

# '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



A suspect identified as Matthew Bernard, 18, came jogging out of the woods and into the parking lot of Keeling Baptist Church. Despite being sprayed in the face and chest with pepper spray, he kept moving and briefly had his hands around the neck of church groundskeeper Loyd Gauldin.

Caleb Ayers/Register & Bee

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.

# Suspect in triple slaying on suicide watch; police ID family members killed

By Caleb Ayers cayers@registerbee.com Aug 28, 2019



Matthew Bernard



Pittsylvania County Sheriff Mike Taylor officially named Joan Bernard, 62; Emily Bernard Bivens, 25; and Cullen Bivens, 1, as the three victims of Tuesday's triple homicide in Keeling at a Wednesday afternoon news conference.

Caleb Ayers/Register & Bee

The mugshot of Matthew Bernard shows a man in a prison-orange jumpsuit, a confused expression on his face and a bandage around his head.

After his arrest near the crime scene Tuesday — fully nude and unarmed, pepper-sprayed and whacked with a police baton after having attacked a man — he is reported to have banged his head repeatedly against the cage in a police car.

Bernard, 18, had to be taken to the emergency room at SOVAH Health-Danville and then to Carilion Roanoke Memorial Hospital before being transported to the jail in Chatham at about 3 a.m. Wednesday, Pittsylvania County Sheriff Mike Taylor said.

That type of behavior has not continued, Taylor said, but he is still on suicide watch.

It wasn't until Wednesday afternoon that Taylor confirmed the reports that had been swirling about since shortly after the arrest — that the three homicide victims found at a Keeling home were the mother, adult daughter and her infant son.

Taylor, at a news conference, officially named Joan Bernard, 62; Emily Bernard Bivens, 25; and Cullen Bivens, 1, as the three victims of Tuesday's triple homicide in Keeling.

It also was confirmed that Emily Bivens is the wife and Cullen Bivens the son of Danville native and Tampa Bay Rays prospect Blake Bivens, 24. Joan Bernard is the mother of both Emily Bivens and the suspect.

Blake and Emily married in 2016, according to a post on his Facebook page from Jan. 10. On that day he posted a picture of the smiling mother holding up and gazing into the face of her son.

"I can go on for days about how you have changed me for the better," he wrote.

Another post, from June 10, includes a video of a smiling Cullen Bivens in a baby walker and hoisting above his head a kitchen pot.

“Happy 1st birthday to my little man!” Blake Bivens posted with the video and two photos of the infant. “Daddy loves you.”

On her Facebook page, Emily Bivens described herself as a “lover of Jesus, wife, mama, photographer.”

She shared pro-life articles that spoke against abortion. The photos she shared included shots of her and Blake Bivens smiling and one of her holding Cullen Bivens as they watched a baseball game.

The bodies of the three victims were found at their home on Keeling Drive on Tuesday morning, and soon after warnings were issued throughout the immediate area via reverse 911 of a suspect who was declared armed and dangerous.

After a manhunt lasting several hours, around noon a nude Bernard came charging from the woods nearly a mile from the crime scene, evaded the police officer who pepper sprayed him and whacked him with a baton and attacked a bystander before authorities were able to apprehend him. Taylor said a firearm was involved and investigators know how the suspect got it, but he declined to elaborate.

“We want to express our sincere condolences, both to the Bernard family and the Bivens family,” he said. Investigators did not release the names of the victims during the news conference Tuesday afternoon because Blake Bivens, a pitcher with the Double-A Montgomery Biscuits, was traveling by plane to Virginia and had not been officially notified, Taylor said.

“We purposely withheld that until we met with Blake and his family,” Taylor said. “We were trying to be respectful.”

Taylor said he didn’t want to speak to Blake Bivens’ response, but he did say that he was composed and respectful.

“[Bivens] has questions just like we all do,” he said.

Bernard’s arraignment hearing could be as early as today, said Commonwealth’s Attorney Bryan Haskins, but may also happen next week. It all depends on the availability of the judges, he said.



The hearing, where a magistrate will present Bernard with the charges and decide on his bail, could take place in juvenile and domestic relations court or general district court, since one of the victims was a child and the other two were adults, Haskins said.

Prosecutors are not starting with the assumption of capital murder, Haskins said, even though Bernard is accused of killing three people. According to Virginia Law, the threshold for capital murder is more than one person.

“We’re going to look through every possible charge,” Haskins said.

Taylor said the community has rallied together, with ministers and community leaders calling to see how they could help. He also expressed appreciation for the number of localities that contributed to the Tuesday search.

“We had one common goal, and that was to find the subject and protect the community,” he said.

The friends and family that the Danville Register & Bee attempted to contact for this story did not respond.

The Central Boulevard Church of God, where some of the Bernards and Bivens attended, posted a Facebook statement Tuesday afternoon to implore the community to rally together.

“The Bernard and Bivens families are very precious to us and we at Central Boulevard desire your prayers for these dear people, as they are a beloved part of our church family,” the statement read.

Church leadership declined to provide additional comment when contacted.

