

Putting together pieces of a puzzle

By JACINTA CARROLL

JUSTINE Ford was still at school in April 1987 when news broke that two women had been brutally murdered in Cowra.

The attack, known as the Cowra axe murders, rocked the Central West.

Justine, now a journalist and author, has just published her second book, *One Piece Of The Puzzle*, examining 20 of this country's shocking and most complex murder cases, including the Cowra axe murders.

Justine, one of the country's most proficient crime journalists, has spent the past 20 years reporting on some of Australia's most shocking crimes on shows such as *Australia's Most Wanted* and *Missing Persons Unit*.

But in 1987, when the murders occurred, Justine was a teenager living in Orange, and she said she remembers them vividly.

"There was certainly a sense of fear [at the time] in the Central West," she said.

"The media at the time told us someone with an axe had murdered these two women, and for the people living in Bathurst and Orange these crimes were local.

"Everyone thought there was a crazed maniac running around when the reality was probably someone known to them."

Justine has spent the past 12 months working with police and the families of homicide victims putting together *One Piece Of The Puzzle*, which follows her first book, *Missing You*, which was released in 2012.

'Everyone thought there was a crazed maniac running around when the reality was probably someone known to them.'

Inspired by the victims' families, she said she decided to write *One Piece Of The Puzzle* almost as soon as *Missing You* was published.

"With *Missing You* I could see I was giving families some hope that there might be answers one day," she said, adding the families of victims and families of missing persons need help from the media.

"I think because of my time on *Australia's Most Wanted* I always believed the media could be used for good purposes, and

one way to do this was with my book."

Featuring clues and photos about unsolved homicides from the 1970s to the present day, *One Piece Of The Puzzle* also delves into some of Australia's most disturbing solved murders, revealing for the first time how police cracked these cases through police work, forensic science, and help from the public.

The book contains emotional appeals from families of the murdered, as they struggle to make sense of their harrowing circumstances.

While speaking about what happened to their loved ones no doubt opens old wounds, Justine said the families were still happy to talk.

"They can't rest until they find out who is responsible," she said.

Justine said she believes knowing she works alongside the police made the families feel they were in a safe space and could communicate what they wanted to.

"I told everyone to tell me exactly what they wanted to about their loved one so I could get a clear picture of who they were," she said.

"I wanted to respect that person and convey that they are so sorely missed."

She said the families were eager to get their stories out there not only to crack the case, but also to remember their loved ones.

Having finished her second book, Justine said she hopes to continue writing about unsolved

crimes.

"I've already been contacted by families asking if I write another book could I include their case in it," she said.

And is there one particular story or person that haunts the author?

"That's really hard to say because they [the victims] are all equally important," she said.

"And I have become friends with many of the families."

One family that stands out in her mind is that of missing Bathurst teenager Jessica Small, who featured in her

first book, *Missing You*.

"I know Jessica's case is about to go to inquest and I hope the police and Ricki [Jessica's mum] get the answers they so desperately need," she said.

Another family that comes to mind is that of Matthew Leveson, who disappeared from a Sydney nightclub in September 2007.

His story is featured in *One Piece Of The Puzzle*.

"I'm very close to Matt's family. They are so beautiful and so close to one another," she said.

"Through my book I'm very

much hoping I can help them find the clue to his disappearance.

"That one piece of information they need could come from someone in Sydney or someone in a regional area."

Justine said while *One Piece Of The Puzzle* is essentially a book about murder, it is also a book about life.

"About respecting people and finding the answers families need," she said.

"At the heart of the book is hope that with the readers' help, these unsolved files can be closed once and for all."