

[Transcript] True Sunlight / MMP #86: Solving Stephen Smith's Case, Clearing Up Misinformation and What's Next with the Exhumation

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I don't know why the Stephen Smith investigation went so sideways from the get-go, but after almost eight years, I believe the investigation is finally heading in the right direction, and I believe justice is coming for the Smith family.

My name is Mandy Matney.

I have been covering the Murdoch family for more than four years now.

This is the Murdoch Murders podcast.

MMP is produced by my husband, David Moses, and written by journalist Liz Farrell.

Well, happy Wednesday.

I started to say that it's another busy week at Luna Shark Productions, but honestly, is it ever slow?

I was silly thinking that things would slow down after the trial.

But I'm glad that things are finally speeding up, exactly where they should, toward justice for Stephen Smith.

I just have to say this for the sake of clarity.

This is called the Murdoch Murders podcast for the moment, but we aren't by any means accusing the Murdoch family of killing Stephen Smith.

The case has been tied to the Murdochs in several ways, starting with a case file where the Murdoch name was mentioned more than 40 times, which I counted individually on my own.

There has been a ton of buzz in the Stephen Smith case, which is a great thing.

Just like they did in the Gloria Satterfield case, attorneys Eric Bland and Ronnie Richter have done a full court press, ensuring Stephen's case is front and center in the media.

And it has worked.

Just a few weeks after the GoFundMe was started by Sandy Smith, more than 3,000 people have donated a total of \$113,000 that will go toward an independent exhumation, autopsy, and investigation

into Stephen Smith's death.

There has been significant progress in the last week.

In fact, we got some great news as we were recording this episode that we will share at the end of this podcast.

We'll also hear from Sandy and Eric at the end of this episode.

And the progress goes to show that where there is darkness, there can also be sunlight.

Speaking of things that need sunlight, as you all know, the trial of Ellick Murdoch has

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brought a whole new level of interest in the many cases connected to the family.

And obviously the biggest focus right now is on the Stephen Smith case.

We talked about this last week, but we continue to see a lot of misinformation out there.

Misinformation that is being used to push a narrative that could be harmful to the case itself.

And what we mean by that is this.

We strongly believe that this case remains unsolved because it was handled in a way that prevented it from being solved.

I want to pause and let that sink in because that is one of the most important factors in the ability to solve the case now.

We obviously can't control the narratives out there or stop people from sharing their incorrect certions and assumptions, but we can and will call them out when we see them.

Someone and likely more than just one person knows what happened to Stephen Smith and more than that knows why Stephen's case remains unsolved.

Amplifying lies and drawing uninformed conclusions only serves to help that someone or those of someone who don't want this case to be solved.

So the first thing we want to talk about is the case file itself.

In 2019, I was given the unredacted version of this file when we were at the island packet.

We are not the only ones who are in possession of that file.

Since the murders, bits and pieces of this unredacted file, including the entire file itself, have been shared, not by us, with producers of various true crime shows.

The indiscriminate sharing has resulted in foreseeable problems like photos of Stephen's body being published without permission of the Smith family or so much as a warning to them.

It has also resulted in people using the file to legitimize their own questionable armchair investigations into this case, which in some instances could be considered interference.

As journalists, we have a problem with that.

We understand how decisions get made about what content to run, but the fact that the unredacted file has been out there and traded upon for no other reason than personal gain is disturbing and reckless.

The way we used that file prior to 2021 was to inform our reporting.

It has helped us understand what happened in the investigation in the months after Stephen's murder and why the investigation stopped.

That file was dangerous, and we understood that.

First, releasing it would have exposed the identity of the people brave enough to speak to investigators.

This in and of itself has put people at risk.

Second, it would have outed people who may or may not have been in the closet.

Whether or not they were considered people of interest.

Third, it would have exposed to the killer or killers what investigators knew about Stephen's death and what they didn't know.

And fourth, we had no way of knowing that what we had in our possession was the complete file, whether it was a true representation of the sum total of what had been done in

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the Stephen Smith case.

That was the unredacted report.

The redacted report was released shortly after the murders of Maggie and Paul.

Sometime in late June 2021, it was announced that Sled had found evidence prompting them to take over the Stephen Smith case.

After that, the South Carolina Highway Patrol released their redacted case file to the media.

This was problematic then, and it's problematic now.

It was problematic for all the reasons we've already said, but also, in June 2021, Stephen's case was an open case.

The normal course of action would have been for Highway Patrol to hand the file over to Sled, not release it.

Why?

To protect the people who had spoken to investigators and to protect the investigation itself. Even though the investigation up to that point had been questionable, it was still worth protecting the work that had been done, at least until Sled's investigators were able to make sense of things.

Now as you know, we are huge proponents of transparency, but transparency doesn't mean the reckless release of information.

South Carolina's Freedom of Information Act does not compel law enforcement agencies to release records or information that would interfere with a prospective law enforcement proceeding, or would deprive someone of a right to a fair trial, or an impartial adjudication, or would constitute an unreasonable invasion of personal privacy, or would expose the identity of a confidential source, or would disclose current techniques and procedures for law enforcement investigations or prosecutions, or would disclose current guidelines for law enforcement investigations or prosecutions if such disclosure would risk circumvention of the law, or would endanger the life or physical safety of any individual.

