

Forsgren or Yount, he's liked

Friends say killer would be welcome

By Byron Blake
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HUNTINGTON, Pa. — Jon Yount would like to go home again — home to Idaho, that is. It may never happen, though. Many of the friends he made in

Idaho while on the run between April 1986 and June 1988 gladly would open their homes to the man they came to know as Jim Forsgren, even though they now know he is a convicted murderer who had escaped.

The same is true for Yount's companion from that period, Kathy Kermer, even though they now know she is really Diane Brodbeck, who is accused of helping Yount escape and leaving her husband to be with him on the run.

Today, Yount, 48, sits in his cell in the State Correctional Institution at Huntington, a maximum-security prison. He faces sentencing today, having pleaded guilty to escaping from prison on April 5, 1986.

Brodbeck, 43, is awaiting trial on a charge of conspiring with Yount to plan and carry out the escape. A pre-trial hearing for her is scheduled for Dec. 5 in Center County.

The two were captured June 15 in Coeur d'Alene, shortly after having driven there from Boise.

Yount said his return to prison after more than two years spent mostly in Boise has made him realize how precious freedom is. "The truth is," he said last week, "I'd happily trade the rest of my life just to be able to relive those 26 months of freedom."

Yount, a schoolteacher in his native Pennsylvania, murdered one of his students, Pamela Sue Rimer, in 1966. After confessing to the crime, he was convicted and imprisoned.

Twenty years later, he disappeared from a minimum-security work detail at the State Correctional Institution at Rockview.

The next day, the worried husband of Diane Brodbeck, a York County housewife who had volunteered for a prison ministries program, called the Pennsylvania State Police to report her missing. Police soon learned that Brod-

Yount

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that Brodbeck was linked to Yount's escape.

Some investigators thought Yount, already once convicted of murder, might have killed Brodbeck. Her husband and children, however, clung tenaciously to a belief that she was alive.

Yount and Brodbeck wandered into Boise in December 1986 in search of a new home, new friends and a new way of life.

"How we started out was really strange," Yount recalled. "We first went to the Salvation Army. We asked the captain if he knew of any elderly or needy people with whom we could share our Christmas. It seems that because of insurance liability for any such referrals, the captain was disinclined to give us any names. But he did send us over to the Unity Church."

Yount said his experiences with Muslims, fundamentalists and atheists in the three Pennsylvania prisons where he spent more than 20 years gave him an ecumenical view of religion. Brodbeck had grown up as a Protestant, he said.

Neither of them was uncomfortable with the rather orthodox liturgy they encountered in their first Unity Church service, he recalled.

"We just seemed to fit right in," he said. "When they found out I could sing — and, soon thereafter, that I could play the piano and organ — it didn't take long for them to accept (Brodbeck) and me into their fold."

He described how, during their second or third Sunday service, "We met this guy they called 'Goose.' He had earned that monicker by his reputation as a bird hunter. Somebody told me he had some decoys for sale.

"When I introduced myself as a



Jon Yount
killed a student in 1966

hunter, he invited me to go goose hunting with him. He even gave (Brodbeck) and me a couple of geese he'd shot the day before. That became our Christmas dinner."

A few days before that, Yount and Brodbeck had gone apartment hunting.

The couple that ended up renting to them was surprised at first to find they did not have steady jobs. Brodbeck said she had enough money saved to pay the rent for several months, and Yount said he planned to do odd jobs, the couple recalled.

But their landlord, who asked not to be identified, said, "They seemed real nice, very friendly, well-educated, excellent people."

"It's just awfully hard to believe they were running away from another life. (We) decided to trust them — give 'em a chance. And as it turned out, they never were late with the rent over the year they were our tenants."

"More than that, they made a lot of improvements. (Yount) often did painting for me and helped with chores without expecting any

compensation. We were real sorry to see them leave — even sorer when we heard the news about their arrest."

Their landlord had a handicapped brother whom Yount befriended. A Boise businessman, he once had been an avid sportsman, but had suffered a stroke that slurred his speech and limited his mobility.

"It was rather difficult at first," Yount said, "because his speech was impaired. But he could understand me very well, and we hit it off pretty well right from the start."

"In the spring of 1987, I took him fishing. He obviously had become accustomed to having people do just about everything for him."

"When I told him, 'You're going to have to bait your own hook, and you're going to have to reel in the catch yourself,' the man thought I was really being hard on him. But after catching that first fish by himself, he seemed to take on a whole new outlook. He discovered he could do a lot of things for himself after all."

The man's wife said, "He was almost like a new person. (Yount) made him work hard, and each little victory day by day seemed to give him another good reason for living. He really needed that."

Now, reflecting on what happened last June when Boise residents first learned that Yount and Brodbeck had been the subjects of a nationwide search for more than two years, she said, "We were so shocked. It's still very hard to believe. Although our children, who live away from here and had met them several times, expressed concern that (Yount and Brodbeck) deceived us, we're not bitter about it. They never lied to us."

"To me, although he murdered someone, Jon isn't a murderer. ... If they ever were to come back to Idaho, they certainly would have a

place to stay — here with us."

Another friend, a local barber, recalls Yount and Brodbeck befriending a couple in their 70s.

"These people were on welfare and couldn't afford anything at all," he said. "(Yount and Brodbeck) took them fishing, cooked dinners for them, even helped with their housework. It really made a difference in those people's lives. They're still talking about it."

Others have expressed similar sentiments and related similar experiences.

Yount's mother, who lives on the family homestead near DuBois, Pa., receives several letters a day from Idaho friends.

Back in Pennsylvania, though, strong sentiment was fueled by broad media coverage of the 1966 murder, and of subsequent attempts by Yount's attorneys in petitioning for his parole.

That has made any chance of release slim at best, according to Pennsylvania officials. The completion of an aided sentence of five to 10 years for his escape from prison would seem only to confirm Yount's future as a lifer in Pennsylvania's corrections system.

Brodbeck faces a possible prison term of 3½ to seven years if she is convicted of conspiring with Yount in his escape from Rockview, officials say.

Although he has come to regret his escape, Yount said, "I have some of the best memories anyone could ask for. (We) shared something wonderful with so many different people, and nobody can take that away from us."