

# How did my son die? Mary Couey has spent a decade searching for truth

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Keith Warren's life was full of promise.

He had just graduated from John F. Kennedy High School in Glenmont and was preparing to head to college in the fall. He was tall and handsome, bright and sociable.

Warren strode out of the door of his Aspen Hill home one hot Tuesday in July in 1986, with his knapsack and some favorite tapes, probably on his way to spend a typical summer day with friends.

He never returned.

Warren was found two days later hanging from a tree in a wooded area just a stone's throw from his house.

The police called the death a suicide. But it didn't take long for his mother, Mary Couey, to believe her son had not killed himself.

Couey had too many questions left unanswered, the biggest of which was why had she never been allowed to identify her son's body? Before she was even notified of his death, the body was at a funeral home, embalmed without her permission.

She was outraged with what she saw as a lack of consideration on the part of the police, the evident lack of protocol at the crime scene, according to Keith's friends and rescue personnel, and the factual contradictions that continued to develop weeks -- even months -- after police declared the case closed.

That outrage sent her on a painful journey into a world where she felt betrayed by the very people -- namely the police, but also including the NAACP and eventually the governor -- who should have been on her side.

"If you know what happened, you can bring it to closure," Couey said. "But when you don't, you still have that doubt, that lingering doubt."

Part of that doubt came from the strange "coincidences" about the case that kept coming to light.

There were the pictures of the crime scene and a note that ended up on her doorstep almost six years later on Keith's birthday, of all days.

There were the clothes that Keith was wearing in those pictures. The clothes were not his.

There was the way the rope was anchored and how close Keith's body hung to the ground, both suggesting he could not have done it himself.

There was no suicide note.

Then there was the "freak" bicycle accident that claimed the life of one of Keith's friends, a guy named in the note that accompanied the pictures.

And at least one law enforcement official in Montgomery County, Sheriff Raymond Kight, says he is not satisfied that all the questions have been answered.

Couey does not say her son's death was necessarily a homicide. She is willing to admit that her son -- who had toxic levels of an inhalant in his system after an exhumation and autopsy years later -- could have been inhaling drugs with other teens and overdosed. She thinks the people with him may have put him in the tree to avert suspicion from themselves and their families.

What she still cannot accept is the way the police handled the investigation.

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Couey used to believe in "the system."

That was when she was growing up in Bahama, N.C., a small village of about 300 people where three generations of her large family lived.

Her maternal grandfather was a Baptist minister and her grandmother was a missionary. They were active in the civil rights movement.

Couey and her four brothers and sisters attended public school and Sunday school each week, and helped run a busy household on the 100-acre farm.

Her parents were blue-collar workers, and her grandmother watched after the children. She made sure everyone did their homework, did their chores, and took their baths, Couey adds with a laugh.

Couey said it was a community that functioned around a strong work ethic, strong values and lots of love.

"They didn't spare the rod or spoil the child," Couey recalled fondly. "I was considered one of the more hard-headed [ones]. I think that speaks for itself."

She laughed and then paused for a moment to reflect on the community where she said everyone watched out for everyone else, where there was no crime, and where everyone knew each other.

"There was a nucleus there," she said finally. "And the nucleus was love -- and respect."

Couey credits her family for imbuing her with a special kind of strength.

Couey received her bachelor's degree in biology from North Carolina Central University, and did some graduate work in microbiology at Howard University and Duke University. She now works at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington as a medical technologist.

Married in 1965 to her high school sweetheart, who later became a police officer in Durham, N.C., the two were divorced by 1976. She struck out on her own to Maryland in 1979 with two children -- her son, Keith, who would be almost 30 years old now, and his younger sister, Sherri, now 26.

Couey did it all as a single parent -- raised two young children, worked and went to school at the same time. It was a time that she admits was hard, but it helped strengthen her character. And her children, born only 26 months apart, meant more than anything to her.

Keith and Sherri were also extremely close, sometimes even mistaken for twins.

"We were best friends," Sherri Warren said of her relationship with Keith. "We were more than just brother and sister."

Sherri said that during her parents' divorce, she and Keith pulled together for support. Keith was about nine years old at that time.

"We made a pact that we would never leave each other," she said.

Couey held her family together with a combination of love, patience and discipline.

"We looked up to her," Sherri said of her mom. "She went back to school. That in itself was inspirational enough. She kept us focused."

Sherri paused for a moment and then laughed. "If it weren't for my mom, I'd probably be in jail now."