Usually, and in our experience, law enforcement agencies aren't typically handing over open case files without a fight.

In fact, in 2021, the post-encourager sued Sled in an effort to get investigation files in the Murdoch murder case.

They lost that fight.

So the release of Stephen's case was and is baffling.

Do we like having case files released?

Absolutely.

And only to the extent that it doesn't put people at great risk or screw up the investigation. Neither of us have met an investigator who would advocate for or be okay with the release of an open case file, especially one that included recordings of interviews.

There are a lot of reasons for this, but one of the big reasons would be that the release of those interviews not only could affect people's willingness to share information in this case, but in all cases moving forward, especially in Hampton County where things are so secretive.

It's hard enough to get people to do the right thing and tell police what they know, especially in cases that involve strong and deep-rooted power structures where there are

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potentially serious consequences.

So in consideration of this case being loosely connected to the Murdochs in some way, and in consideration of the fact that Ellick Murdoch had deep ties to the highway patrol, we have to ask, what was the point?

Was the investigation's release in 2021 to discourage others from daring to speak out against the family?

Was it a warning of sorts?

It came at a time when Sled was interviewing people for the murder investigation.

Did the release of the Stephen Smith file, which revealed conversations between investigators and people with information, keep others from being fully forthcoming in the murder case?

We don't know what factors went into the decision to release the redacted case file in the summer of 2021, or who was involved in that decision.

But we question what, if any, damage it might have caused or might be causing right now.

And hopefully the answer is none.

That said, the release of the case file and this new and wider interest in the Murdoch story has led to a few things.

The first is the backlash we talked about last week over the letter Sandy Smith had written to the US Attorney's Office, which the trolls have tried to characterize as defamatory to bust her because Sandy had shared the information she and her family had been given from people

in the community.

We are so puzzled about the online campaign to paint Sandy in this way, and we want to address something on her behalf, which is this.

We have known Sandy since 2019, and she has been consistent on her stance about the Murdochs and her son's death.

The family is connected to this case in some way, but she doesn't know why.

In 2021, Sandy spoke with a reporter from the New York Post and told her that she believed the Murdochs had inserted themselves into the investigation of Stephen's death, and she wasn't sure why.

And this is evident from the case files.

Sandy's words were then paraphrased by the newspaper on June 19, 2021, to quote Sandy and Todd Proctor, a former South Carolina Highway Patrol detective who was part of a team that investigated Stephen's death, believed the Murdochs had some involvement, but the two have no evidence.

No one in the family was charged or considered a formal suspect in the case.

Two days ago, Sandy's words from June 2021 were again paraphrased to this by that same newspaper, quote, Smith's mother, Sandy Smith and Todd Proctor, a former South Carolina Highway Patrol detective who was part of a team that investigated Stephen's death, told the Post a week after the June 2021 murders of Maggie and Paul Murdoch that they believed Buster was somehow involved.

This has gotten further twisted by online critics who seem intent on depicting Sandy as being on a crusade, a crusade that isn't to find out who killed her son after eight years of not knowing, but to take down the Murdochs.

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It's almost like the past two weeks have been about building a case against Sandy in the Murdoch Facebook groups and beyond.

This isn't to say there hasn't been an abundance of support because there has, but the backlash seems to speak more to people's own feelings about the Murdochs and the outcome of Elex Trial.

And that's what we find interesting.

For some, Stephen's case has become an avatar for the Murdochs, quote, being wronged rather than what it is, a case that wasn't solved because of how it was handled.

Another aspect of the backlash was something we addressed last week as well, and how Sandy came to hire Charleston attorney Andy Savage and why she parted ways with him.

One thing we should have pointed out last week is this November 17th, 2021 jailhouse call between Elex Murdoch and Buster Murdoch, when Elex inquired as to whether people were still talking about their connection to Stephen Smith and Gloria Satterfield.

Note whose name he also says.

I would have seen if it's the same old thing.

Brooklyn told me some stuff that was on it, and it was stuff that's wrong, so I mean it's just that same old Stephen Smith and Gloria and all that bullshit.

You know, I think it probably had to touch on that.

I think this one hit maybe a little bit more on the boat wreck.

I just know that there was some stuff that Brooklyn said that was said in the little show, and it's just stuff that's not important, but it just shows that if they will understate that, in fact, that they just don't know what they're saying, because it's just stuff that's not true.

I understand.

Are they still trying to say out there like there's some mystery surrounding Gloria's death about how she died?

Sam, what now?

About how she died.

Are they still trying to make some innuendo there?

About Gloria?

Yeah.

I don't know.

I haven't.

Are they still saying anything about Stephen Smith, even though Andy Savage?

Yeah.

I mean, I don't think anybody...

Is there a connection to us?

Yeah.

I don't think anybody took the heart of Andy Savage.

If you've never come out and say there's no connection, you can let me tell Andy Savage that.

No.

The flood has not released anything.

