

[Transcript] True Sunlight / MMP #85: Who Murdered Stephen Smith? Part Seven: Stephen Smith's Death Now Officially A Homicide

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I don't know who killed Stephen Smith, but there have been several huge developments in the last week.

And finally, Sandy has a renewed hope to get justice for Stephen after nearly eight years, and that is a big deal.

My name is Mandy Matney. I have been covering this story for more than four years now.

This is the Murdoch Murders podcast. MMP is produced by my husband, David Moses, in Britain by journalist Liz Farrell.

Well, I didn't think things would get more chaotic after the trial, but here we are, battling yet another online troll campaign.

Seemingly designed to intimidate us out of seeking answers in the Stephen Smith case. It has been a week, y'all.

But the good news is that there have been several positive developments that have happened in the last few days.

In fact, we were in the middle of putting together this episode when we got a call from our Cup of Justice co-host, Attorney Eric Bland,

telling us he had some major news to share about the Stephen Smith case.

You have probably heard this by now, but Eric and his partner Ronnie Richter announced Monday that their law firm Bland Richter is now representing Sandy Smith,

and that their first order of business would be to get a court order to approve the exhumation of Stephen's body so that they could get a private autopsy.

For nearly eight years, the Smith family has tried to get law enforcement to pay attention to Stephen's case, to properly investigate his death as a murder and not as a hit-and-run.

To do that, his death needs to first be seen as a murder and not a hit-and-run. The independent autopsy would set that straight.

And for the past week, Sandy has been raising money on a go fund me for a private autopsy.

And then, on Tuesday afternoon, Eric Bland was shocked to get a phone call from South Carolina Law Enforcement Division Chief Mark Keel.

We recorded the moment Eric shared his news with us. Here is how it went down.

Okay, so Eric, you brought us here for something. What's going on?

Well, we're kind of, I only see a half shirt, but is that, this is a big deal, this is a big deal shirt?

Yeah, I only wear a merch now. It says that is a big deal. It's very comfortable. But yes, what is something going on? What?

I think we have a big deal to announce to MMP and COJ fans.

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You know, I had the honor of being retained to represent Sandy Smith a couple of days ago, and it's kind of been a whirlwind.

We've done a press conference. So what I'm going to say is for Sandy, but most importantly, what I'm going to announce is really for you guys, for Liz and Mandy, because you are the frontline warriors who have fought not only the Murdoch fight, but really, in keeping to the forefront, the Stephen Smith fight, while the Murdoch matters have been going on for the last two years, you know, Stephen Smith has taken a back burner, so to speak, and you constantly, in your podcast, and when we did COJ, and in our private conversations, we're constantly talking about Stephen Smith to make sure that he is not forgotten, that, you know, the Mallory Beach trials coming up, and the Murdoch trial came up, and all these victims had their, you know, are making their claims, and the one person that seems to have been forgotten is Stephen Smith. And just the way Mandy, you've befriended Sandy, and, you know, I saw how you treated her at your wedding, and that was one of the reasons why I decided to get involved and give my time to Sandy, so that, you know, we can give her answers, because the woman deserves peace.

Like I said, in my press conference yesterday, you know, a parent should never witness their child dying before.

And so for eight years, she wanted answers, and I think today we're getting some answers, because this afternoon,

I received a telephone call from Chief Mark Keel from SLID, who gave me permission to go on television,

obviously later on, or at a press conference, but I wanted to do it on our podcast, Mutual Podcast, to announce that he supports our decision to investigate the death of Stephen Smith.

And what he said is, amazingly, Eric, you don't have to exhume Stephen Smith's body to prove to SLID that Stephen Smith died by homicide and not by a vehicular accident.

He said, if you want to go out in the public and say, SLID supports you, that Stephen Smith died by homicide,

that he was killed somewhere else, or died in a way that was intentional, and not just hit by a car, you have our permission to do so.

More importantly, if you decide to go forward with exhuming his body, we want to be part of it. We want to be part of the process,

and we will partner with you, your firm, and the experts that you hire, to find out what happened to Stephen.

Right now, we don't know who murdered Stephen, but we do believe it was an intentional killing.

And we have not had this on the back burner, Chief Keele, SLID.

And, you know, you can imagine, guys, that my mouth is on the floor because, you know, never does law enforcement call you on the phone to share their thoughts with you.

And he said, contrary to what you may believe, we have not put Stephen on the back burner.