Representatives from both the Tampa Bay Rays and the Montgomery Biscuits did not provide any comment outside of their official statements.

Emily Bivens was involved with Our Baseball Life, an organization that provides resources and connects professional baseball families. In a statement, they said “She deeply loved this community of baseball women and was a comforting, kind soul to all who knew her.”

The group started a GoFundMe page with the goal of raising \$1,000 to help Blake Bivens. About \$33,000 had been raised by Wednesday evening.

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

# After a tragedy, it's critical for a community to band together, Dan River Region religious leaders say

By Caleb Ayers cayers@registerbee.com Aug 30, 2019



Joan Bernard, 62; Emily Bernard Bivens, 25; and Cullen Bivens, 1, were killed Tuesday in Keeling.

Family photo///(Danville) Register & Bee/

In the wake of the Tuesday's triple homicide, Father Jonathan Goertz, of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Danville, expressed the importance of the community banding together and sticking with the family for the long haul.

“There's no particular timeline on the healing process,” he said. “We shouldn't let anybody impose conditions or a time frame on that.”

With the funeral for all three victims — Joan Bernard, 62; Emily Bernard Bivens, 25; and 1-year-old Cullen Micah Bivens — scheduled for today, the family still is attempting to wrap their heads around what has happened.

Blake Bivens — husband of Emily, father of Cullen, and son-in-law of Joan — expressed some of what he and his family are feeling and dealing with in a Thursday night post on Facebook.

“My heart was turned to ash. My life as I knew it is destroyed. The pain my family and I feel is unbearable and cannot be put into words,” he posted.

He went on to address each of the three victims and the impact they made on his life.

Of Emily, he wrote: “You made me into the man I am today and you loved me with all of my flaws.”

Emily’s obituary described her as “a kind and gentle soul and a light to all who knew her, loved the Lord and her family with all her heart.”

To Cullen, the father wrote the child’s birth helped him understand what love really is.

“I can’t breathe without you here,” he wrote.

To Joan, Blake Bivens wrote she was the best nana the world ever has seen.

“You loved your family more than anyone I’ve ever seen,” he wrote.

The obituary for Joan Bernard notes she “devoted her life to being the best Mama and Nana there ever was.”

Family members aren’t the only ones trying to cope the aftermath of the slayings. In a news conference Wednesday afternoon, Pittsylvania County Sheriff Mike Taylor reflected on the difficulty in emotionally dealing with these tragedies, especially for the law enforcement officers who become so intimately involved with these crime scenes.

“It’s devastating,” he said.

The sheriff’s office offered debriefings to help staff cope with what the experience.

“Each one of us processes it a bit differently,” Taylor explained.

Many faith and community leaders had reached out to the sheriff’s office to see if there was anything they could do, Taylor said Wednesday.

Jackie Poe, the lead pastor at the River Church where the Bivens family attends, said one of the keys for processing and responding to this tragedy is to do it with faith.

“The bottom line is we got to rely on a strength that’s stronger than we are,” he said.

In addition to looking to God, it is important to rely on each other, Poe said.

“People need to talk about it,” he said. “They need to comfort one another with kind words.”

Goertz said the same thing: sticking together as a community is critical to move through a tragedy like this one.

“We often think of these things as happening somewhere else. When it happens here we really need to walk in solidarity,” he said.

Poe has met and talked with the Bivens family in the wake of this tragedy.

“It’s just really amazing how [Blake Bivens is] holding up,” he said of Blake.

Looking to the future, Blake Bivens said he will “get through this together as a family” with Skip Bernard, his father-in-law.

“I’m not sure what is next for me, but I do know God has a plan even though I can’t see it,” he posted.