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They didn't even release a statement about what was this most recent thing. There was something, something came out not long as you're talking about how there's been a breakthrough in evidence to do with like the homicide and the flood wouldn't even come out and issue a statement saying that there has been no further evidence gathered.

Careful.

So personally, I would not count on the flood to help in any way.

Now that Elick is a convicted murderer and proven habitual liar, it is pretty weird.

Elick had been behind bars for a few months at this point, but he sure seems to be updated on that statement Andy Savage made to the press without telling Sandy first, which happened while he was in jail, by the way.

And another thing that's weird, more than a year after Sandy fired Andy Savage, Steve Peterson, Savage's private investigator, is still scooting up to the cameras to talk about Steven Smith's case, even though he hasn't been involved in any official capacity since October 2021.

Making matters more confusing, Steve Peterson has repeatedly been identified in the media as a private investigator hired by the Smith family.

While it's true that Peterson was hired by Andy Savage to look into Steven's death in the summer and fall of 2021 before Sandy fired Andy, the Smith family in no way regards Peterson as someone acting on their behalf or in their best interest.

Here is a clip from episode 24, which aired in late 2021 to remind you of who Steven Peterson is.

Steven Peterson did speak to her before the story was published and said that they believed that they had a suspect in the case and they didn't think that the Murdochs were connected, but he told her that he didn't want to say anything until he knew for sure.

Sandy Smith was crystal clear.

She was not mad about the conclusion that Savage and Peterson apparently reached in the investigation to apparently absolve the Murdochs.

And also, I want to point out that Savage specifically stated that his comments were about Paul Murdoch, but he did not add that much clarity.

So Steven Peterson I worked for the Buford County Sheriff's Office as the Assistant Public Information Officer for just over a year.

I was at the office when I got a call from Peterson who told me he was an investigator with Sandy's attorney and was working to get to the bottom of the Steven Smith case.

I had a Google Doc with 100 pages of my notes from the Smith case, including a very detailed timeline, and I had already shared that with an attorney friend of mine who passed this on to Savage's team.

I figured Peterson was calling me about that, but it turned out he wanted something else.

In 2019, Mandy was given an unredacted copy of the Highway Patrol investigation.

This included hours of interviews with witnesses, investigator notes, and photos.

Peterson wanted a copy of what we had.

He said Sled wouldn't give it to him.

I would do anything to help Sandy, so I told him I would.

But then I started talking to Peterson and, huh, where to start?

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I asked him if he was certified with Sled.

He wasn't.

I asked him what his thoughts were on the case, and he shared them.

Now, a day before this, again, in October 2021, Mandy had learned that law enforcement was starting to float the idea that Steven really had been killed in a hit and run, and the Murdochs had nothing to do with it.

So it struck me as odd when Peterson began telling me the same details that Mandy had learned.

I want to be very clear here.

We do not care whether the Murdochs had anything to do with Steven's death, and we certainly are not saying that they did.

What we are saying, however, is that no one, no one, can claim the Murdochs, quote, had nothing to do with the case when their names and metaphorical fingerprints are all over the case file.

If they had nothing to do with it, then they are a very unlucky family.

On his own, and according to him, before Sled had interviewed this person, Peterson told me he had visited Sean Connolly, who was named in the original investigation as a potential person of interest in Steven's death.

You might remember from the last Steven Smith episode, Sean Connolly is one of two teenagers who suddenly emerged as potential suspects right after Sandy Smith was on the cover of the Hampton Guardian, insinuating that people in Hampton County were covering up for the Murdochs in November 2015.

Sean's friend, Patrick Wilson, was facing attempted murder charges at the time they were brought to law enforcement's attention, and was being represented by Corey Fleming. You know, Elec's best friend and Paul's godfather.

Neither boy appears to have been questioned by Highway Patrol and Steven's case at the time, and Mandy and I have always found their appearance in the file strange.

Also a little strange, the 14th Judicial Circuit Solicitor's Office, of which Elec Murdoch was a member at the time, dropped the attempted murder charges against Patrick Wilson altogether,

shortly after this.

Peterson told me he was a former DEA agent, and that he had used one of his super special DEA agent skills to interrogate Sean, who, according to Peterson, started to come undone under his questioning.

Peterson told me he lied to Sean, and told Sean that he had photos of the damage done to his truck the night Steven died.

He told me Sean got quote unquote, squirrely, and told him that he had hit a deer that night, and that the damage to his truck was from that.

When I asked Peterson what he made of the fact that Daryl Williams, the man who came forward about Sean Connolly and Patrick Wilson in 2015, had told a Highway Patrol investigator that Randy Murdoch had urged him to contact police and tell them about Connolly and Wilson.

Peterson told me that he had also interviewed Daryl, and guess what?

Daryl now swears that Randy never told him this, and that he didn't know why it was

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in the investigators' report.

During our reporting, Mandy and I had been told the names of three kids who allegedly witnessed Steven's killing, along with Buster and Paul, again allegedly.

When I brought up these names with Peterson, he seemed to dismiss the idea altogether.

Again, we do not care who killed Steven Smith.

We care about finding out who killed Steven Smith.

In that moment, in talking to Peterson, I got a sick feeling and immediately called Mandy afterward.

