

## Admitted serial killer up for parole

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Betty Portenlanger's heart breaks every three years.

Every three years for the past 44.

Every three years, Portenlanger is faced with horrific details of her sister's murder, as the woman's killer asks a review board to grant his parole.

Every three years, Portenlanger relives the nightmare: The call in January 1970 that 27-year-old Jean Bianchi was missing. The three-day search throughout McHenry County. The details of her sister's final moments.

"It's horrendous to think that the earth opened up and swallowed someone you loved," said Portenlanger, of Chicago. "The whole ordeal, it's just unimaginable."

Because of sentencing laws in place at the time, admitted serial killer Mark A. Smith, is eligible for parole every three years. Portenlanger will face the Illinois Prisoner Review Board next month to argue against his release.

It's Smith 13th bid for freedom, and Portenlanger's 13th request that the panel deny his request. At 69 years old, Portenlanger has outlived many of the people who once attended the triennial hearings with her.

Smith, 65, was convicted of Bianchi's murder, the death of a 17-year-old McHenry girl, Jean Ann Lingenfelter, and a woman in Cook County. Smith admitted to murdering at least 10 other women, including eight in 1969 while he was serving in the Army and stationed in Germany, and a woman in Arkansas.

"We're there to light a candle for the women who died, and who can't go to speak for themselves," Portenlanger said.

Bianchi – who is of no relation to the McHenry County State's Attorney – was a young mother of two when she disappeared Jan. 27, 1970 from an Elm Street laundromat. She left behind her laundry and an unfinished letter. Her body was found after three days in a partially frozen creek near a bridge in town.

"It's heartbreaking," said Portenlanger, who was separated in age from her sister by three years. "I like to think if my sister was still alive, we'd be dear friends. We had such fun together."

With the Bianchi murder unsolved, Smith killed Lingenfelter the following spring. The girl's parents reported their daughter missing May 27, 1970. Her naked body was found the next day in the water of a beach in Lakeland Park subdivision. Smith was arrested later that day and charged with her murder.

Between the Bianchi and Lingenfelter murders, Smith also killed Janice Bolyard in Des Plaines.

Smith was given an indeterminate sentence of 300 years for the murders, but under past sentencing laws, he's eligible for parole every three years. His scheduled release in June 2220.

The law changed in 1978, after which offenders were given specific amounts of time based on the seriousness of the crime.

Though granting his parole is unlikely, he's still allowed the request. A three-step process begins Tuesday at Pontiac Correctional Center. Portenlanger will be at a hearing in Chicago next month, and the final decision will come after a presentation in Springfield.

"It's so cruel that we have to do this every three years," she said.

Representatives from the McHenry County State's Attorney's Office also will argue for Smith's continued incarceration and one of the upcoming hearings. Criminal Division Chief Michael Combs said the office is "vehemently against" his release.