



REMEMBERING  
**SHARON TATE**

# MY SISTER'S MURDER

**45 YEARS AFTER MANSON**

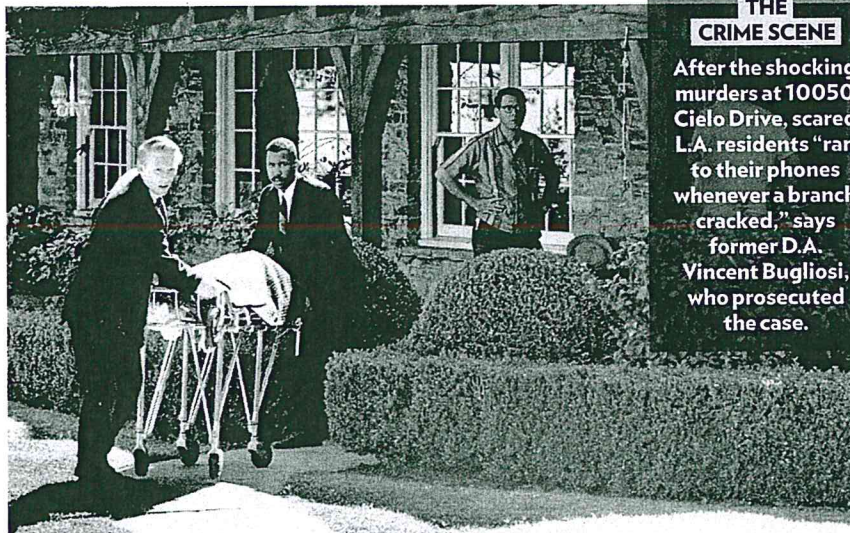
DEBRA TATE WAS JUST 16 WHEN HER SISTER WAS BRUTALLY KILLED BY FOLLOWERS OF CHARLES MANSON. NOW, MORE THAN FOUR DECADES AFTER THE MURDERS, SHE OPENS UP ABOUT THE HORROR OF THAT TIME AND HOW IT CHANGED HER FAMILY FOREVER **By ELAINE ARADILLAS**



Sharon Tate in  
1966 and sister  
Debra (inset).

It was an unusually warm day in Southern California on Aug. 9, 1969. The Tate family had just moved from Northern California to the Los Angeles area, where their oldest daughter, Sharon Marie, 26, was winning fame as Hollywood's latest "It Girl." Married to acclaimed director Roman Polanski, Sharon was 8½ months pregnant with the couple's first child, a boy, and the family was eagerly awaiting the birth of the baby. "Sharon was my mother's world," Debra Tate, then 16, remembers. "And she was my sun and my moon and what I modeled myself after as a person."