We ultimately decided we would not share the investigation with Peterson until we got the OK from Sandy.

In the meantime, though, we cut off all access to my notes and timeline.

And shortly after this is when a TV station reported that Andy Savage was declaring that the Murdochs had nothing to do with the case.

And what's even weirder, a source close to the investigation told me she was interviewed by Steven Peterson this fall.

She told me, like Liz, that she felt sick while speaking to Peterson.

She said that Peterson only seemed focused on information that could clear the Murdoch's name, and seemed to ignore all the other details that she was giving him.

She said that he had a list of suspects in front of her during the interview and literally crossed off Buster and Paul's names in front of her, despite what she was saying.

So essentially, Andy Savage apparently did three things for Sandy Smith.

He appointed a PI on her case who appeared to have conducted a botched investigation that apparently concluded that the Murdochs were not involved in Steven Smith's death.

He silenced Sandy during a time when her son's case needed momentum and the public's attention.

And he made a public statement without her consent that attempted to clear the Murdoch's name from the case.

So yes, we should be questioning Andy Savage's intentions in this case.

I was devastated that he had made a public announcement without consulting me first.

I felt betrayed, and I felt very betrayed, you know, because I feel if you're an attorney and you're working my son's case, you're working for my son, that all information needs to go through me first so I can prepare my children from the devastation, you know, I mean, it was just, I just felt betrayed, very betrayed.

After that story ran, Sandy Smith and Andy Savage split ways.

At that point, Sandy told me that she felt like she was better off doing this on her own.

She was worried that she would never be able to trust an attorney again.

We'll be right back.

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I did a quick Google search on Peterson, and it is hard to see what exactly his deal is.

He appears to be on TV a lot, commenting on the Smith case, and even managed to blame Paul for the glorious Satterfield case, which is strange.

But after watching a clip of him discussing Stephen's case from a Surviving the Survivor podcast episode on YouTube, I feel validated to not trust his intentions.

In an interview where he managed to belittle and malign Sandy Smith, he literally said that he stayed on the Smith case after Sandy parted ways with Savage because, quote, now it's my ego.

Meaning Peterson, a former DEA agent who began working for Andy Savage in June 2021 right before Sandy hired him, a man who is now telling people that Sandy did not want to face the facts as he saw them and therefore must be unduly influenced by people in her circle, which he specifically characterized as people who, quote, want the Murdochs to be involved rather than what it really is, people who know and care about her deeply and know what she's been through.

That Steve Peterson continued to conduct an investigation into her son's death even after she was no longer a client.

You hear how crazy that sounds, right, and how that in and of itself is yet another prime example of how poorly Sandy has been treated in all of this, instead of understanding that Sandy didn't like his methods and poor communication, nor did she like the threat that was made to her about speaking to the media.

Instead of understanding why Sandy would feel distressed and skittish, this man has made Steven's death about him and per his assessment, his own ego.

The truth is this, Savage and Peterson once worked for Sandy and Sandy simply didn't feel like she was the client that they were working for.

In my opinion, she had every right to fire him, and the consistent twisting of facts to bend Sandy into this Murdoch-hungry monster is not only unfair, it is despicable and defamatory.

There is a whole army of trolls out there trying to get this false narrative out that Steve Peterson is blabbering all over TV.

So my question is why, and is he working for someone?

Because who wants to hurt a grieving mother who has been kicked around by the system for eight years?

That is what he is doing.

Thinking about this is weird, in a case that is already so so weird.

Think about this.

There are people who apparently see Sandy's quest for answers as a direct threat to them for some reason.

And people wonder why Sandy Smith keeps questioning whether she can trust anyone.

They wonder why Sandy seems more comfortable with two small town reporters who simply listened to her back when no one else would.

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Sorry.

They not only wonder.

They accuse us of hijacking Sandy or exploiting her when really what they're seeing is exactly what a relationship of trust looks like.

So back to the release of the case records, let's talk about some of the things that people new to the case are just discovering.

We've discussed most of these elements of the case in previous episodes, but it's time for a refresher.

Let's start with the jurisdiction issue because it's a big deal.

It's the ignition point to how this case ended up in the hands of the wrong agency.

In the initial moments after the 911 call, it was first believed Stephen had been killed in a hit and run, then by possible suicide, then by homicide.

The case started with Hampton County Sheriff's Office and South Carolina Highway Patrol. When it was believed that Stephen had been shot to death, the Sheriff's Office, much like the Colletton County Sheriff's Office did at Moselle, called in Sled's crime scene unit to collect evidence.

The coroner, Ernie Washington, believed that Stephen's head wound looked like a gunshot wound and he even pointed out the entrance and exit areas to Highway Patrolman Tommy Moore.

You know the name Tommy Moore because he is one of Ellic Murdoch's financial victims. In January 2018, Tommy Moore was injured in a car crash while driving in his patrol vehicle.

Four months after the crash, Ellic filed a complaint on his behalf in Orangeburg County Courthouse.

Three years later, Ellic is accused of depositing \$125,000, which was only part of what should have been Moore's settlement, into his fake forage account.

Moore never got a penny of that initial payment.

