

A video clip of Chanelle and Gabrielle Pickett (in which Chanelle's name is misspelled as "Channel") has recently surfaced on YouTube, leading me to dig through my records of the time between Chanelle's death and the trial of William Palmer for murder. The following is a previously unpublished account written by me in early 1997, about the events surrounding the murder of Chanelle Pickett. I publish it here unedited. It is incomplete, but does include some details not published elsewhere.

[Open
YouTube
page](#)

My primary source was Gabrielle Pickett.

- Nancy, 2/25/08

[more resources at page bottom]

The Chanelle Pickett Story

by Nancy Nangeroni, May 17, 1997

On November 20, 1995, William Palmer's lawyer called the police and told them that they would find a dead body in Mr. Palmer's bedroom in Watertown. The body was that of Chanelle Pickett, 23, a Boston-area transsexual woman. In the flurry of contradictory press reports, allegations and challenges that followed, Palmer never disputed the fact that Chanelle had died immediately following a struggle with Palmer in which he used his 60 pounds and 3 inch height advantage to brutally beat her. 18 months later, on Friday May 3, 1997, the jury in the Middlesex County Superior Court case against him found Palmer innocent of any murder charge, guilty only of simple assault and battery. The verdict sent a chill through Boston's transgender and larger queer communities.

As an outspoken transgender activist in the Boston area, I've received too many requests for more information to ignore. I'm also personally interested in knowing just what went on that night when a member of my community died, apparently at the hands of a man who appears completely unsympathetic. If he didn't murder her, why has he shown to date only a driving determination to defend himself? What were the facts of the case? Only William Palmer knows for sure what happened the night of the murder -- excuse me, death -- and he probably has trouble maintaining a clear memory in the face of what must be quite powerful emotions.

William Palmer met Chanelle Pickett on Sunday evening, November 19, 1995. Palmer was a computer programmer. He was also a crack addict and frequenter of Boston's two most well-known TV/TS hangouts, Jacque's and Playland. He was familiar to regulars at both establishments. That night, he and Chanelle bought some crack together, and then drove with Chanelle's twin sister Gabrielle (also TS) to Chanelle's apartment, where they all smoked crack together. Chanelle then departed with Palmer to go to his place. Although both Pickett girls made their living turning tricks out of Playland, there was no money involved in the evening's liaison. Rather, Chanelle is said to have found Palmer at least somewhat appealing.

Palmer's roommates heard him come home with Chanelle sometime around 3 or 3:30AM on the morning of the 20th. They did not hear any unusual noises at that time. At around 5 AM, they were awakened by sounds of a struggle, including an unfamiliar ("strange") male voice shouting religious epithets, and Palmer shouting things like "This is not happening" and "Keep quiet, you'll wake the whole household". The sounds intensified, and became blood-curdling screams and pounding on the wall near the bed (according to the roommate in an adjoining room) so intense that the roommate thought the wall must surely give way. Roommates heard the unfamiliar voice -- Pickett's -- become muffled, and gradually diminish. Two roommates, concerned, knocked on Palmer's door, asking if he was OK. Palmer told them, in a calm voice, "I've got a crazy bitch in here. But I've got it under control". They tried to open the door, but it was blocked by an open drawer of Palmer's dresser, which was situated close to the door. They were unable to see into the room. Things quieted down, and the roommates tried to sleep, mostly unsuccessfully.

Four hours later, Palmer approached one of the roommates saying "We've got a problem." Palmer called his lawyer, but nobody made any move to secure medical attention for Chanelle. Palmer and his roommates went to visit his lawyer, with whom he was unable to get an appointment until after lunch. Upon their arrival and discussion, the lawyer finally called the police.

What kind of a person was Chanelle? Why was she "working the streets"? Why did she go home with Palmer?

According to Chanelle's twin sister Gabrielle, also transsexual, the sisters were working at NYNEX in a sales department in Marlboro Massachusetts in early 1995, when both girls were transferred to a Braintree sales office. After one month, Chanelle switched to the MIS department, reporting to manager Deborah Shea. Shortly after Chanelle started working for Shea, she began to feel personally disliked by her new supervisor, and soon began to feel harassed. Chanelle and Gabrielle talked about it, but couldn't be certain why Shea was wanting to harass Chanelle. Although she was taking some hateful abuse, Chanelle really wanted to work in MIS, so she resolved to stick it out. It wasn't long, though, before she heard from a friend that Shea was spreading the word, in a very negative way, that Chanelle was a pre-op transsexual. Chanelle spoke with Shea's supervisor Jane Tessier about the situation. Tessier was unsympathetic, and sided with Shea against Chanelle. The harassment continued, and Chanelle began to hear from more and more people that she should transfer. About 6 weeks after the conversation with Tessier, Chanelle was fired. The excuse was an incident between Chanelle and Shea. Chanelle's twin Gabrielle left the company one month later. They turned to "supporting themselves off boyfriends". Gabrielle has since admitted turning tricks, and Chanelle is know to have also done so.