Yes, it's true that we didn't have the manpower to the horse power to keep up with this investigation during the Alex Murdoch matter,

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because we reassigned so many low-country resources to the murder investigation and ultimately the trial.

But now that the trial's over, we're going to reassign people to the Stephen Smith death, and we are willing to commit the resources, and we will share information with you, and it's our hope that you share information with us.

And we had planned on meeting with Sandy Smith and you next week to discuss all this.

But the takeaway was that the State of South Carolina has reached the conclusion that Stephen Smith was murdered.

Wow.

I can't imagine.

You can't imagine, you know, I'm sitting here, I'm like, well, well, thank you so much, Chief.

And he's like, you know, we don't want you going on TV and, you know, hammering us like I did in the Satterfield matter.

And I said, you know, I have not done that.

I said, for seven weeks of the trial, I was one of the rare pro-prosecution voices on TV.

And if you listen to our press conference and what we've said and what we say on our podcast, you know, we're not hammering sled.

We think that the way this investigation unfolded puts sled in a compromised position because a conclusion was reached too quickly that it was a highway accident that caused Stephen's death, which caused Highway Patrol to investigate it and not have those robust resources if it was deemed a homicide so sled could have investigated it.

So there you go.

That's awesome.

So everything that you guys really have fought for, you know, your journalistic integrity has certainly been questioned and certainly been attacked.

Not question is in the right word, more like attacked on Twitter or in the paper.

Are you sure you're right?

You remember after the verdict, we were all sitting together in Eric Allen's camper and we all kind of looked at each other and said, wow, you know, and I said, you guys were right.

Everything you said about the murder case turned out 100% right.

And and Mandy, you know, for for all these years and Liz, all these years, your articles and Mandy and your podcast constantly talking about Stephen Smith to the point that people are like, OK, yeah, I get it.

You believe that he was killed.

But, you know, it's been eight years.

What's the big deal?

And it was a big deal to you, Mandy, and obviously to you, Liz.

And so I wanted to call you guys to tell you you were my second call after I called my client.

Obviously, my obligations are to my client and you can imagine how emotional Sandy was.

But I wanted you guys to be the second phone call. So there you go.

I can't wait to talk to Sandy.

I mean, I can't imagine because I'm just so overwhelmed.

And she has been gaslit and told that, like, basically shoved to the side for almost eight years and

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has been fighting.

Like when we talk about fighters, she has led the charge.

Yeah, all the time that she's one of the most.

If I had all my clients be as articulate and kind and and commanding as she is when she talks, I'd have an easy job.

I mean, she she has fought the fight for her son, but she didn't fight it alone.

It was fought, obviously, by you guys.

I think it's interesting, though, that the exhumation, just the pushback that she has gotten over the last few days from people online.

So there's so many people who have supported this, obviously, because obviously it raised a lot of money.

Also, there's people that have just been questioning her integrity in wanting to do this and questioning what it would bring to in terms of answers.

So I think that this is such confirmation that we've all been on the right road and that Sandy's been on the right path this entire time.

Emotions were high on Tuesday.

During that Zoom call, I kept looking at Liz and thinking back to the time that was actually four years ago this month.

When we first met Sandy Smith at her sister's house in Hampton, South Carolina.

It was March 2019, our first time in Hampton, and we were terrified to even cross the county border.

I was going to go alone, but Liz saw how nervous I was and said those magic words.

I'll go with you. You shouldn't go alone.

We weren't nervous about meeting Sandy.

We were nervous about crossing into Murdoch territory to talk about something everyone seemed to be terrified to talk about.

Steven Smith's death.

Honestly, I was worried if it was a setup.

From the things I was seeing online, that fear didn't seem to be too farfetched.

But that fear just all melted away when Sandy greeted us at her sister's front door with her big blue eyes and warm hug.

I remember documents spread across the kitchen table and look in her eyes when she said, I'm telling you, he wasn't hit by a car.

He was murdered.

Then I remember getting into Liz's car after several hours of speaking to Sandy and her sister.

We looked at each other, drained from sadness and despair, and we both agreed we had to help her.

We didn't know how, we didn't know where to start, but if we didn't do something, who would?

Four years of twists and turns, backstabs, heartbreaks, and emotional roller coasters led us to yesterday.

When Sandy Smith finally got the validation she had been fighting for since 2015.

So of course, I had to hang up quickly with Eric and Liz and call Sandy.