Also, Ellic never finished the work on Moore's case.

He seems to have used Moore as a way to get money for himself.

Currently, Moore's case is being handled by Ellic's former law partner Mark Ball, the guy who was called as a defense witness but whose testimony ended up benefiting the state.

Prior to all this, Moore was one of the key players in the Smith case and seemingly the loudest voice in Highway Patrol who was questioning why an accident reconstruction team would be assigned to what was so plainly a murder case.

Stephen's autopsy was attended by two agents from Sled in the assistant corner of Hampton County at the time, Kelly Green.

Dr. Erin Presnell was initially told that Stephen had been shot in the head, but she didn't have evidence of that.

So the story goes, she rolled his death the result of getting hit by a car.

Two Highway Patrolmen, Tommy Moore and Todd Proctor, later questioned Presnell on this finding.

There was no evidence of a gunshot wound, so Dr. Presnell ruled that Stephen was not

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killed by a gun, but there was also no evidence that Stephen had been hit by a car and yet Dr. Presnell ruled that he was.

That right there is the point of contention.

We've seen several armchair experts recently assert that Dr. Presnell's findings were appropriate because they believe Stephen's head injuries, the brainstem, rent or stretch, the extensive skull fractures, the hemorrhaging of the brain and scalp, the laceration to the forehead and the cerebral contusion were consistent with the injuries one could receive by being hit by a car.

Now we are not forensic experts, so we can't speak on whether those injuries are actually consistent with getting hit with the side view mirror of a truck.

But what we can say is that context is key and that Sled is now saying that Stephen was not killed accidentally by a vehicle.

He was murdered.

No other part of Stephen's body showed signs of getting hit by a car, nothing on the road pointed to him getting hit by a vehicle.

His clothes were untouched, his shoes were still on and loosely tied, his body appeared to be placed on the road in a manner inconsistent with being thrown and landing on the road.

So that is the issue with Dr. Presnell's findings.

She used evidence to determine that he wasn't shot to death, but she did not use evidence to determine so definitively that he had been hit by a car.

The evidence showed that he was not hit by a car.

So the highway patrolmen, the state's experts in reconstructing car crashes, tried to get her to explain her ruling and they were met with hostility.

Now let's talk about that rape kit.

Our researcher Callie Lyons asked South Carolina Highway Patrol how many rape kits they've ordered on a person who died in a car wreck or as the result of being hit by a car.

Here is Highway Patrol's response, quote, the law enforcement divisions within the South Carolina Department of Public Safety do not investigate criminal matters such as rape.

Such crimes are handled by the local law enforcement agency where the incident occurred.

So why did they order a rape kit?

Maybe they didn't.

Remember, Sled attended Stephen's autopsy.

At the time that Stephen was brought to MUSC, investigators believed he had been murdered.

Stephen's autopsy does not explicitly mention a rape kit, but rather refers to oral, anal, and penile swabs that were taken as evidence and given to the assistant coroner, Kelly Green.

According to a highway patrol chain of custody form filed by patrolman David Rahl, the swabs were given to Todd Proctor by the coroner's office.

And Todd Proctor gave them to a patrolman named Laura Hydrick on August 11, 2015.

Laura Hydrick is the last known person to have handled that evidence, according to the records.

Laura Hydrick left State Highway Patrol in October 2015, just two months after she was in possession of the rape kit.

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Almost a year later, she was hired at the St. George Police Department where she worked for two years.

She then worked at the Berkeley County Sheriff's Office for a few months before she was hired at Yemisee Police Department in 2018.

Yemisee Police Department, as you'll recall, is led by the Murdoch's good family friend, Greg Alexander.

You might also remember that shortly after the murders of Maggie and Paul, Alec paid Greg \$5,000.

Greg said that payment was a loan for his father.

So this is our take on the rape kit.

It's not clear that one was ordered per se.

Dr. Pressnell took the appropriate swabs and gave them to the coroner.

It's not until Highway Patrol called those swabs a rape kit that it became a rape kit, at least according to the records that we have.

This is, of course, just semantics.

The bigger issue, the only issue, is where did those swabs go and what story did they tell?

Highway Patrol needs to answer that question.

Yes, it seems like they got stuck with a case that wasn't meant for them, but they played a role and the work they did affects the work sled is doing now.

So where are those swabs?

And while we're at it, why did Highway Patrol destroy video evidence in December 2015? December 2015 is right around when Steven's case started to go cold, according to the case file.

It's right around the time that a man came forward to give Highway Patrol two names, Patrick Wilson and Sean Connolly, saying that Patrick Wilson had told him that he and Sean were responsible for Steven's death by hitting him with the side view mirror of Sean's truck, which is the theory that Steve Peterson seemed to be stuck on in his investigation.

Just like the coroner, the guy who did not think that Steven was hit by a car, surmised in Steven's death certificate and later in an interview with a Hampton County Guardian.

Okay, now let's talk briefly about the two men interviewed by the Highway Patrol who allegedly had sexual encounters with Steven.

First, there's the parking pass.

When law enforcement gave Sandy back the little yellow car that was shared by Steven and Stephanie,

she searched it and found a gate pass for a private Hilton Head Island resort.

