a 55-gallon drum in Mississippi, the same way he disposed of Wright's body three years later. Mardis confessed and is serving two life sentences in prison.

When sparring in court with the defense, Parker was "in their face, so courageous," the widow said. "There was never an ounce of fear."

Parker was born a fighter, said his father, George Parker, who described his son's seven hospitalizations before age 3 due to bronchial pneumonia.

"They said if he did live, he would be puny," and that he would likely only reach age 4 or 5, said the elder Parker, a retired insurance adjuster.

Steve Parker, who has run marathons, is now 58 and 6-foot-4.

"He overcame a lot of obstacles," his father said.

The younger Parker's wife said she's not sure what her husband will do next.

"He's a workaholic or he can't stand it," she said.

"If he believes in something, he will fight for it until the bitter end."

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GRAPHIC: Brandon Dill/Special to The Commercial Appeal, Asst. U.S. Atty. Steve Parker was born a fighter, says his father, George Parker., Jan. 8, 2015 -- Asst. U.S. Atty. Steve Parker talks with Senior District Court Judge Jon McCalla during a party for Parker at Central BBQ commemorating the veteran prosecutor's retirement. (Brandon Dill/Special to The Commercial Appeal)

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