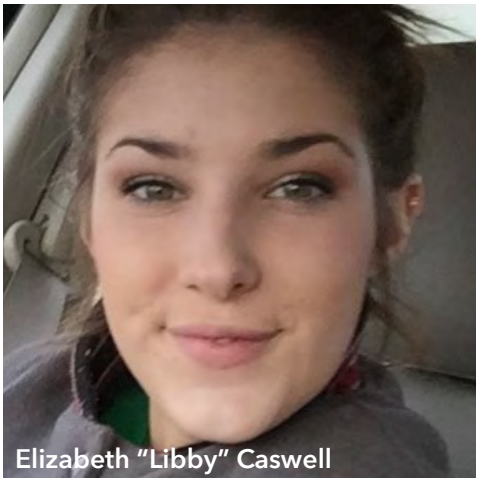
FAMILY IMPACT STATEMENTS VOL. I

VOICES FOR VICTIMS OF HIDDEN HOMICIDES

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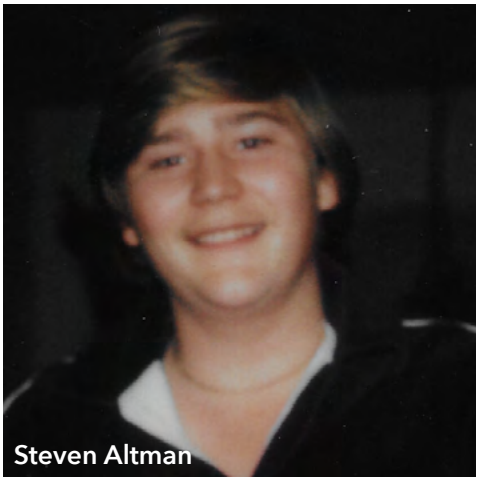
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Elizabeth "Libby" Caswell

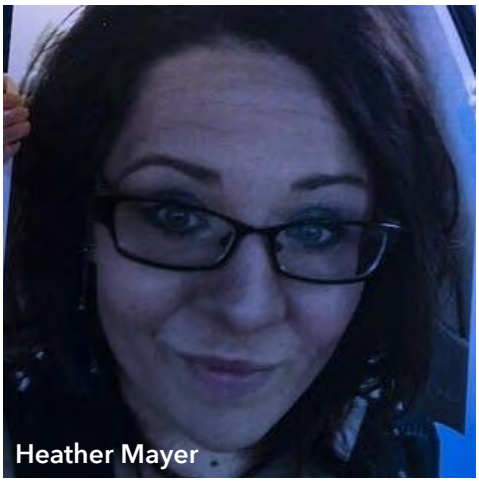

Stacy Feldman

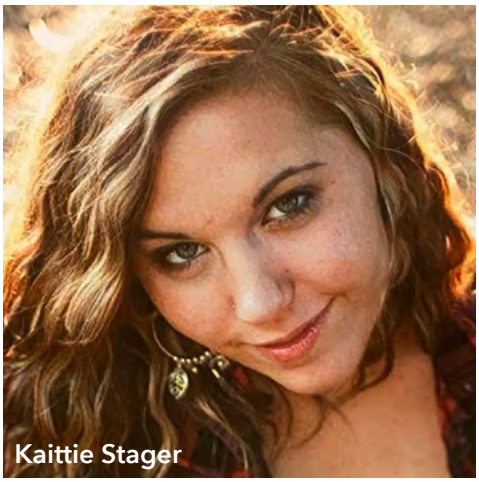

Kelsey Harris


Mary Ann Hayes


Steven Altman


Joanna Hunter


Heather Mayer


Kaittie Stager


Alysse Steed

“The dead cannot cry out for justice.

It is the duty of the living to do so for them.”

Lois Mcmaster Bujold



The Voices for Victims of Hidden Homicides group poses with photos of their loved ones who were victims to suspicious deaths.

Follow Voices for Victims of Hidden Homicides on Facebook:

@VoicesforVictimsOfHiddenHomicides

VOICES FOR VICTIMS OF HIDDEN HOMICIDES

INTRODUCTION

THE JUSTICE PROJECT is a program of Alliance for HOPE International that provides legal, forensic, and consulting services to families and government agencies in domestic violence cases involving a suspicious death. The Justice Project focuses on evaluating death cases where there is a prior history of domestic violence and is committed to ensuring that killers do not get away with murder.

VOICES FOR VICTIMS OF HIDDEN HOMICIDES (VVHH) consists of family members who have sought legal and forensic assistance from the Justice Project to re-evaluate the suspicious death of their loved ones.