The gate pass had a last name on it.

Sandy, who is not a law enforcement officer, found the man on Facebook and let Highway Patrol know about him.

In the meantime, the family was also highly suspicious of a guy named Mark, a man who called himself Steven's boyfriend.

I'm going to play this clip from Steven's twin sister Stephanie when she was interviewed soon after Steven was murdered in 2015 and she was asked if Steven was in a relationship.

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Steven's never had a relationship.

That's one thing that got me when this guy said I'm his boyfriend because he's not Steven's type.

Okay.

And because Steven liked skinny, kind of built light-skinned guys and when this guy's like I'm his boyfriend, I'm just like, you know, you're more of a sugar daddy and he got mad at me for saying that, but I was just explaining to him and he don't want to talk to me because everything he told me about Steven, I'm sitting here calling him a liar.

Later in the interview, Officer Duncan of the Highway Patrol asked Stephanie if she's heard of any other rumors involving her brother's death.

How about the rumors that you've been hearing on the street that you told me earlier today about people that possibly were involved?

A bunch of people, like I just left the house the first official time yesterday and I went into the store and a bunch of people kept coming up to me and they're like, did you know the Murdoch boys are behind it?

You know, saying Buster Murdoch, the one we went to school with did it and some of his friends and I'm just sitting here like, why?

You know, it makes no sense, he's never said anything bad about Steven, he's never been around Steven too, you know.

Who told you this stuff?

One person was a friend of my brother's, I can't think of his name.

Then a boy named Tyrell told me and some other people, but I'm just, you know, I was mind boggled at that and I kind of ignored it and, you know, I haven't heard any more about that.

Has anybody, has anybody called you your mom, now, and this is, has anybody brought it to the attention of your mom about, you know, rumors and things like that?

Has she heard anything that you know of?

She's heard the same exact stuff I've heard, but she's more stuck on, Mark did it, Mark did it and all that.

Notice how skeptical Stephanie sounds of that rumor?

Notice she said that her mom was more focused on Mark.

Social media keyboard warriors have accused Sandy of hiding Steven's online encounters in lieu of, quote, blaming the Murdochs.

This is simply not true.

The Smiths wanted investigators to get the information off Steven's iPhone and iPad to find out who he had been talking to and where he had been going in the lead up to his death.

In fact, Sandy was talking about her suspicions about Mark, so much with Highway Patrol officer Michael Duncan in July 2015 that Duncan had to ask Sandy if she had heard of anyone else being involved.

Here is a clip.

So has now, has Mark or anybody else other than Mark, has anybody else, have you heard any rumors or anything like that, other than anything other than Mark?

The rumors that's going around hands in that everybody keeps coming up to me and saying

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it was Murdoch boys.

The Murdoch boys?

Yes, whoever they are.

Okay, alright.

Notice she says whoever they are.

Again, both Stephanie and Sandy were initially a lot more suspicious about Mark than they were about anyone else.

It is worth noting that they didn't even know that Mark existed until Steven died.

In fact, Sandy told the police that she was creeped out by Mark who made a scene at the funeral claiming that he was in a relationship with Steven when no one in the family had heard of the man.

In this narrative that the Smiths were not helpful to investigators when it came to looking into anybody besides the Murdochs, that is simply false.

Sandy and Stephanie both gave investigators as much information as they could about Steven, about people who Steven might have hooked up with.

In that same interview, Stephanie said that Steven had become secretive in the weeks leading up to his death.

He was acting a little secretive.

Okay, so he was becoming more secretive then, and then was that with the whole family, including you?

Yeah, that was with the whole family.

Hey Sergeant, can I call you back in a little bit and I'm in an interview?

Okay, all right.

But that's when he kind of, it's like my sister would call and ask him to take her places, and you know, he was acting normal.

And then he started coming home late and going to Bamberg all the time.

And that was over the past two weeks, and when you say he was going to Bamberg, did y'all know where he was going at in Bamberg?

Nobody knew?

No.

Does your mother know?

Did she have any idea?

She said that he was hanging out at Bobcat Landing, but then again she said sometimes he would take Highway 17 and go to her house.

Okay.

Again, Stephanie and Sandy were both pointing in directions away from the Murdochs when they were interviewed back in 2015, and I want to note one more thing here.

Mark seemed to wear Highway Patrol out.

He called them over and over and over again.

He seemed to be an off-putting person with serious personal issues, but he definitely was not ignored by law enforcement.

And Mark certainly did not seem to be the type of man to have enough power to steer an investigation into the wrong direction, not at all.

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We'll go deeper into this in a future episode about the investigation, but we've been seeing a lot of people online assign full blame to either or both of these men, and who have mentioned Stephen's Craig List encounters as THE explanation for his death. Both men were questioned by Highway Patrol investigators, and it appears that they determined that they were not responsible for Stephen's death, but again, these officers were not at all equipped to investigate a murder.

The investigation file is messy and incomplete, and it's hard to determine who was cleared and who wasn't because there didn't seem to be a process.

Additionally, there is nothing at this point that suggests Stephen's encounters on Craig's List are what led to his death.

