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FEATURED

'This is a shock to our community' sheriff says after 3 found dead in Keeling; manhunt ends with authorities corralling naked suspect

By Caleb Ayers cayers@registerbee.com

Aug 27, 2019



Matthew Thomas Bernard



KEELING — A chaotic nightmare unfolded Tuesday morning in a small Pittsylvania County community when authorities found three people dead and launched an hours-long manhunt for a 18-year-old that ultimately ended with an unclothed apprehension.

Around 8 a.m. Tuesday, a neighbor went to check on residents at 1949 Keeling Drive when she found the body of a woman in the driveway, Pittsylvania County Sheriff Mike Taylor said. When deputies arrived, they swept the home and found two additional bodies — another woman and a child. Taylor indicated the suspect was likely related to the victims, but he would not say how.

Matthew Thomas Bernard, 18 of Keeling, has been charged with three counts of first-degree murder, officials announced Tuesday afternoon.

“This is a shock to our community... it’s just a reminder of how fragile life is,” Taylor said.

Earlier in the day, alerts swept through social media and a reverse-911 system warned residents that authorities were searching for Bernard. That alert also stated he was armed with a rifle and "very dangerous." This prompted schools to go on what's called a code orange lockdown, meaning exterior and classroom doors remained locked and all students were forbidden from going outdoors.

Authorities set up roadblocks on both sides of Keeling Drive, where officers were investigating the triple homicide. Armed with assault rifles, officers stood guard and searched through the woods around the area.

Taylor estimated that as many as 100 officers had been on the case, including K-9 units, Virginia State Police and units from other localities.

Thick wooded areas dotted the landscape where most of the houses had long driveways. One of the longest driveways led to 1949 Keeling Drive, where yellow crime scene tape blocked off the front yard.

A mobile command unit in the front yard blocked much of the view from the road, while a tank and an armored vehicle sat in the driveway next door. Police and public safety personnel continued coming and going all morning. Engines hummed and police lights flashed all morning and into the afternoon.

Shortly after noon, Loyd Gauldin's wife called to warn him that a naked man was running through their yard.

A few seconds later, unarmed and naked, a man jogged between two houses on Keeling Drive, while a state police officer backed away and demanded him to stand down.

The suspect — identified as Bernard — didn't stop.

Even when the officer sprayed him in the face and chest with pepper spray, he just kept jogging along and came into the parking lot of Keeling Baptist Church.

After jogging in a circle while the officer sprayed him, the suspect headed toward the church, passing a group of media representatives gathered to cover the unfolding news. Gauldin, the caretaker and a member of the church, saw the suspect coming right at him and desperately attempted to get back into his truck. Before he could get safely inside, the naked man pushed him away from the truck's door and put his hands around his neck.

When the officer caught up, he whacked the suspect with his baton, causing him to leave Gauldin and continue his jog with mace dripping down his face and chest. He traveled through the grass along the side of the church and onto Keeling Drive.

Authorities who were investigating the triple homicide crime scene less than a mile up the road at 1949 Keeling Drive arrived and formed a blockade. Tactical teams and a K-9 successfully corralled the suspect, who initially attempted to just run past them.

The whole chase and apprehension lasted four minutes. More officers raced into the scene from both directions over the next several minutes as the man's screams periodically pierced the air.

"I would say that the immediate threat is gone," Taylor said in an afternoon news conference after the suspect was arrested.

Authorities could not provide a motive for the shooting.

"We don't know what happened to set off this chain of events," Taylor said.

When Gauldin saw the man coming toward him he thought "Lord, what's happening?"

When the unclothed man wrapped his hands around Gauldin, he transferred some of the mace, causing Gauldin's skin to burn terribly.

A Virginia State Police senior trooper — who only identified himself by his last name of Turner — was the officer who sprayed the suspect with pepper spray. Turner was the only officer in the vicinity when the man came out of the woods. He said that he didn't attempt to apprehend the him because was worried about the suspect getting his guns.

Taylor could not comment on whether or not they had located the suspect's gun.

Katina Davis, who lives across the street from Keeland Baptist Church and had been keeping an eye out all morning, watched the whole apprehension unfold through her cracked open front door. She wondered if he had been hiding in the woods behind her home the entire time.

"It hits this close to home," she said.

Joe Earp, who lives a few houses down from the the shooting scene has lived in the neighborhood for 30 years and said that many of the residents have been there for years.

"It's a quiet neighborhood through here," he said.

He reminisced on the 2016 incident where a man barricaded himself in his Blair Lane home and shot a deputy as the only other comparable incident in the area.

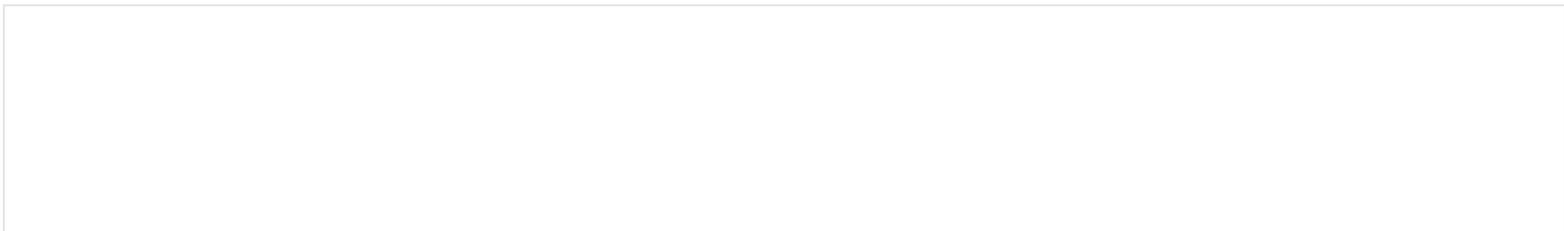
Avery Stevens, the pastor of Keeling Baptist Church, arrived at the church after the apprehension and was surprised about what happened.

"It can happen anywhere, even in a place like Keeling," he said.

Neighbors said Bernard was a 2019 graduate of Dan River High School.

The bodies are being taken to the Medical Examiner's Office in Roanoke for an autopsy.

Ayers reports for the Register & Bee. Reach him at (434) 791-7981.





Photos: Scenes from the triple homicide investigation in Keeling
Aug 27, 2019