How do you feel?

When I got the news, I was just like shocked and I was like shaking all over and I was like, oh my

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gosh, really?

And it was just like, like I couldn't breathe for a minute.

Same.

I can't imagine how you feel.

I actually cried for the first time in a while.

It felt good, didn't it?

Do you feel validated to finally, like, she feels saying the word murder?

Yes.

Oh my gosh, I've been waiting to hear that word forever.

And now what I've been fighting for is truth.

I want to repeat what she said because it's so important.

What I have been fighting for is now true.

She had to fight to hear the word murder from investigators for eight years.

Let that sink in for a second.

For eight years, Sandy has been dismissed, maligned, harassed, and betrayed time and time again.

It breaks my heart that it took so long and so much for officials to finally say what they should have said

from day one, that Stephen Smith was murdered.

Now, this is significant because to Sandy, this means for the first time that she knows in our heart the investigation is heading in the right direction toward justice and the truth.

And to hear law enforcement say that they support Sandy in her pursuit of the truth, that is a big deal.

And like, you're the one who knew all along.

Yes.

And, I mean, you never stopped fighting for Stephen.

No, absolutely not.

And I'm still trying to take all this in.

It was like, you know, sometimes you say, what's that a dream?

And then it's like, today is mom.

The day I've been waiting for is here, finally.

I feel like in the last few days, there's just been a lot of resistance and awful people out there.

Oh, yes.

How do you feel now that Chief Keel...

I mean, this is a huge leap and this never really happened.

For him to call a verdict and say all this.

How do you feel?

Elated. I'm overjoyed. I just can't explain it.

It's like this sense of peace has just washed over me.

Sandy.

I have you right now. I wish I was with you.

I wish you were here.

Soon after we hung up the phone, Cameracruz showed up to Sandy's home.

She held her chin high as she spoke to a national audience about her amazing son, Stephen Smith,

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who was murdered at 19 years old. Murdered.

So how did we get here?

Like I said, a lot happened in the last week.

So let's go back to the beginning.

The GoFundMe we told you guys about in the last episode exploded.

As of Tuesday evening, more than \$83,000 has been raised for Stephen Smith's independent exhumation

and autopsy, which is amazing.

I want to pause here and thank this community for continuing to support Sandy

and giving her and the Smith family the hope they need to continue this fight.

We believe the unexpected and overwhelming success of this fundraiser is not just about the money.

It has been a real show of force.

So many of you have Sandy's back and we love that so much.

We believe this heartfelt outpouring has already helped bring forward momentum to the case.

From the bottom of our hearts, thank you.

Of all the cases we've covered in this podcast,

this is the one that has weighed the heaviest on Mandy and me because of the cruelty of Stephen's death.

They left him in the road like he wasn't even a human being because of how much the Smith family has been held back from the very start

and because of how long they have gone without answers.

This is the case that keeps us up at night because it's a reminder of just how many people are scared to speak up

and do the right thing when other forces are at play.

Solving this case is important not only because Stephen and his family deserve the dignity of

knowing what happened to him and why,

but because it's a case that appears to have been influenced by outside forces in a way that points to potential internal corruption.

Trust in South Carolina's justice system needs to be restored,

and it won't be unless mothers like Sandy are heard.

Family members should not have to go to these lengths to get answers about what happened to their loved ones.

And let's be real here.

Money makes a huge difference in how our justice system works,

and money unfortunately can influence the outcome.

This fundraiser has already leveled the playing field for Sandy.

The overwhelming number of people who donated to Stephen's Eximation Fund is a huge sign that Sandy isn't going anywhere,

and her voice in this is only going to get louder.

But no good deed goes unpunished in this story.

Soon after the GoFundMe started to gain momentum,

people in the Murdoch's camp, paid bots and other amplifiers,

began broadcasting their disgust about the fundraiser spreading misinformation about Sandy's

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intentions here

and mischaracterizing the Eximation as some sort of attack on the Murdoch's.

The worst of the worst was when one shameless instigator of a television personality who has positioned herself as yet another villain in this case

by inserting herself into this mess without any apparent connections to it

said on Twitter that she doubted Sandy would use the money she was raising to actually exhume Stephen's body.

It wasn't just a baseless accusation.

It was mean, mean, mean, mean.

And that meanness has carried through in all aspects of Sandy's quest to get answers in a case that, unfortunately for her, is connected to the Murdoch family in some way.