That doesn't mean it isn't a factor that Sled needs to consider now, though.

But here's the thing.

Our primary question, our step one question, was this.

Was Stephen killed by a car?

That was the clog in the drain.

But again, not only was this case technically not being investigated as a murder, getting information off of Stephen's electronics appears to have been wildly mishandled.

And then it was further mishandled in 2021 when two private investigators who we now know were working for Greg Parker, according to the Wall Street Journal, showed up at Sandy's door to get Stephen's iPad in the name of helping her get answers.

Where is that iPad now?

The private investigators allegedly destroyed it.

That's what Sandy was told.

Now she's hearing that iPad might not be destroyed.

Again, can you blame Sandy for having trouble trusting people?

So this is important.

Any assertion that Sandy has been hiding Stephen's romantic partnering or his history with Craig's List is a lie.

It is not true.

Now that Stephen's case is being looked at appropriately as a murder, it is of course a factor in the investigation.

This investigation was, for lack of a more elegant phrase, screwed up from the minute that 911 call came in early on the morning of July 8th, 2015.

The Smith family knew it, Stephen's friends knew it, and Highway Patrol knew it.

But for some reason, no one else agreed.

No one else could make it right, until now.

And we'll be right back.

Since Sandy Smith's attorneys, Eric Bland and Ronnie Richter, and man, does it feel good to say that, have come onto the scene, things have been moving at a great pace.

Eric and Ronnie are showing the world that they and Sandy mean business.

Here is Eric on an update on the exhumation process.

So we've had a, you know, a kind of whirlwind two weeks now, since we came on board, you know, to have the honor to represent Sandy in pursuit for justice for Stephen.

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We've had multiple conversations with Chief Keele.

We now have retained certain experts that are going to help us do the exhumation, the funeral home, and then the exhumation, and then transportation of Stephen's body to where it's going to be examined by both a recognized criminal pathologist to do the second autopsy and something neat, somebody called a forensic anthropologist.

So, you know, a person that, you know, if you were to dig up, let's say, King Tut, they could look at King Tut bones and whoever's in, you know, one of these ancient Egyptian crypts and they can reach a lot of conclusions.

So we're very excited about the team that we have assembled where we don't have investigators hired yet.

We've had so many different investigators offer their services, which is just really heartwarming.

You know, some for free, some at a discounted rate.

Dr. Michelle Dupree is doing this, she's from Columbia, South Carolina.

She's overseeing the assembly of all the forensic team and she's doing it for free.

All we're paying is our expenses, which is just really, really nice.

So we're in the process now of applying for the permit.

You have to get a permit issued by DHEC to do the exhumation.

Based on what I'm hearing, I feel confident that we're going to get that, you know, we're trying to get it expedited, which means you, you know, may hear your jump in the line with people.

So we're trying to be cognizant of that.

But I think it's promising.

I think we will be in a position early next week or next week to have Stephen's body exhumed and the process begin.

So that is a big deal.

Y'all, Sandy has waited so long to get this ball rolling and now the ball is full speed ahead.

Answers are coming, justice is coming and it is possible only because of an entire network of people.

Eric Bland, Ronnie Richter, law enforcement and every single person who donated to the GoFundMe.

Sometimes justice takes a village.

Yeah, I mean, it's just, it's my numbing, you know, you hear situations like, and I guess the only thing I can equate it to is like politics, you know, when Bernie Sanders ran for president, you know, he raised, you know, \$800 million, \$5, \$10 donations.

Well, it's kind of like that here.

The GoFundMe is up to \$100,000 the last time I learned.

And, you know, these donations are not, somebody didn't just come in and write \$50,000, Jeff, these are, you know, 20 and 40 and 10 and 50 hour donations and it's just extraordinary and these donations have come from all over the world.

That many people want justice for Stephen, it's just amazing.

I want to pause for a minute and say thank you to every person who donated to this fund

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to support the Stephen Smith investigation.

These past few years have been so hard on Sandy.

She's been maligned, harassed, taken advantage of and betrayed, all while searching for answers on who killed her son.

While she's encouraged by and thankful for this new round of support and she still has faith that her son's killer or killers will be brought to justice, it gets harder for her as the years pass and her guard is higher than ever, rightfully so.

But thanks to y'all, Sandy is feeling the weight of the world lift from her shoulders.

She is finally seeing how many people care about Stephen and support the Smith family.

She is finally seeing a clear path to justice and peace that has been a long time coming.

I want y'all to hear from Sandy herself.

I want to thank everyone who supported me through this fight and I want to thank everyone for the sweet cards I get in the mail and I just appreciate all the love and support and this fight is still going.

David and I were lucky to spend the past weekend with Sandy and we were both reminded of just how much of a wonderful person she is.

While she is strong and speaks her mind, she's also incredibly kind and considerate.

She's constantly thinking of her children and her grandchildren and just about everybody else besides herself and she's truly a happy person and a delight to be around.

She makes light out of every situation and man, did we laugh a lot this weekend.

Stephen was so, so lucky to have a mom like her and this weekend, I realized how blessed I am to have Sandy in my life.

