Gary Heidnik Biography

Gary Heidnik

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Biography

Gary Heidnik died by lethal injection in 1997 for the murders of two women in his North Philadelphia home. When he was captured, police found other women being held captive in his basement. Heidnik was born in 1944 and raised in Ohio, but his family disowned him by the mid-1960s. Over the next twenty years, he was hospitalized two dozen times and attempted suicide on seventeen occasions. In 1978, he was convicted on kidnapping charges involving a developmentally disabled woman. In the mid-1980s, he abducted women, some of them prostitutes, whom he chained to pipes in his basement. Neighbors reported hearing loud noises, constant rock music, and occasionally the odor of burning flesh. But Heidnik's crimes were only discovered when a woman he had held captive for more than four months managed to flee from his car and contact the police. He was arrested immediately, and police found two other women in his basement chained to pipes and another inside a pit that Heidnik had dug. The captives reported that a mentally retarded woman had starved to death alongside them and that Heidnik had electrocuted a sixth. He fed them a mixture of dog food and ground human flesh, and body parts were found in a freezer.

In his 1988 trial, Heidnik pleaded insanity but was sentenced to death. He never contested the verdict, but the case traveled through the appeals process after being taken up by an anti-death penalty group. They claimed that Heidnik was schizophrenic and that to execute the mentally ill is immoral.