And thanks to that kind of relationship, Sherri is now a successful businesswoman, working in the Houston area as a promotions manager for MCA Records.

Couey said that she tried, as her parents and grandparents had with her, to teach her children the "golden rules," but she thinks the manner of Keith's death and ensuing red tape had an effect on how she and her daughter view the world.

"I taught them, as I was taught, to believe in the system, to trust police, to do the right thing ... now Sherri reminds me it doesn't work that way," Couey said. "Everything I taught Sherri, she's like, 'I don't believe a word you told me. You trust, you believe, you do the right thing, and this is what happens to you?'"

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Keith Waddell Warren, 19, was found hanging from a tree by a passerby July 31, 1986. It was a Thursday. He had been missing since midday Tuesday.

There were questions about the case from the beginning, questions asked by the family, friends who were on the scene, and paramedics from the county Department of Fire and Rescue who were the first to arrive.

The only ones who did not seem to think anything was unusual, said Couey, were the police.

Couey, who had reported her son missing when he did not come home that Tuesday night, said she was not notified of her son's death until almost seven hours after his body was found.

In the meantime, the body had been transported to the Collins Funeral Home on University Boulevard and

embalmed without her permission. No autopsy had been performed.

Permission has to be given by the family to the funeral home before an embalming can be carried out, according to a 1984 state law.

Attempts to see the body that day and for a couple of days afterward were denied repeatedly to Couey and her family, she said, because either the funeral home was already closed, or the body was being "prepared" for burial.

Finally, on a fourth try when her brother took the burial clothes to the funeral home, he was ushered in to see the body for only a few minutes.

The clothes on the body when it was found had been destroyed. Couey was told by the funeral home that the body was badly decomposed and that she would not want the clothes in that condition. But when Keith's uncle saw the body, he said he had seen no decomposition whatsoever, Couey said.

Couey said she knew she was in no position to challenge anyone.

"I'm in pain. I want to die," Couey said of how she felt that day. "I was in no position to negotiate."

It would not be until later, when she would meet the funeral director (now deceased) who performed the embalming, that he would describe his concern about how urgently the police requested him to embalm the body.

The first time she saw her son's body was at the funeral in Silver Spring, and then again at his burial in the family cemetery in North Carolina. That resting place for Keith leaves her believing he is at least finally safe.

The private investigator Couey hired, Joseph Alercia, found out from witnesses on the scene when Keith's body was discovered that the police did not cordon off the area, and the scene became trampled.

Paramedics who were first on the scene said it did not look like a suicide, but Couey would not know for herself what the crime scene looked like until a startling occurrence six years later, on Keith's birthday.

Couey, with her new husband Tyrone Couey, to whom she now has been married eight years, had just moved to a new house in Layhill.

On April 9, 1992, Couey came home to find a manila envelope on her doorstep.

In the envelope she and Sherri found a series of large, black-and-white photographs of Keith hanging.

After the hysteria, they noticed some inconsistencies from what they had been told by police.

Though brown boots had been returned to the family after his death, Keith was wearing sneakers in the pictures. He was pictured wearing a long-sleeved shirt, long pants and the sneakers -- none of which belonged to him.

The position of the body suggested that Keith's dead body had been hoisted into a position in which his legs were outstretched in front, almost in the shape of an L. Leaves on the back of the shirt suggested the body had been dragged before being hanged.

The noose around the neck was loose, suggesting that the rope was not what killed him. The rope was also thrown through the crook of a tree that could barely support the weight of the body and wrapped around the base of another tree.

Though the officer on the scene wrote in his police report that Keith jumped off a log, no log was seen in the photographs.

After the police told Couey the case was closed, the tree was inexplicably cut down.

It had worried Couey, who is black, that her son could have been lynched in the middle-class neighborhood. Couey said that hate crimes in the area were not unheard of, but she said the pictures disproved all that for her. She felt they substantiated that Keith had already been dead before being put in the tree.

A note accompanying the photos named two other boys, friends of Keith's, as being "next."

Harold "Mark" Finley, one of those young men, would die a few months later, in August 1992, in a bicycle accident described by many as "freak."

The investigation report filed with the Chief Medical Examiner's Office in Baltimore said he fell off his bike and died from multiple injuries. No autopsy was performed.

According to Private Detective Alercia, an ambulance driver and paramedic said his injuries seemed far too severe for an accident on a low-grade bike path.