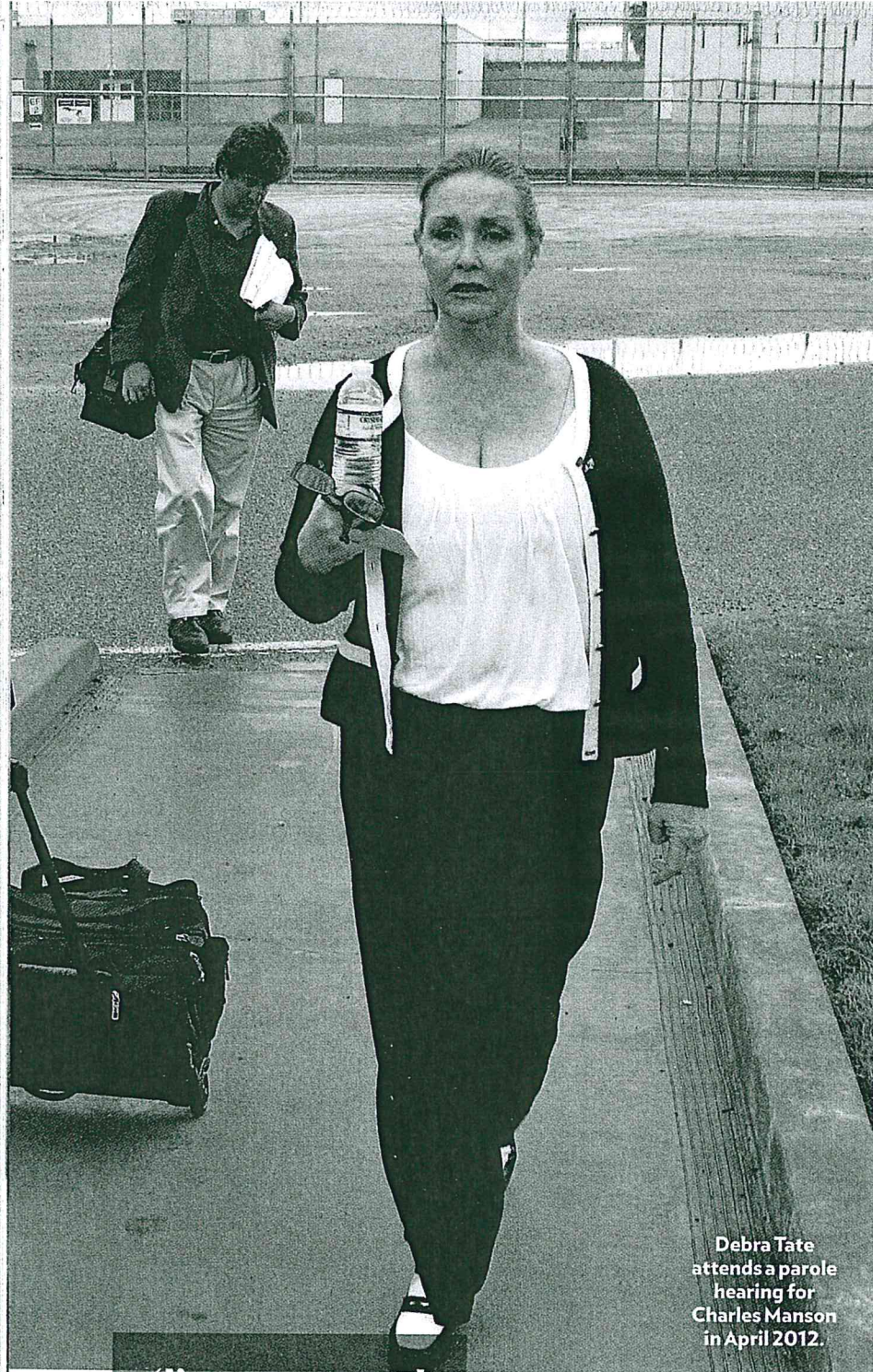
By mid-afternoon, as the temperatures rose, the girls' mother, Doris, sat down in the family kitchen to have a piece of coffee cake with a visiting neighbor while 11-year-old Patti watched cartoons in the den. Debra decided to take advantage of the break from unpacking to cool off with a quick shower. While she was in there, the phone rang—and the family's world fell apart. "My boyfriend at the time called to say he had heard on the radio that there was a fire at a house in Benedict



#### THE CRIME SCENE

After the shocking murders at 10050 Cielo Drive, scared L.A. residents "ran to their phones whenever a branch cracked," says former D.A. Vincent Bugliosi, who prosecuted the case.



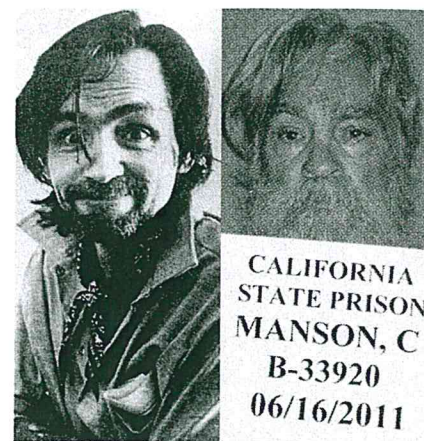


Debra Tate attends a parole hearing for Charles Manson in April 2012.