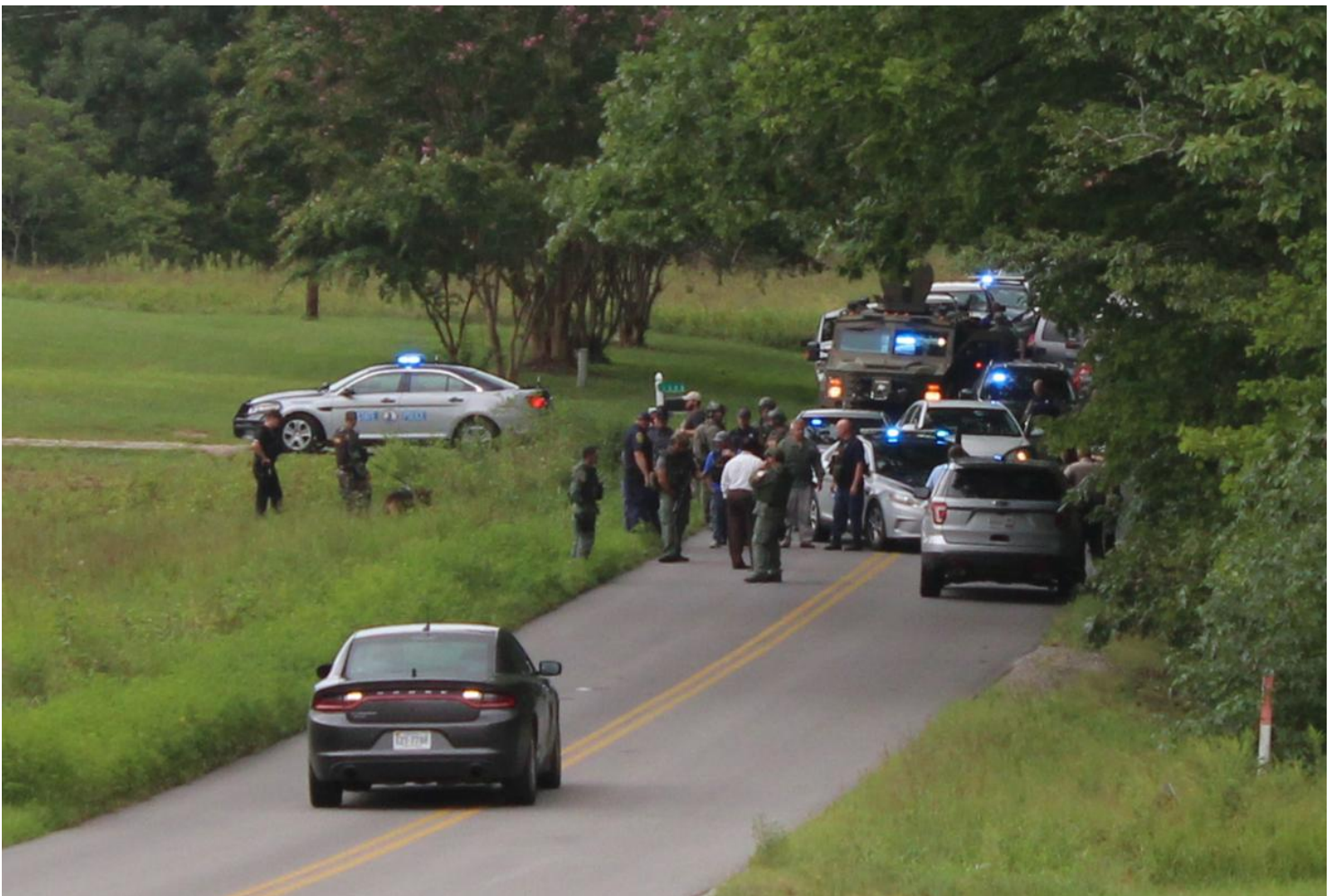
Ayers reports for the Register & Bee. Reach him at (434) 791-7981.

# A timeline of school lockdowns during the August manhunt in Keeling

By Caleb Ayers cayers@registerbee.com Sep 20, 2019



Matthew Bernard



Officers apprehended a naked Matthew Bernard, 18, a suspect in a triple homicide less than a mile away, in the middle of Keeling Drive.

Caleb Ayers/Register & Bee/

Keeling — August 27 was a chaotic morning for the Keeling community — when authorities began their hunt for the suspect behind a triple homicide — and that extended into some of the surrounding Pittsylvania County Schools that initiated lockdowns. A report submitted for the county school board on Sept. 10 provides an exact timeline of what took place at the public schools involved.

The twitter account for Pittsylvania County Public Safety sent out a message at 7 a.m. warning about Matthew Bernard, who was said to be armed with a rifle and very dangerous.

He is accused of killing his mother, Joan Bernard, 62; his sister, Emily Bernard Bivens, 25; and her 14-month-old son, Cullen Micah Bivens, at the Bernard family's home in Keeling. At the time of the manhunt, however, scant information made it out to the public.

At 8:20 a.m., the school district received a notice from both the sheriff's department and the resource officer at Dan River High School about an unspecified incident in the Keeling area.

The term Code Orange began to make its way around the schools. It's the lightest level of lockdown the district has, Superintendent Mark Jones. It is used when there is a potential for a threat to be outside of the building, whereas a Code Red represents a more immediate threat and would necessitate moving students out of sight.

During a Code Orange, instruction continues as normal, but the doors to classrooms are locked and administrators monitor entrances and hallways.

All Dan River zone schools — Dan River High, Dan River Middle, and Kentuck Elementary — then went into Code Orange lockdowns by 8:40 a.m. Five minutes later, Southside Elementary initiated their own Code Orange lockdown.

Jones said they waited to hear recommendations and updates directly from the sheriff's office before taking any action.

“We usually don’t act until we’ve heard something from them,” he said.

Chatham High Principal Jason Reece called the administration office roughly 15 minutes later to say that the school’s resource officer, Deputy Tim West, was also recommending a Code Orange lockdown.

Around that same time, Chatham Middle School, Pittsylvania Career and Technical Center, and the Regional Alternative School/STEM Academy also began their own Code Orange lockdown procedures.

By now, a very large police presence that included members of the Pittsylvania County Sheriff’s Office, Virginia State Troopers, and officers from other counties, had formed in the Keeling community where the slayings had taken place.

At 9:57 a.m., Jones sent a vague announcement to parents of students at the schools under a lockdown about an “incident” in the Keeling community: “During this incident, the safety of students was our most important priority and at no time were any students or staff in danger.”