She's another bright light in all the darkness.

We both have been betrayed and backstabbed by a lot of the same people and we've clung tight to each other while we felt like the world was going mad.

To know Sandy is to love Sandy and I'm so, so glad to see the MMP community showing Sandy all of the love and support that she needs right now.

Now one of the next steps in all of this is to use some of the money to create a reward for information.

Here is Eric.

I think that would be, you know, the cherry on top, so to speak, through MMP and COJ and then our tweets and when I go on TV and you go on TV, Liz, we're all asking people to come forward, you know, look into your conscience and see if this is something that requires you to stand up and be tall instead of sit quiet and be small.

We think that ultimately somebody will stand tall.

It may be, it may take a little pressure.

One of the things we talk about is you definitely want to be first.

If you got knowledge because you're either directly or indirectly involved in something happened when something happened to Stephen, I can't implore you enough as a lawyer, especially you come in first or second.

If you're down the food chain and enough people come in before you and all of a sudden the police knock at your door and you don't have an opportunity to volunteer, I don't think they're going to give you a special dispensation on, you know, if you have an involvement

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and it's actually a criminal involvement, I don't think you're going to get any dispensation at that point.

So, you know, we're asking people, again, to stand tall, you know, I understand, it's actually, and so do you, it's difficult to come forward in that region of the state.

Not that this is a Murdoch-related matter, but it is a Murdoch-related matter in the sense that it's all, it got all ground up, the whole Murdoch saga, like we talked about it was always, you know, one-fifth of the story in any documentary or in any news program and for better or worse, Stephen has gotten grouped into the Murdochs, not by any evidence that they had anything to do with his death.

And so maybe that caused people to be reticent about standing forward, but we certainly saw courage under fire, quiet courage, and then also loud courage at the trial when people were willing to come forward and tell the truth.

And, you know, enough time has passed, it's time that we find the right answer for Sandy Smith on what happened to her son.

And I don't believe that just getting the answer that he was murdered is enough.

That's not justice.

That's a pour in the cup, pour in liquid into the cup of justice, but it's not a full cup of justice.

The full cup of justice is that she finds out what happened to her son, who did it, and why.

And I think that's what we have to keep working towards.

As y'all know, Eric really understands the power of the media and the power of a caring public when it comes to getting justice for people who have been harmed by a system that has allowed the powerful to step on those with less power.

But he was careful to add a caution as this case progresses.

We all must be patient.

Obviously, everybody's been patient for a long, long time, and we're running out of patience.

And that's why we started with an absolute fury of press and discussion, public discussion about that we want the state to reverse its decision that Stephen died by hit and run and actually died by the hands of someone else intentionally, which is a murder.

But by the same token, I don't want to do anything that will hurt the investigation.

I want sled.

I take my direction from sled, and I'm not going to violate the trust that I'm building with Chief Keele.

And I would ask that Sandy be respected in this process.

There's a lot of requests for her to be interviewed, and there's a lot of people that are going down to that area and starting to ask questions of people where reporters are kind of doing their own investigation.

I promise you, you will get updates as quick as I can give them.

I'm confident that we are going to be able to exhume this body.

But that is an amazing achievement to do in two weeks.

You know, there's so much red tape and bureaucratic red tape as there should be to exhume a body.

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But at the same time, it's a very solemn experience.

And for Sandy, it is absolutely torn her to shreds.

She has to witness her son coming out of the ground and coming out of a coffin where we're all religious in some way, shape, or form, or another, where he's been at peace, or he may not have been at peace because he may be pounding on the coffin saying, I was murdered. But by the same token, we don't want people, you know, hounding Sandy.

We don't want people trying to figure out when the body's going to be exhumed or who's going to do it.

I promise you, all that will be shared with the public.

But we don't want Sandy to go through more heartache and more turmoil because this whole process starts to become a spectacle in the circus.

Sandy has had an amazing team supporting her.

In fact, as we were recording this episode, we got some really exciting news from Eric Bland.

David, Mandy, Liz, hey, this is E.B. here.

Just want to let you know we have some exciting news regarding the Stephen Smith investigation and exclamation process.

Over the last week, you know, we've received a lot of inquiries from investigators and pathologists, not only from South Carolina, but all over the nation, wanting to assist and be part of the team that we're assembling.

But the main guy that I always wanted was Dr. Kenny Kenzie, and everybody remembers him from the Myrtle trial.

He's the assistant sheriff from Orangeburg County.

He has agreed to become part of the investigative team regarding Stephen's death.

And I think he's a great guy, a great addition.

We obviously saw him in action at the trial and not only when the state put him on as a witness, but in the rebuttal case, he is somebody that I think everybody can relate to and he's a guy that can get answers.

He's a guy that can explain it.

And we were looking for somebody that law enforcement would trust, and we could get investigators who used to be in law enforcement, either with SLED or other law enforcement agencies.

But I think there's nothing better than getting a current law enforcement agent to assist in this investigation.

So we're really excited about it.

We're really excited more for Sandy and for Stephen.

When I have a feeling, there will be more good news soon.

So stay tuned, stay pesky, and stay in the sunlight.

We'll see you next time.