**'I've never read *Helter Skelter*. I don't read any books put out. I don't want my memories tainted'**  
—DEBRA TATE

Canyon and that one of the victims was Sharon Tate," Debra recalls. "My mom flung open the shower door and said, 'Sharon's dead.' She was crying and wailing and shaking and her knees buckled and I remember the horror that comes with watching my little sister's world crumble. It's very horrifying when your parents fall out from beneath you."

And the family's horror was just



CALIFORNIA  
STATE PRISON  
MANSON, C  
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#### CHARLES MANSON

Manson (in 1978 and 2011) was convicted of conspiracy to commit murder in 1971. "He can recognize crazy and recruit it," Debra says. Now 79, he was denied parole for the 12th time in 2012.

beginning. Over the next hours, days and months, the Tate family would learn that there had been no fire, that instead Sharon and friends Jay Sebring, Abigail Folger and Wojciech Frykowski, who were at the house that night, had each been stabbed dozens of times, their blood used to write messages on the walls of the home as part of Charles Manson's unhinged plan to start a race war he called "Helter Skelter." (Another man, 18-year-old Steven Parent, who had arrived at the home to visit groundskeeper William Garretson, was shot to death at the front gate.)

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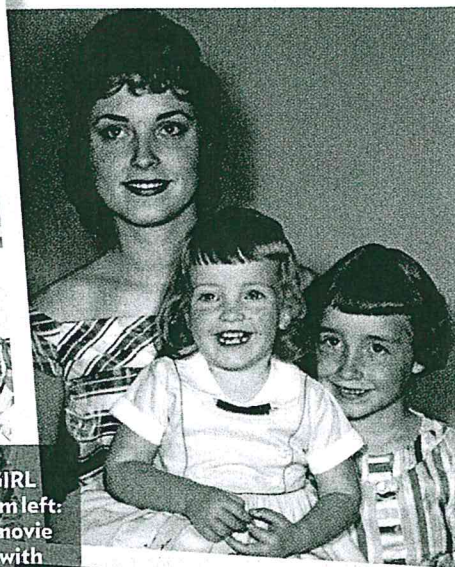
**Forty-five years later, Debra, now 61, sat** down with PEOPLE to discuss the night that changed her family's life and how they have spent a lifetime trying to move forward. "It's hard to determine if it's a dream or if you're awake," says Debra, who recently published *Sharon Tate: Recollection*, a book of iconic photographs of her sister. "The ones that are left behind are victims as much as the actual victims. We are here to suffer for years and years to come."

Even now the hours after that fateful phone call on Aug. 9 are forever seared in Debra's brain. "I got out of the shower without even rinsing the soap out of my hair and got on the phone," she says. "I felt like there must have





**GOLDEN GIRL**  
Clockwise from left:  
Sharon on a movie  
set in 1967; with  
sisters Debra (right)  
and Patti (center);  
with Polanski on  
their wedding day;  
two days before  
the murders.



been some sort of mistake." Tate called her father, Col. Paul Tate, who was wrapping up his 23-year Army career in San Francisco, to deliver the news. "He came down and went straight to the house," she says. He wandered in on the scene when they were still doing their detective work."

When he returned to the family home, Debra wanted answers. "I had to know what happened, and he needed to tell somebody," she says. "He said in all his time in the military, that he hadn't seen such slaughter. And he cried. I was stoic. I didn't allow myself to cry for years."

As detectives tried to piece together what had happened, they interviewed Debra about the time she had spent with her sister and friends in the days before the murders. After starring in 1967's *Valley of the Dolls* and other films, Sharon took a break from acting to get ready for the birth of her son. The last time her family saw her, Debra

recalls, their mother asked if she needed anything. Sharon looked at her round belly and smiled before replying, "I have everything I need."