This is a case where some people, whether they be trolls or bots or whoever,

seem way more concerned about where Sandy's donation money will go

than they do about what Ellic Murdoch did with the millions of dollars he has admitted to stealing from clients.

But that's a conversation for another day.

It's worth noting, though, that there will be transparency in how the money Sandy raised gets spent on this investigation.

The resistance we saw on social media was strange, and despite not being entirely shocking, it was a little unexpected still.

There also seemed to be a behind-the-scenes effort to misconstrue and spread lies

about the things Mandy and I have reported on this podcast in relation to the Stephen Smith case.

Suddenly, we were getting inundated with tweets from sketchy accounts accusing us of blaming Buster Murdoch

for the murder of Stephen Smith, which we have never done.

This was strange, but unfortunately also familiar.

However, all the backlash we saw over the weekend, which we believe was designed to essentially kill the momentum

toward getting answers in this case, only made it even more clear to us that we are on the right path.

And Tuesday's news confirmed that we are on the right path.

As time has passed with no answers for the Smith family, we have begun to question whether there is something more here

and whether there could be a network of nefarious people who don't want the truth to come out about Stephen's death, whatever that truth may be.

But those people cannot and will not stop the power of a mother's unending love for her son.

We'll be right back.

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Over the weekend, it became very apparent with the success of the GoFundMe and the false narratives being pushed on Twitter

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that Sandy needed an attorney to help her in this fight.

Her former attorney, Mike Hamlap, has taken another job working for the city of Columbia.

Sandy needed a lawyer for several reasons.

She needs someone to set up a trust for the GoFundMe.

She needed someone who could help her do things like getting a judge's order to exhume the body and finding the right pathologist to do the autopsy.

She needed a real bulldog attorney.

Someone who will fight for her, make noise, and do everything they can to keep the current momentum in the Stephen Smith case going forward

and use that momentum to solve this case, something that Sandy has been waiting for for nearly eight years.

So, who did she call?

Well, everyone's favorite attorney, Eric Bland, our co-host on Cup of Justice, of course.

Sandy met Eric when she attended the Glorious Gift Foundation press conference back in June.

Glorious Gift is a nonprofit started by Gloria Satterfield's family.

Like Mandy and me, Eric was immediately taken by Sandy's kindness, her selflessness, and her relentless perseverance in her quest to get justice for her son.

And like so many others, Eric wanted to do everything in his power to help her.

Over the weekend, Sandy Smith quietly retained Eric Bland and Ronnie Richter as her attorneys, both of whom are not taking fees in this case.

And on Monday, right out of the gate and true to the bland Richter style that was so effective for the Satterfields and the Plilers, they made a lot of noise about it.

Here are Ronnie and Eric at a press conference announcing this new partnership.

Yeah, good morning. This is Ronnie Richter, partner of the Bland Richter law firm.

My partner Eric Bland and I are honored today to announce our representation of Sandy Smith as it relates to a renewed investigation into the death of her son, Steven Smith.

On July 8, 2015, at approximately 4 a.m., Steven Smith's body was found in the middle of Sandy Run Road in Hampton County.

There were no skid marks around his body. There were no, there was no vehicular debris found. His loosely tied shoes were still on his feet.

His motor vehicle was about three miles away on Bamberg Road with the gas cap removed.

And while it would appear that his car broke down and he had walked for help, he never called for help from the cell phone that was found on his body.

Sandy Smith has never accepted the conclusion of the cursory investigation that followed his death, that concluded that his death was a result of a hit and run.

And it is our job today, is our honor today to launch a new investigation into this death in the hopes of finding real answers to the questions that still persist surrounding Steven's death.

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for attending this press conference and the introduction of Blaine Richter into this investigation.

I've been a lawyer for 35 years and many of our cases come to us after other people have represented clients.

And so this is nothing different than what we've had many times in our career.

What we're going to do is start over. We're going to hire experts who are going to come into this

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case with a fresh set of eyes, with an open mind, without any preconceived conclusions.

Being objective and wherever the facts go, that's where the investigation will go.

We've been hired and we're going to give our time to petition the court to get permission to exhume the body of Steven.

We're going to have to show good cause to the court, why they should do it, because in our state, like in every other state, people who have died have rights.

They don't end when their heartbeat stops. And Steven has a right not to have as grave disturbed as do other people who are buried.