The VVHH founding members' cases involve an inadequate investigation at the time of death, and, in some cases, no autopsy was ever conducted. Only in a few cases were family members interviewed about the history of domestic violence or the presence or absence of suicidal ideation in their loved one prior to death. All of the family members believed the death of their loved ones were suspicious and had previously sought to reopen their cases without success before reaching out to the Justice Project. Each of their cases resulted in the quick determination that the cause of death was due to suicide, an overdose, or due to an undetermined cause. All of their cases lacked an adequate investigation at the time of death, a professional suicidal assessment and in some cases, no autopsy was conducted. Only in a few cases were family members interviewed about the history of domestic violence. The handling of these cases demonstrated a bigger systemic issue showing a lack of training, of adequate protocols or laws, insufficient resources and, at times, a lack of compassion for grieving family members.

A SUSPICIOUS DEATH is where there is evidence to suggest that a potential homicide was staged, either verbally or physically, to appear as a suicide, accident, or an overdose.

A STAGED CRIME SCENE involves deliberate alteration of evidence by the offender to simulate events that did not occur for the purpose of misleading authorities.(Geberth 2006).

Most Justice Project cases involve **homicide by manual strangulation**, and the death is then **staged to appear as a suicide by hanging**. The Justice Project has come to the conclusion that these cases are suspicious deaths based on an independent review of the evidence obtained by family members and/or the Justice Project team. In each case handled to date, evidence was reviewed by a multi-disciplinary team of experts. Each case comprised interviews with family members, a post-mortem risk assessment, a suicide assessment, and/or a review of the **TEN FACTORS OF A SUSPICIOUS DEATH**—a tool developed by the Justice Project following a literature review and expert consensus among consultants and faculty.

For family members, this information provides answers, some measure of closure, and/or justice. For the legal system, it ensures that responsible parties are held accountable as well as protecting the innocent. For public health, thorough investigations can identify trends or hazards that can even prevent future deaths. A thorough and transparent investigation demonstrates the integrity of the legal and medical system fostering public trust in death investigators, coroners or medical examiners which ultimately prevents anyone unintentionally getting away with murder.

"The dead cannot cry out for justice. It is the duty of the living to do so for them."

Lois Mcmaster Bujold

The goal of the Justice Project is to help find the truth.

TEN FACTORS OF A SUSPICIOUS DEATH IN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE RELATIONSHIPS

1. **Victim died prematurely/unexpectedly**;
2. **Death appears to be a suicide** (by any means) or an accident (overdose, fall, and/or drowning);
3. **One partner** wanted to end the relationship;
4. There is a prior **history of domestic violence** (or coercive control);
5. The victim is **found dead in their home** or place of residence;
6. The victim is **found by the current or previous partner**;
7. There is a prior **history of strangulation/suffocation** by a partner (including prior relationships);
8. The partner was **the last to see the victim alive**;
9. The partner had **control of the crime scene** before the police arrived, and
10. The **crime scene is altered** in some way (verbal or physical)

All the cases handled by the Justice Project to date have a minimum of 7 out of 10 factors that were known at the time of the review, with several as high as 10 out of 10 factors. Most of the cases of the founding members of VVHH were reopened by law enforcement only to be subsequently closed by law enforcement with the original determination confirmed without interviewing family members, without conducting a post-mortem risk assessment and/or without an independent suicidal assessment. These "reopened investigations" have led the members of the Justice Project to believe that the involved law enforcement agencies were not interested in conducting a new independent investigation but more interested in confirming their original determination to avoid accountability or public exposure for the original failure to conduct an adequate investigation.

Because family members sometimes get dismissed by law enforcement professionals as simply a "grieving family member" who cannot accept that their loved one may have died by suicide, many of the VVHH family members were left feeling isolated, unheard and robbed of hope. They have essentially been forced to investigate the deaths of their own daughters, sisters and/or mother without the expertise or the resources to do so. One by one, family members found their way to the Alliance's Justice Project team either through a referral, independent research and/or media coverage.

Once the Alliance realized the magnitude of the problem and the isolation and pain experienced by family members in these cases, it became important to ensure their voices were heard and they had an opportunity to meet each other. In the journey of the Alliance to creating our new course called Hidden Homicides, the family members had a chance to not only meet each other but also to bond with each other. Every suspicious death should be treated as a homicide until proven otherwise. Suspicious death cases deserve a full investigation, a complete autopsy and interviews with family members and close friends. Accurately determining how someone died is critical for family members, public safety, public health and public trust.

MISSION

As of 2025, VOICES for Victims of Hidden Homicides is made up of 10 active, founding members with clear goals. They meet every other month while often supporting each other daily. The Justice Project continues to work with many other family members who are not listed here due to concerns of retaliation from the suspects in their cases.