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**Life in the Benedict Canyon house** "was really normal," Debra says. "Jay would take me out sometimes or bring food in. Abigail Folger loved to read; she always had her nose buried in a book. Wojciech liked to fly kites in the front yard, and we would swim. They had a young dalmatian puppy, and Sharon had a Yorkie puppy, Tom and Prudence."

After the murders, police found the two puppies hiding in a closet. "They were scared to death," says Debra. "We took Prudence home and found a home for Tom. I wouldn't leave him behind."

Debra remembers reporters showing up at her school and even flocking to the funeral. "They actually knocked me down, bloodied my knees and palms trying to get to my mother and Roman,"



# The Other Victims

"Other" is exactly the word Anthony DiMaria (inset) doesn't like used to describe his uncle Jay Sebring (right, with Tate). "All my life I've seen 'Sharon Tate and four others killed,' as if he's insignificant," DiMaria says. "I want people to know more about him." To that end DiMaria, 48, is making a film about Sebring, a hairdresser. "I still remember the moment my mom told me I couldn't see him again," he says. Also murdered in the house that night were the three pictured below; the next night, Manson's followers murdered supermarket executive Leno LaBianca and wife Rosemary. "So much fascination and attention has been paid to the crimes and killers," DiMaria says. "But for our families, the killings are a life sentence."



## WOJCIECH FRYKOWSKI

A friend of Roman Polanski, Frykowski, 32, and his girlfriend lived in Polanski's home while he worked on a movie project in Europe. After his death, his ashes were taken to Poland.



## ABIGAIL FOLGER

After getting an art history degree from Harvard, the coffee heiress, 25, and her boyfriend Frykowski moved from New York to Los Angeles. They were house-sitting at Tate's home that summer.



## STEVEN PARENT

A friend of the property's caretaker, the 18-year-old was working two jobs to save money for college. He was confronted by the killers near the front gate.



Jay Sebring and Sharon Tate once dated but remained friends after she married Roman Polanski.

**'These were all extremely wonderful, kind, smart, loving, good-looking people'**

—DEBRA TATE

Debra says. Grieving was made even harder by all the attention. "It's very private, yet so darn public."



**The trial and eventual convictions of** Manson's minions and the man himself—who called himself God upon arrest—intensified interest and cemented the horrific crimes in the public imagination. "Your mind cannot grasp how these people's motive was to go into strangers' homes and cause a

race war. I mean that's craziness," says Debra. And it utterly destroyed her family. "For my mother it was absolutely devastating, and she wasn't capable of getting beyond the pain. She fell into a horrible depression. She shut everything off. The lights were on, but nobody was home. She would have moments of lucidity, but most of the time she was sedated."

Their father worked on the case yet never talked about it. And he forbade the rest of the family to attend the trial.





'Sharon was being groomed to be a Marilyn Monroe-type bombshell, but she didn't take her looks seriously. **She was a jeans-and-T-shirt kind of girl**'

—DEBRA TATE

"If he was suffering, and I know now he was, we never saw it," she says. Debra was left to care for younger sister Patti, "making sure she had money, clothes put out, everything a mother would do."

More than a decade later, hearing that Manson Family members were petitioning for the convicted members' releases, Debra and her family fought back, appearing at every parole hearing and becoming well-known advocates for victims' rights. "When that phone call happened, you could see in my mother's face, 'Boom!' The lights went back on again for the first time, and she had a purpose," says Debra. "By helping others, you're actually helping yourself."

Debra, who lives in Riverside, Calif., and has a daughter, says her sister's murder was her life's defining moment. "It made me what I am." As long as she lives, she will battle to prevent parole for Sharon's murderers. "They're not supernatural, they're not the devil, they're nothing special, they're just little creeps," she says. And while she dreads the court hearings for the way they "make you relive it all," she finds satisfaction in seeing that "these people stay in prison for the rest of their lives. The people that we lost in this historical event were real, and they had lives and families. They're sorely missed." ●



**DEBRA'S TRIBUTE**

The book "doesn't have one ounce of anything to do with the ugly side of this," Debra says. "It was pure joy."