And so we're going to have to petition the court, show facts that would indicate that a fresh set of eyes and new autopsy may yield a different conclusion that Steven was not killed on Sandy Run Road, that maybe he was killed somewhere else.

And if we get that permission, Ronnie and I are going to supervise and oversee the exhumation process, making sure it's respectfully done. You have to have a funeral director there.

There has to be protocols put in place to make sure that the remains are not disturbed any more than they should be, and do it in a respectful fashion.

And hire investigators who are going to go back and do a Steven Smith 2.0. This is not a Alex Murdoch 2.0 or any Murdoch 2.0. This is a Steven Smith 2.0.

It's all about Steven. And what we intend to do is look at his life, you know, look at the life 90 days before July 8, 2015.

Look at who he was associating with, who are his friends, what kind of communications did he have, what were his plans.

We knew that he was a nursing student and obviously wanted to become a doctor.

We think a lot of the pre-death communications can be relevant. We also think that post-death communications on different people could yield some information.

One of the things that we can do is start a civil suit to look at the cause of death, which would give us subpoena power, as well as discovery rights under the South Carolina Rules of Civil Procedure. But all those are decisions that are going to be made down the road. Our job is not to find out who did it. That's not what we do. We're not law enforcement.

We're not doing a criminal case. We're helping an investigation and what we're really trying to do is give a mother answers.

Parents should never have to witness children dying before them. And Sandy has witnessed that. And for eight years, all she has is questions.

And we're very grateful for law enforcement for what they've done so far to date on this case. We know that in September 2021, they opened an investigation in Stephen's death.

And we have maintained that SLED should have been and is the proper investigative agency for Stephen's death.

And so we intend to share anything that we may find in our own investigation with law enforcement. There's no secret sauce here. There's no intent on us trying to trump anybody.

It's our goal that we can all work jointly together.

Because of incorrect reporting that's been out there and other mischaracterizations online, I want to quickly clear up something about how this new partnership came to be and why Sandy sought new counsel.

After the murders of Maggie and Paul Murdoch, when attention was being brought to other

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suspicious cases in the Murdoch's realm, a friend of a friend of Sandy's told her that Charleston attorney Andy Savage was willing to represent her and help her with her case.

Andy Savage is a highly reputable and well-connected attorney, so this seemed promising at the time.

I was so happy to hear that there would finally be some muscle behind Sandy's search for answers. And I was especially happy because the first call that Sandy had received from SLED after the murders was not about them wanting to help her find out what happened to Stephen, but rather to assess whether she or anyone in her family was responsible for the killing of the Murdochs.

It was a slap in the face then, in a bigger slap in the face now that we know that Ellick was the one who killed his own family.

On July 7th, 2021, one day before the six-year anniversary of Stephen's death and a month after the Murdoch murders,

Sandy was sent a formal letter from the Savage law firm outlining Andy Savage's plan to manage the onslaught of media requests that she was getting and to serve as a liaison to law enforcement.

Attached to that letter was a representation agreement that needed to be signed, as well as copies of Freedom of Information Act requests that his office had already sent to SLED,

the South Carolina Department of Safety, which oversees the Highway Patrol, Collettin County Sheriff's Office, Hampton County Sheriff's Office,

the Hampton County Coroner's Office, and the Collettin County Coroner,

aka the man who took the stand in Ellick Murdoch's trial and told the nation that he determines time of death by feeling under victim's armpits.

Oh, and the 14-circuit solicitor's office, of which Ellick was a badge-carrying member.

It is not clear why Collettin County was included in these foyers as Stephen was found dead in Hampton County.

Collettin County, however, borders Hampton County.

In fact, Moselle, which is just a few miles away from where Stephen's body was found, is partially in both counties.

In the following months, in the summer of 2021, Sandy did not talk to the media, including me.

She told me later that she had been informed by Andy's office that she wasn't allowed to speak to the press, and if she did, she would be dropped as a client.

That seemed odd to me.

Talking about Stephen's murder publicly when all eyes were on the Murdoch family would have only helped Sandy in her mission to get answers.

And it seemed especially odd when in late October 2021, Andy Savage was quoted in the press saying that the Murdochs might not be connected to Stephen's death or that the suspects that his team had identified.

That this media focus on the Murdochs may be unfounded.

Quote, there are suspects we have in sight that are unconnected to Murdoch.

Savage told ABC News reporter Ann Amerson that they had suspects in sight who were unconnected to the Murdochs.