Jones said the delay between the lockdowns and the announcement was about ensuring safety.

“Once you get the schools settled in and you feel that the students, staff and faculty are safe, the next step is reaching out to the parents,” he said.

At the schools, students could not move around throughout the facilities on their own. Teachers and staff took them where they needed to go, and exterior doors and classroom doors remained locked.

As Jones received information directly from the sheriff, he would pass that on to the principals, who could pass that on to their teachers through the school sound systems.





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The principals, Jones said, told him that they and their staff tried to carry on as if it was a normal day.

“The principals were very complimentary of what had taken place in their schools,” he said.

None of the school principals replied to the Danville Register & Bee’s repeated requests for comment on this story.

There isn’t an exact protocol for serving lunch during a Code Orange lockdown.

“That’s all determined by what you know about the situation,” Jones explained.

For the Dan River schools, staff brought students to the cafeteria, where they grabbed lunch before returning to their classrooms to eat. At Dan River High School, they also parked two buses in front of the glass windows to the cafeteria.

“We just parked the buses there to obstruct the view into the cafeteria,” Jones said.

Around 12:20 p.m., Bernard, unarmed and completely naked, ran out of the woods toward a media staging area at Keeling Baptist Church, located less than a mile from the crime scene. A Virginia State Police trooper doused him with pepper spray, but he kept jogging around, eventually trying to choke the church caretaker.

The trooper whacked Bernard with a baton, forcing him to run away and into a police blockade that had been set up down the road.

Roughly half an hour later, parents received the announcement that the lockdown was over.

“The issue that took place in the Keeling Community this morning has been resolved,” the notice read.

The next day, authorities reported that Bernard banged his head in the police vehicle, was taken to a hospital and subsequently put on suicide watch before finally arriving at the jail in Chatham.

Bernard’s arraignment — on three charges of first-degree murder and related firearms counts — came on Sept. 12, and his defense attorney requested a mental health evaluation.

A preliminary hearing has been scheduled for Nov. 6 at 9 a.m. in Pittsylvania County Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court.

Jeff Early, Assistant Superintendent for Operations, said the school district will review its crisis management plan later this year, and will likely go before the school board with any changes in January.

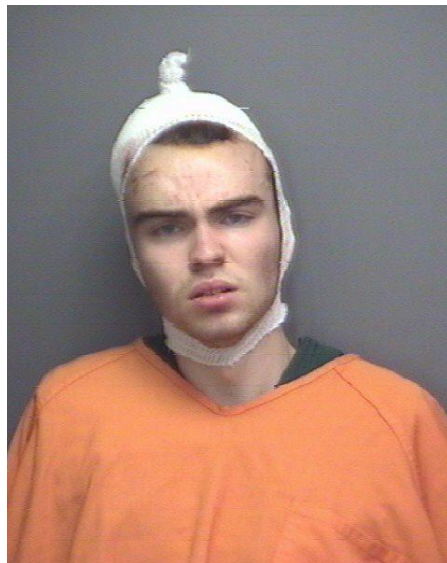
Ayers reports for the Register & Bee. Reach him at (434) 791-7981.

# Attorney seeks psychological evaluation in first court appearance for suspect in Keeling triple slaying

By Quashon Avent qavent@registerbee.com Sep 12, 2019



Matthew Bernard



MatthewBernard



A suspect identified as Matthew Bernard, 18, came jogging out of the woods and into the parking lot of Keeling Baptist Church on Aug. 27. Despite being sprayed in the face and chest with pepper spray, he kept moving and briefly had his hands around the neck of church groundskeeper Loyd Gauldin.

Caleb Ayers/Register & Bee

### Evaluation order

CHATHAM — For a few tense seconds, the handful of bailiffs surrounding Matthew Bernard during his arraignment Thursday leaned toward him as he took pen in hand to scrawl his signature on a court document.

One bailiff set a hand on the table near Bernard's writing hand while the officers behind the teenager took a few steps toward him. Court-appointed defense attorney James C. Martin leaned in over Bernard's left shoulder and appeared to whisper in his ear while staring at the document.



Bernard's mental health had been questioned ever since he made headlines last month by running naked and drenched in mace past watching reporters following a manhunt involving more than 100 police after three of his family members were found dead. After his arrest he needed hospital care because he repeatedly banged his head against the cage inside a police car, police reported.

He is currently being held by the state's Behavioral Health and Developmental Services instead of at a local jail, court documents state. And his attorney has requested that a psychological evaluation be done.

The reporters and court personnel watching the scene Thursday morning leaned forward in their chairs just a little, sitting back only after Bernard returned the pen to a bailiff.

When the 18-year-old accused of a triple homicide Aug. 27 appeared in court for the first time, it was without the signature head bandage and prison-orange jumpsuit from the mugshot that began circulating shortly after his arrest.

Instead, he wore regular street clothes, the most noticeable of which was a green, canvas jacket. He stood stiff and attentive in Pittsylvania County Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court throughout the hearing.