Male to female transsexuals like Chanelle and Gabrielle face a difficult life path. If they cannot pass as "real women", they will be hired only for the most degrading and lowest paying jobs. They will be harassed regularly, and find themselves shunned by much of society. Those that can pass as women can land more respectable jobs, but then must live with the inner paranoia and personal distance it takes to maintain a false front. Those that manage to land a decent job and gradually let their mask slip without getting fired often find the world a lonely and insincere place. Rural transsexuals have been burned out of their homes, while urban girls perish by drugs, AIDS and murder with alarming regularity. Things are beginning to change, and a few transsexuals in some urban centers and corporations are actually beginning to be regarded as specially gifted individuals. But for most, it's a world so discouraging that for many it's fatal. Indeed, the mortality rate among transsexuals is far greater than that for any other identifiable population group, with the possible exception of young urban black men. In 1995, there were 22 reported murders of gay folks, and three reported murders of transsexuals. Given that there is something like one TS per 50,000 people, and about one in 15 people are gay, a TS is about 450 times more likely than a gay man to be murdered. Of course, these numbers are almost complete guesses, but even if both guesses are off by a factor of 10, and the ratio is only 4.5 to 1, that's still a cause for some legitimate concern. We have identified an easily recognized group of people who are at particular risk of murder. Furthermore, it takes just a few questions asked at any service provider to determine that this group is vitally underserved by our law enforcement, court and family services systems.

CHAPTER TWO: THE HOOPLA

My first contact with this case came on the evening of Wednesday, November 22. I left work early that night, as it was a Wednesday, and I hosted GenderTalk radio each Wednesday, as I had been doing for about 6 months at that time. I was driving home from my client Lucent Technologies in North Andover, MA, where I was doing design engineering on a new telecommunications access system. North

Andover is the next town over from Haverhill, where Deborah Forte was murdered. That murder, in an incredible coincidence, happened on the same day that I was in Falls City, Nebraska demonstrating with Riki Anne Wilchins, Leslie Feinberg, Kate Bornstein, Tonye Barreto-Neto, and about 35 other activists outside the courthouse where the trial of a man for the murder of Brandon Teena, an FTM transsexual, was getting underway. I turned on the radio for some company on the 45 minute drive, and just caught the tail end of a news story that said something about a transsexual being found dead in some guy's bedroom, and how the guy said that he didn't know "she was a he". I was instantly riveted to the radio, but they moved on to other stories. I frantically scanned the other stations on the dial for more news, and came across a talk show with people talking about the incident. The program turned out to be the Howie Carr show, sort of Boston's version of Rush Limbaugh with even less style, intelligence, and integrity. Howie was taking calls, and people were asking questions about the girl and guy, but Howie kept saying things like 'I don't care about the transsexual, what I wanna know is, what is this guy doing hanging around with such lowlives in the first place?' I was incensed, but by this time driving on the interstate, miles from a phone. The night was nasty cold outside, and I wasn't dressed for it. I had the car's heater on full and still shivered. I knew that if I called and was able to get through to the station, I'd have to wait on hold outside in some phone booth, lightly dressed in a biting cold wind. I drove for home, hoping to make the call after I arrived, but the program moved on to another topic after about 10 minutes. During that time, only one caller said something sympathetic about the murder victim. The rest all decried the perversion of finding ones self in bed with a transsexual.

On the way home, I picked up a paper, and the story there wasn't much better. The story basically told how William Palmer was a nice upstanding young man, with interview of his neighbors and employer. All it said of the victim was that she was a transsexual prostitute.

CHAPTER THREE: THE TRIAL

CHAPTER FOUR: AFTERMATH

I realize now that I made a mistake, a mistake that might have made the difference between Palmer being convicted for manslaughter (at least) and what happened. My mistake was that I got caught up in the argument over whether he knew that Chanelle was a transsexual. By allowing the debate about Palmer's innocence or guilt to be framed around the question of whether he knew Chanelle was TS or not, I was misled into barking up the wrong tree, wasting my energy in fruitless effort. The defense counsel, I think, knew this and used it to his advantage. He knew, I think, that it didn't make a bit of difference what Palmer knew about Chanelle. What mattered, was how she died.

Palmer's guilt or innocence hinged on cause of death. Palmer admitted to being with Chanelle, and being the only person with Chanelle, from the last time she was alive until she was dead. He admitted to struggling with her. The only question was, did he kill her on purpose, by accident, or did she die by some other cause.

That's it, that's what I wrote back then. You can read more about this case on these pages:

GenderTalk: "[Another TS Murder in Boston Area](#)", Nov 1995

GenderTalk: "[Call to Action](#)", 12/10/96

GenderTalk: "[Activists Respond to Transsexual Murders](#)", Dec 1996

Boston Globe: "[Sibling Decries Murder Acquittal](#)", By Francie Latour, 5/3/97 (reprinted without permission)

Boston Globe: "[Facts, Decision Hard to Explain](#)", By Patricia Smith, 5/19/97 (fee for non-subscribers)

GenderTalk: "[Activists Demo for Murdered Transsexual Chanelle Pickett](#)", 2/27/97

GenderTalk Radio: [Interview with Gabrielle Pickett](#), May 7, 1997

Boston Phoenix: "[Travesty of Justice](#)" by Kevin Rothstein, May 1997

TransGriot, a blog by Monica Roberts: "[Chanelle Pickett](#)", 11/21/07

Transadvocate, a blog by Marti Abernathy: "[Remembering Our Dead, Echos From Our Fallen Sisters](#)", 2/17/08

Every year, the Transgender community gathers to remember those whose lives were stolen by violence. This worldwide event was inspired by the vigil held for murdered transsexual Rita Hester in Allston in late 1998, whose murder still remains unsolved. Please join with us this November for the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance. For the latest information about this and other events, please visit www.masstpc.org/dor.