He didn't say who those suspects were.

The interview caught Sandy completely off guard, though she knew that Andy and his private

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investigator felt the Murdochs might not be involved.

They did not expect him to publicize this or any other aspect of the investigation without there being an official word for law enforcement or at the very least before talking to her and telling her about what they found.

Let's not forget that it's been over a year and a half since Savage said that about suspects and there have been no arrests for Stephen's murder.

Moore has sled the agency handling the actual investigation publicly spoken about whether the Murdoch family is or is not connected to the case.

Instead, on Tuesday, sled announced their support for the Smith family and even went so far to tell Eric Bland that they believe the people will be more forthcoming now that the Murdoch trial is over. So basically, Andy's big act as Sandy's attorney was for all intents and purposes, it seemed like to publicly exonerate the Murdochs without explaining how this reconciled with a case file that contained dozens of references to their potential involvement.

Because he had spoken to the media without warning her, Sandy decided to end her agreement with Andy Savage.

She later paired with Columbia attorney Mike Hemlip, who you have heard on this podcast. Hemlip recently took a government position, which impeded his ability to serve as her official attorney in the criminal investigation.

But this break with Andy Savage has been mischaracterized online, specifically by uninformed onlookers who seem to take a perverse pleasure in furthering the false narrative that Sandy is out to get the Murdochs.

That she was upset by Andy's declaration that this might not have anything to do with the Murdochs, which caused the relationship to end.

This obviously is not remotely true. Sandy wants answers and does not care one bit whether the Murdochs are found to have anything to do with the case or not.

The only reason the Stephen Smith case is connected to the Murdochs right now is because investigators at the South Carolina Highway Patrol and the Smith family were told this in 2015, in the days and weeks after Stephen's murder.

Which brings me to another aspect of this that needs to be cleared up. In July 2016, just over a year after Stephen was murdered, Sandy sent letters to the FBI and to the US Attorney General pleading for their help.

These letters are now being characterized as defamatory by those with ill intentions. So let's talk about that.

Stephen's case is not one that the FBI or the Attorney General of the United States would ordinarily look into. That is for several reasons.

Local agencies were not asking the feds for help. Stephen's murder was not, as far as anyone knows anyway, connected to any larger federal investigation.

Stephen's death did not happen on federal property and his death did not involve more than one state. Sandy was desperate for someone to actually investigate the case and she was getting nowhere with state agencies.

She had to explain to the FBI and to the Department of Justice why she needed them to take the case.

What made this investigation problematic? So Sandy told the feds what she was being told about her

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son's death and why she thought there might be a problem with the investigation.

My family is in desperate need of your help and time is critical. My son, Stephen Nicholas Smith, was murdered on July 8, 2015. Sandy wrote to Loretta Lynch, who was the US Attorney General at that time.

Stephen's father, my ex husband and I were first told he was shot to death after running out of gas. Later that day we were told it was a hit and run.

Finally, investigators determined he was beaten to death. He was beaten so severely that the entire side of his face was rebuilt with putty for his funeral.

There have been no named suspects and the Hampton investigators asked us at that time to publicly say it was a hit and run. They claimed they didn't want the killer to know they were looking for him. It has been apparent from the first week of this investigation that authorities are covering up critical evidence. Sandy then laid out the pieces of the puzzle that she couldn't make sense of.

This included references to the Murdoch family. She told the Attorney General that the Murdochs are probably the most prominent family in Hampton County.

She shared what Stephen's older brother had been told about how Stephen was killed. She recounted the early contact the family had gotten from Randy Murdoch, Alex's older brother.

She told the AG how Stephen had told his twin sister and friends that he was, quote, involved romantically with someone from a prominent family in the county who was hiding his sexuality. He said that it would shock people to know this person was gay.

Sandy also wrote about the strange circumstances surrounding Stephen's phone and investigators' attempts to get information off of it.

And she wrote about what her family had been told about the Murdochs, quote, we desperately need your help.

This investigation is being deliberately derailed and we no longer know who we can trust.

We need someone to hold the investigators accountable and access Stephen's phone before it is too late.

Mr. Murdoch is widely known and it seems this is playing to his advantage. We need someone who doesn't care about his family name to take this case seriously. I thank you immensely for your time and help.

Sandy's mention of the Murdoch name throughout the letter has been the focus of some in the Murdoch camp who claim that her citation of what she was hearing about the case to law enforcement constitutes defamation.