Moments before the hearing began — as the courtroom filled with reporters, court workers and others — Bernard nodded knowingly to a person in the back.

Soon, Judge Brian Turpin asked whether any witnesses were present. The handful of spectators and court personnel there looked around expectantly. After no one answered, proceedings continued.

Turpin read the charges: three counts of first-degree murder and three counts of use of a firearm in the commission of a homicide. Bernard is accused of killing his mother, Joan Bernard, 62; his sister, Emily Bernard Bivens, 25; and her 14-month-old son, Cullen Micah Bivens, at the Bernard family's home in Keeling.

Emily Bernard Bivens is the wife of minor-league baseball player Blake Bivens and Cullen Micah Bivens is his son.

"Do you understand these charges?," Turpin said, turning to look at Bernard.

"Yes sir," the teenager replied, in a low, soft, tone of voice. Turpin continued with his questions, asking if Bernard would collaborate with his appointed counsel, James Martin. "Yes sir," he answered again.

Once the questioning ended, Turpin scheduled the preliminary hearing for 9 a.m Nov. 6.

Initially, Turpin suggested an earlier date, but changed it due to a scheduling conflict raised by county Pittsylvania County Commonwealth's Attorney Brian Haskins.

"I have another trial on that day," said Haskins. "I want to give this case my full attention."

Martin stood up, light reflecting off his glasses. "We have filed a motion for a competence and sanity evaluation," he said, reading the words off a piece of paper on the table in front of him.

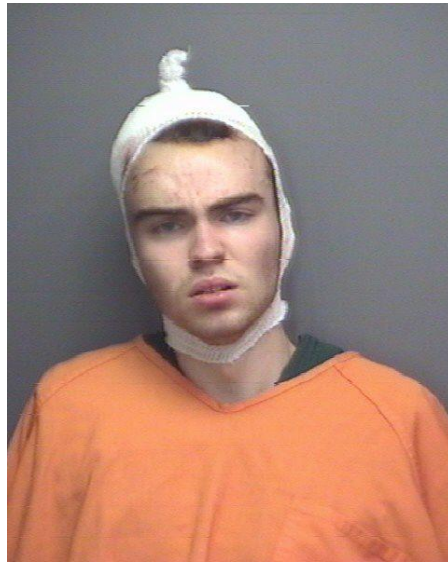
The evaluation is to be completed by Oct. 31, according to the order signed by Turpin.

Moments later, Bernard was handed a notice of his next hearing date to sign. A bailiff held out a blue fountain pen, making sure the tip was pointed away from him as Bernard took it. The teen leaned in close to the document on the table, his eyes just above the top of the pen and inching closer to it as he scrawled his name. That's when the group of bailiffs circling him stepped closer, appearing to relax only when Bernard handed back the pen.

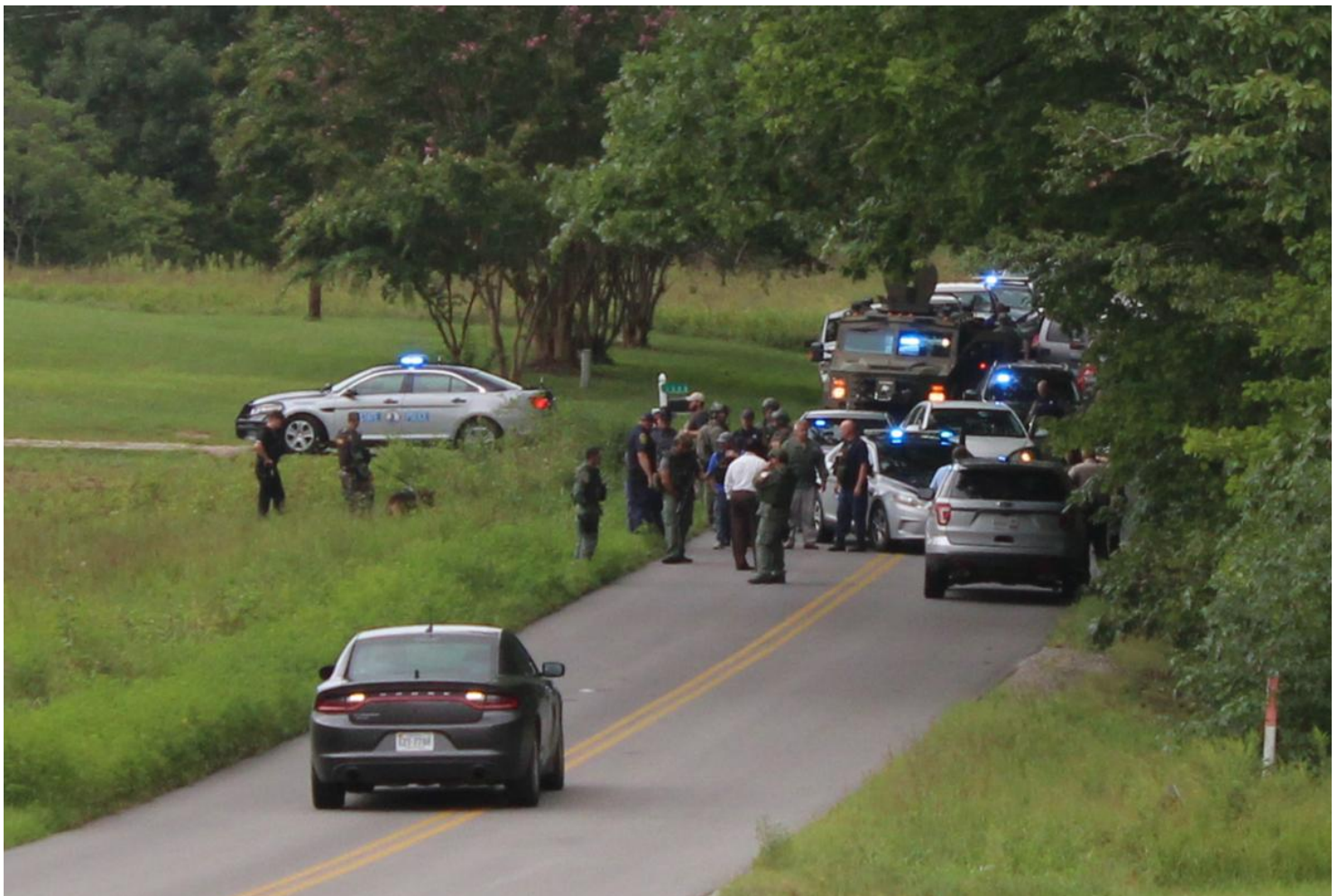
With the arraignment over, Bernard stood up to be ushered out of court. He looked again to the back of the courtroom, made one last nod of acknowledgement to someone, and left.