There were no rash burns on his hands, according to the investigation report. Rash burns are often evident because the person usually extends his hands to break the fall.

County police from the Wheaton/Glenmont district later told Couey that the photos sent to her had actually been developed from negatives taken from police archives, she said.

Couey filed a civil action lawsuit against Montgomery County, citing police negligence and violations of her and Keith's civil rights. But her attorney submitted the suit three months after the statute of limitations on civil rights violations expired. The suit was dismissed.

She then called on the Attorney General, the U.S. Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to help, but all said they could not help her because the case was ruled a suicide.

"I live eight miles from the Justice Department and I still can't get there," Couey said.

Even when she asked Gov. Parris N. Glendening for support, he reviewed the facts and decided there was no reason to reopen the case.

In her quest for new evidence, Couey and her family in 1994 paid to have the body exhumed and have an autopsy performed by a pathologist at Lehigh Valley Hospital in Bethlehem, Pa., Isidore Mihalakis. He was commissioned by a community group called the CLAMS (Chatter, Learning, and Mingling Society), which has long supported Couey and her efforts. The organization attempts to encourage interracial harmony.

An autopsy found lethal levels of 1,1,1-trichloroethane, or TCE, in Keith's body as well as four other chemicals. These chemicals are often found in paints and solvents, which are sometimes abused as inhalants because they can have an intoxicating effect.

The levels found in Keith's brain were so high, said Mihalakis, that Keith would have likely been unable to hang himself.

But John Smialek, the chief medical examiner in Baltimore, maintains that the TCE entered Keith's system post-mortem through the embalming fluid.

And despite notations in the embalmer's report that the embalming fluids did not contain TCE or the other chemicals found in his system, Smialek responded that San Veino, a solvent used topically to decontaminate bodies, was the source of the TCE.

Forensic experts said that even if San Veino was used, it would not have been used in such high quantities as those found in Keith's brain.

ESCO, the Connecticut company which makes San Veino, told Couey it does not now nor has it ever contained any of the other four chemicals found in Keith's tissues.

The funeral home has also said they did not use San Veino.

The Montgomery County Sheriff's Department has offered its support to Couey as she attempts to get the case reopened.

Sheriff Kight said in a recent telephone interview that any tips that come in from an episode of "Unsolved Mysteries," which featured the case, are sent to the Sheriff's Department.

Kight said it is his duty as an elected official to listen to his constituency and to try to find answers to all the unanswered questions.

"I think some questions have got to be answered," he said. "I don't know if we'll find [the answers], but I believe in what I think is right."

Kight, who has supported Couey from the beginning and sustained personal attacks about his stand on the case, is still hoping that the case can come to closure.

"My heart goes with her," Kight said of Couey. "Of course she's a distraught mother, but that's not what is driving her. She wants the truth."

The county police department continues to uphold the ruling of the state Medical Examiner's Office that the case is a suicide, Cpl. George Ludington, spokesman for the Montgomery County Police Department, said.

Ludington said the case remains closed, but that the department "can empathize" with Couey.

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Though she feels closer to the truth about what happened that day in July 1986, Couey is still not satisfied.

But she has endured.

She does not have the haunted, angry, bitter look of a parent who has been brutalized by the death of a child. Rather, she has grown stronger, more determined. She is also calm, quick to smile and laugh.

She has been called "crazy," told she is obsessed with the obvious and that she should just let it go. But Couey, who has worked through the endless stages of grief, emptiness and unbearable sadness, refuses to lash out at her critics.

She says that "slinging mud" is not going to get her any closer to her goal, and she chooses instead to stick with the facts.

"Justice will prevail," she said matter-of-factly. "The truth's going to come out."

Couey said she continues to fight not because she is a grieving mother; it has gone far beyond grief.

"Sure there's grief," she said. "But I don't think I'm grieving ... It's like an amputee -- you cut a part of your body away and parts [of you] are always going to know [other] parts are missing."

Couey said she grieved hard, let herself break down when she had to, and then let that grief temporarily turn into rage. She has found that talking about the grief in therapy and letting healing take over has made all the difference for her and Sherri.

People from all over the world, including London and Germany, have contacted Couey offering forensic expertise or legal support, and that has helped, too.

Part of Couey's fight is a result of being stubborn. Part of it might be that this was her only son and a human being who did not have to die so young. And part of her is remembering growing up with her family in the little village where people did things because of principle and honor, because it was the right thing to do.

"The truth is over and done," Couey said philosophically. "But a lie will linger."

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