And it's this idea that a person telling law enforcement about the reasons that they think corruption might be a foot in the investigation into their son's death somehow constitutes defamation that got spread and amplified by bots, trolls, and people in the Murdoch camp.

On Sunday, Bland Richter put out a notice to the media that there would be a press conference early Monday morning to announce that they'd be representing Sandy Smith in her efforts to initiate an independent exclamation of her son's body.

Less than an hour before the press conference was set to begin, Boster Murdoch, whose name appears several times in the Stephen Smith case file, put out a statement through Jim Griffin, who was one of Ellick's attorneys in the murder case.

Here's that statement.

Before, during, and since my father's trial, I have been targeted and harassed by the media and

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followers of this story. This has gone on far too long.

These baseless rumors of my involvement with Stephen and his death are false.

I unequivocally deny any involvement in his death and my heart goes out to the Smith family. I am requesting that the media immediately stop publishing these defamatory comments and rumors about me.

So before I say what I want to say here, let's first acknowledge something. Boster is a victim and should not be targeted or harassed because of something his father did. That should go without saying.

Also, I feel like we need to say this really loudly for the people in the back. There is no evidence that we know of that Boster Murdoch killed Stephen Smith or had anything to do with his death.

The only connection we have ever cited between Boster and the Stephen Smith case is that his name and his family's names appear in the investigation file dozens of times.

No one in the case file admitted to directly witnessing what happened to Stephen. That is it. And that is a fact. We cannot change what law enforcement put on the record.

We have both repeatedly said publicly that we have great sympathy and empathy for what Boster has been put through.

We talk to people who genuinely love him and who are worried about him, and we keep that in mind in our reporting.

The amplifiers on social media, however, have erroneously conflated the actions of others and the reporting of others with our actions and our reporting.

That is by design and it is an intentional conflation. Why? Because attacking our integrity as journalists is meant to call the facts of our reporting into question.

So with Buster, there have now been two incident reports filed with the Beaver County Sheriff's Office about true crime influencers who have been masquerading as reporters apparently and following Buster and his girlfriend,

taking pictures of him when he's inside their condo and getting caught snooping in the windows of his girlfriend's car.

On March 11th, deputies were contacted by a woman who has been following the case who reported that one of the people targeting Buster was posting disturbing messages online, including the ominous message that, quote, Buster was next.

The woman told law enforcement that this man is involved in several lawsuits and, quote, uses this type of behavior to gain views on social media platforms.

That's who we're dealing with here. That is the type of person that the Murdoch camp wants people following this story to believe we are.

And my God, we are so far from that. We have never and would never publish any of those photos, nor would we ever condone such gross, depraved and dangerous behavior toward any victim of violent crime.

Until one more time for the record, leave Buster Murdoch alone, be wary of sharing stories from news sources that use photos of Buster that were likely gotten through harassment, and be wary of comments on social media that mask as news reports.

Okay, so let's quickly talk about those bots amplifying false information about our reporting on the Stephen Smith case and the misinformation that's being put out by people with unclear motivations. When Sandy first announced her fund for the exhumation, she was criticized for targeting the

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Murdochs. The mere act of her wanting to get answers in her son's murder is being seen as an attack on them.

Amplifiers are spreading the message that Sandy is somehow up to no good because she doesn't trust law enforcement enough to believe that they will get her son's death reclassified as a murder and is taking matters into her own hands after remaining hopeful for eight years.

And in spreading this message, the amplifiers are actually the ones implicating Buster in a way. How is it an affront to Buster that Stephen Smith's body is getting exhumed? How is it an attack on the Murdochs that Stephen Smith's body is getting exhumed?

We get that exhuming Stephen's body prolongs the quote, negative press that the Murdochs have been getting since the boat crash, but whose fault is that?

Is Sandy supposed to hang out in the shadows and wait for justice because the Murdoch family wants to move on from this?

If the Murdoch family wants their name not to be associated with the Stephen Smith case, then there is something they can do about it right now.

They can actually help get answers about who did this to Stephen, why they did this to Stephen, and why this investigation was handled in such a strange and unusual way.

We'll be right back.

So, what's next? Now that Sled has publicly shown support for Sandy and her team, now that they've said that they believe witnesses will speak, now that tides have turned in Hampton County and power has shifted,

now that they finally have the resources and the manpower to dedicate to Stephen's case, now that Sled is finally calling this a murder,

and said they believe a small circle of people in Hampton County know who did this, now that Sled is proving itself not to be an agency for the good ol' boys, but an agency for the people.