# Documents detail grisly discovery: three dead, a sledgehammer with blood and rifle found in woods behind home

By Caleb Ayers Danville Register & Bee Aug 29, 2019



Matthew Bernard



Officers apprehended a naked Matthew Bernard, 18, a suspect in a triple homicide less than a mile away, in the middle of Keeling Drive on Tuesday.

Caleb Ayers/Register & Bee

**CRIMINAL COMPLAINT**  
Commonwealth of Virginia

RULES 3A:3 AND 7C:3

Pittsylvania  
CITY OR COUNTY

General District Court  
 Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court

Under penalty of perjury, I, the undersigned Complainant swear or affirm that I have reason to believe that the Accused committed a criminal offense, on or about

08/27/2019 in the  City  County  Town  
of Pittsylvania  
DATE OFFENSE OCCURRED

I base my belief on the following facts: (Print ALL information clearly.)

On 08/27/2019, Ms. Jefferson reported Matthew Bernard came to her residence and punched her in arm and then ran away. Ms. Jefferson stated shortly thereafter, she heard multiple gunshots coming from the residence next door where Matthew Bernard resides at 1949 Keeling Dr. Ms. Jefferson drove to address and found a body laying in driveway. Inv. Rouse with Pittsylvania County Sheriff's Office was first officer on scene and observed adult female deceased in driveway, one adult female deceased in residence, and one baby infant deceased inside residence. Two victims had visible gunshot wounds to the head. 30-30 caliber shell casings were located near all three deceased. One sledgehammer was located in garage with blood. 30-30 Rifle was located in wooded area behind the residence. Adult victims have been identified as Emily Bernard Bivens and Joan Bernard. Infant child has been identified as Cullen Bivens. Matthew Bernard was located up the roadway.

The statements above are true and accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief.

In making this complaint, I have read and fully understand the following:

- By swearing to these facts, I agree to appear in court and testify if a warrant or summons is issued.
- The charge in this warrant cannot be dismissed except by the court, even at my request.

Sheppard, D.G.  
NAME OF COMPLAINANT (LAST, FIRST, MIDDLE)  
(PRINT CLEARLY)

[Signature]  
SIGNATURE OF COMPLAINANT

Subscribed and sworn to before me this day.  
8-27-19  
DATE AND TIME

[Signature]  
( ) CLERK ( ) MAGISTRATE ( ) JUDGE

**CRIMINAL COMPLAINT**

ACCUSED: Name, Description, Address/Location  
Bernard, Matthew Thomas  
LAST NAME, FIRST NAME, MIDDLE NAME

1949 Keeling Dr.  
Keeling, Va 24566

COMPLETE DATA BELOW IF KNOWN

RACE	SEX	BORN	HT.	WT.	EYES	HAIR
W	M	MO: 9 DAY: 28 YR: 38	FT: 6 IN: 2	175	BLU	BRN

SSN: \_\_\_\_\_

Complainant is not a law-enforcement officer or animal control officer. Authorization prior to issuance of felony arrest warrant given by  
 Commonwealth's attorney  
 Law-enforcement agency having jurisdiction over alleged offense

NAME OF PERSON AUTHORIZING ISSUANCE OF WARRANT: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE AND TIME AUTHORIZATION GIVEN: \_\_\_\_\_

KEELING — Several years ago, Matthew Bernard sat at a table in the front office of Paradise Lake and Campground for hours with a woman who had recently lost her husband. He prayed and talked with her and even danced around the table trying to make her laugh.