Now that Sled said that they didn't need an autopsy to know that Stephen was murdered, and now that Sandy has two lawyers willing to go to the end of the earth to fight for her.

So I asked Eric, what's next?

Eric, a quick question that I had for you. Conspiracy theory brain has to go off and just want to make sure you guys are still going through with the independent exhumation and what's the plan for that? So the response that is absolutely 100%, even though the chief keel does not think it's necessary, we do. One, we believe it's necessary for Sandy's peace of mind.

Two, we want to reverse the death certificate. We want to reverse the coroner's report that indicate that he died as a highway incident. That's important to us. It's going to be important to ultimately, if through our efforts,

I have a feeling that Sled has much better resources than we will ever have to find out who did it. I mean, that's going to be the ultimate question. And that may never be answered by the way, guys. It can be. Yeah.

We want to give Sandy the peace of mind to have a death certificate to say that her son was murdered.

We want a coroner. And I know, was it Dr. Presnell in Charleston, who, you know, she had a couple of disputes with, you know, officer Moore and some other officers or Sled officials that, you know, disputed that this was not a highway killing.

We want her to reverse her report and we'll get our, we'll get our own coroner's report pathology

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report. Excuse me. So to answer your question, the conspiracy theory, we are full speed ahead. This money wasn't raised in vain.

From the go fund me, we are going to use it. And as I said yesterday, we're going to be transparent about it. It's going to be funneled all into this investigation. We're pushing all our chips to the middle of the table.

And this, you know, do I feel good? Yeah, I feel good, but I feel really good for you too. And I feel really good for Sandy Smith.

What was it like telling her, Eric, delivering that news after all this time?

It was his, you know, is, you know, I'm a father. So it was emotional to tell a mother that, you know, want your son's murdered. I mean, is that a good thing to tell somebody no, but that she was right, you know, and that,

you know, it's worth the fight. She was right. She was right. You were right. You two were right. You two were right.

So while this was a great day for justice, there is also a lot of work to be done and a lot of things that need to change with our system. Here is the end of our conversation Tuesday night.

Yeah, but I got to say this, guys, like, this is great. But how did this become a hit and run? I mean, we can't, we got a, the fact that this was allowed to be called a hit and run for eight years.

That speaks to just how broken the system is.

That's your job.

When Sled's job, Sled needs it, it needs to be investigated as obstruction for obstruction. Absolutely. I'm not hammering Sled on this. I don't know whether there was competing agencies.

I just think that somebody needs to investigate it as somebody needs to investigate the investigation as to what the, what happened.

It's a pattern.

It's, yeah. And is it as simple as it was a lazy, let me, let me just posit this. Is it as simple as it was just a lazy, easy conclusion?

Because Stephen Smith was a young gay man of not a prominence that really wasn't worth fighting for. Is that the possibility too?

No. Not at all.

There's no way. There's no way. I, I, I cannot possibly think of any way that the, that the investigation would have gone in the direction that it did.

And stopped the way that it did without any answers whatsoever, unless someone powerful was intervening. I, I can't.

That's another battle to deal with with all of us, not only who, who killed Stephen, but who knew that this investigation was completely wrong and completely skewed in the wrong direction purposefully and who didn't do anything about it.

And I'm not blaming Sled for that. I truly do believe that I think a lot went on on that scene that we don't know about.

While I don't blame Sled for what happened the first six years of the investigation, I also understand that they simply did not have the resources before now to do this investigation properly.

And I believe that they have the power now to right a lot of wrongs.

Let's be clear here. Sled not only needs to arrest and charge whoever is responsible for Stephen's murder, they need to arrest and charge every person who helped cover it up.

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Every single person whose actions delayed justice for the Smith family needs to be held accountable. Every official who complied with corruption in a case like this must be dragged into the sunlight. So yeah, we have a lot of work to do. Stay tuned, stay pesky, and stay in the sunlight.

The justice system can be intimidating, but it doesn't have to be. Join us to hold public agencies accountable because we all want to drink from the same cup of justice and it starts with learning about our legal system.

With tales from the newsroom and the courtroom, Liz Farrell, Eric Blanda, and I invite you to gain knowledge, insight, and tools to hold public agencies and officials accountable.

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