"He was a goofball," said campground desk clerk Kelly Cook as she recalled the scene. "If you weren't smiling, he made sure when he walked out of the room that you were smiling."



The caring teenager who performed bookkeeping and landscaping at the family-owned campground is now accused of a triple homicide that includes his mother, Joan Bernard, 62; his sister, Emily Bernard Bivens, 25; and her 1-year-old son, Cullen Micah Bivens.

Capping off the grisly discovery of the bodies Tuesday at 1949 Keeling Drive was a chaotic arrest of the 18-year-old as he dashed nude from a treeline located roughly a mile from the crime scene. He ran into a face full of pepper spray from a state police officer while on his way to a church parking and then tried to choke a church caretaker before getting being whacked by a police baton and moments later running off into a phalanx of waiting cops.

Recently released Pittsylvania Domestic Relations Court documents show there was more to the crime scene — a sledgehammer with blood, a rifle found in the woods behind the home and shell casings near all three bodies.

The scene came to light after a next-door neighbor — listed in court documents as Ms. Jefferson — began investigating after Matthew Bernard showed up on her property, punched her in the arm and then ran off. The neighbor who discovered the body, contacted by the Danville Register & Bee on Thursday, did not want to comment for this story.

Soon after the strange encounter, Jefferson heard gunshots at the house next door, where Matthew Bernard lived with his family.

She called the police, got in her car and drove to the house. When she pulled up, court documents state, she found a deceased body in the driveway. The Pittsylvania County Sheriff's Office, in a news conference Wednesday, said the body of Joan Bernard was found in the driveway.

When deputies arrived, they conducted a full sweep of the house and found the bodies of Emily and Cullen Bivens inside.

Two of the bodies found at the scene had visible gunshot wounds to the head, court documents state, and all three had 30-30 shell casings nearby.

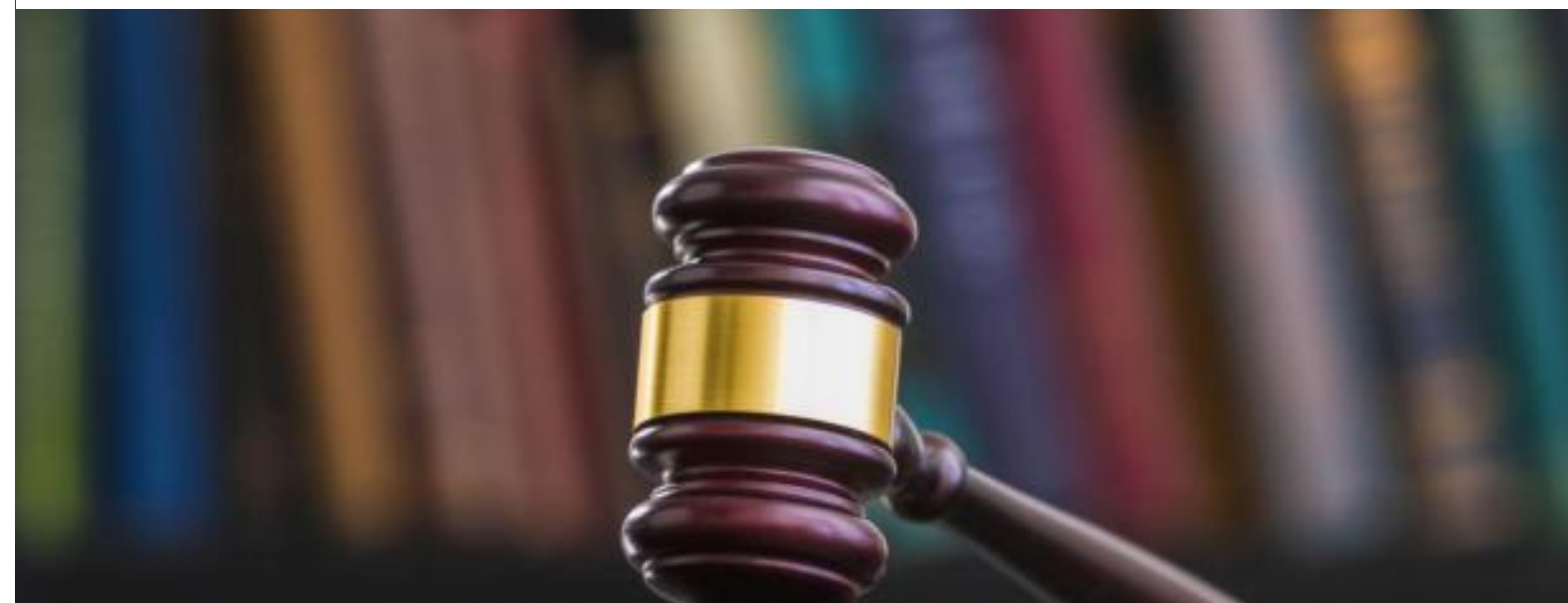
Investigators found a sledgehammer in the garage with blood.

They also found a 30-30 rifle in the wooded area behind the house, according to the document.

Bernard has since been charged with three counts of first-degree murder and three counts of use of a firearm in commission of a felony.

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Family members contacted by the Register & Bee declined to comment for this story.

Cook said after five years of working at the campground, the Bernards were like a second family to her.

"I feel so much heartache for all of them," she said.

Joan Bernard came into the front office almost everyday, Cook said, and stopped working only when she was spending time with family or at church.

"She loved her family more than she loved herself," she said.

Cook said she still expects Joan Bernard to walk through the front door of the office, asking where her keys and phone are like she always used to.

Emily Bernard Bivens was a music teacher and enjoyed photography, according to her obituary.

She was married to Blake Bivens, a 24-year-old Danville native who pitches for the Montgomery Biscuits, the Double-A affiliate of the Tampa Bay Rays. Cullen Micah Bivens was their son.

Emily collaborated with members of Our Baseball Life, a resource community for pro-baseball families, according to their official statement.

"She has been described as a bright light and a kind soul to those who met her within the baseball world," the statement said.

The managing director of Our Baseball Life declined to comment further.

A funeral service for the three will be held Saturday at Central Boulevard Church of God in Danville.

Matthew Bernard, described by Cook as intelligent and good with numbers, attended Danville Community College, court documents state.

"His favorite saying was Jesus loves you and I do, too," Cook said.

# 'Religious motivation' probed in triple Keeling slaying; suspect's phone believed to have audio diary of 'things that he had heard from God'

By Caleb Ayers cayers@registerbee.com Sep 27, 2019



Matthew Bernard

The suspect in a triple homicide in Keeling “was operating under religious motivation” on the day of the slayings, according to a recently filed Pittsylvania County Circuit Court document.

Police investigators wrote about the religious aspect in a search warrant filed to pry from cellphones thought to belong to suspect Matthew Thomas Bernard, 18, any digital records that might reveal the impetus for the killings.

Bernard faces first-degree murder and related firearms charges in the slayings of his mother, Joan Bernard, 62; his sister, Emily Bernard Bivens, 25; and her 14-month-old son, Cullen Bivens, on Aug. 27.

According to the search warrant, Jason Adkins, the youth pastor at Central Boulevard Church of God, where the family regularly attended, told investigators Bernard maintained on his cellphone an audio diary of “his thoughts, what he had seen in dreams, visions, and things that he had heard from God.”

The youth pastor estimated there are more than 100 recordings on the phone, but said Bernard never had directly shared any of them with him.

“Mr. Adkins said Matthew told him he wanted to keep this in case it comes to pass,” investigator Dusty Sheppard wrote in the search warrant.

Pittsylvania County Sheriff’s Office deputies found two cellphones at the Bernard family home at 1949 Keeling Drive, where the killings happened.

One iPhone, which had a cracked screen, was listed in the search warrant as being found in Bernard’s bedroom. Previous search warrants indicate the phone showed two missed calls from “mom” when it was found.

Another iPhone in a black case, which father Skip Bernard confirmed to investigators as belonging to his son, was listed in the search warrant as being found in the front yard. Adkins did not confirm this phone is the one where the recordings are located, the warrant states.

Sheppard wrote information found on Bernard’s phone — including voicemails, recordings, social media activity, internet history and location data — would help them better understand Bernard’s motives and activities on the day of the killings and in the days and hours leading up to those events.

Deputies initially arrived at the Bernard home the morning of Aug. 27 to find the bodies of two adults and an infant. They responded after a 911 call by neighbor and relative Rachel Jefferson following a brief visit by Bernard — he knocked on her door, punched her in the arm when she answered and ran away. The sound of gunshots punctuating the air minutes later.

She arrived at the Bernard residence to find a body in the driveway and to see Bernard walk from the garage.

“At that time she observes him holding a rifle,” the search warrant states. “She observed him look at her, and then she observed him run into the woods carrying the rifle with him.”

Arriving deputies would find Emily Bivens with blood on her chest and Cullen Bivens shot in the head in a bedroom. Joan Bernard was found in the driveway and appeared to have been shot.

Shell casings were found near the victims and a bloody sledgehammer was found in the garage, where bullet holes had pierced an antique car, search warrants state. The rifle later was found in the woods behind the home. A deceased dog also was found inside the house.

Law enforcement captured Bernard nearly a mile from the crime scene after an hours-long manhunt involving more than 100 law enforcement officers. The manhunt concluded with Bernard jogging from the woods naked and unarmed. He received a face-full of pepper spray from a state trooper and attempted to choke a bystander before jogging down the road right into a police barricade.

At the arraignment earlier this month, Judge Brian Turpin, of the Pittsylvania Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court, allowed for a competence and sanity evaluation at the request of defense attorney James Martin. The order signed by Turpin indicates the evaluation must be completed by Oct. 31.

Bernard currently is being held by the state's Behavioral Health and Developmental Services instead of at a local jail, court documents state.

A preliminary hearing has been scheduled for 9 a.m. Nov. 6 in Pittsylvania County Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court.

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