THE GOALS FOR VOICES FOR VICTIMS OF HIDDEN HOMICIDES

1. **Support family members** of lost loved ones;
2. **Raise awareness** of the prevalence of staged crime scenes in domestic violence cases among all professionals;
3. **Educate first responders** about staged crime scenes, trauma-informed interviewing, the need to interview family members and search for a history of coercive control, domestic violence, and/or strangulation;
4. **Reduce the impact of confirmation bias** from the 911 call to the crime scene investigation;
5. **Improve system response** in the handling of suspicious death cases to include trained professionals, written protocols, and multi-disciplinary review teams;
6. **Advance recognition** that the suicide of a female victim with a history of domestic violence should be considered a suspicious death, warranting a full investigation and an autopsy;
7. **Improve state and federal laws**;
8. **Advocate for multi-disciplinary teams** to review suspicious death cases;
9. **Increase the rights for family members** of lost loved ones to include the right to reopen suspicious death cases and request review of the case by an independent agency; and
10. **Increase access to experts** who can conduct an independent review of suspicious death cases.

CASE SNAPSHOTS

ELIZABETH "LIBBY" CASWELL

Date of Death: **12-11-2017** Age: **21**
Jurisdiction: **Independence Police Dept.**
Location: **Independence, MO**
Cause of Death: **Asphyxia**
Manner of Death: **Undetermined**
Case: **Reopened and closed**
10 Factors Identified: **10/10**

STACY FELDMAN

Date of Death: **03-01-2015** Age: **44**
Jurisdiction: **Denver Police Dept.**
Location: **Denver, CO**
Manner of Death: **Undetermined**
Case: **Conviction/Life**
10 Factors Identified: **9/10**

KELSEY HARRIS

Date of Death: **03-28-2021** Age: **31**
Jurisdiction: **Linn County Sheriff's Office**
Location: **Brownsville, OR**
Manner of Death: **Suicide**
Case: **Reopened. Review pending**
10 Factors Identified: **7/10** *(pending)*

MARY ANN HAYES

Date of Death: **09-21-1996** Age: **53**
Jurisdiction: **Northfield Police Dept.**
Location: **Cook County, IL**
Manner of Death: **Initially suspicious death, later ruled suicide**
Case: **Reopened and closed**
10 Factors Identified: **10/10**

STEVEN ALTMAN

Date of Death: **05-11-1984** Age: **21**
Jurisdiction: **Chicago Police Dept.**
Location: **Cook County, IL**
Manner of Death: **Suicide**
Case: **Closed**

JOANNA HUNTER

Date of Death: **10-06-2011** Age: **36**
Jurisdiction: **Solano County Sheriff's Office**
Location: **CA**
Manner of Death: **Suicide**
Case: **Reopened and closed**
10 Factors Identified: **10/10**

HEATHER MAYER

Date of Death: **07-04-2019** Age: **33**
Jurisdiction: **South St. Paul Police Dept.**
Location: **South St. Paul, MN**
Manner of Death: **Undetermined**
Case: **Reopened and closed**
10 Factors Identified: **10/10**

KAITTIE STAGER

Date of Death: **10-21-2020** Age: **26**
Jurisdiction: **Linn County Sheriff's Dept.**
Location: **Harrisburg, OR**
Manner of Death: **Suicide**
Case: **Closed**
10 Factors Identified: **10/10**

ALYSSE STEED

Date of Death: **04-23-23** Age: **34**
Jurisdiction: **Port St. Lucie Police Dept. District 19**
Location: **Port St. Lucie, FL**
Manner of Death: **Accident by overdose (2023) Could not be determined (2024)**
Case: **Open. Under review**
10 Factors Identified: **10/10**

ELIZABETH "LIBBY" CASWELL

FAMILY IMPACT STATEMENT

Date of Death: **12-11-2017**
Age: **21**
Jurisdiction: **Independence Police Dept.**
Location: **Independence, MO**
Cause of Death: **Asphixia**
Manner of Death: **Undetermined**
Case: **Reopened and closed**
10 Factors Identified: **10/10**

My daughter, Libby Caswell, never discussed thoughts of suicide. It was a shock to hear that she was found hanging at the age of 21. The medical examiner listed an undetermined manner of asphyxiation on the death certificate. We originally had trust in the Independence Police Dept. (IPD) and assumed the case was being investigated until we learned that the IPD closed the case due to death as suicide--case closed.

This event completely changed my life. As a result, my family structure changed, including providing full-time care to my 4-year-old grandson. He had been diagnosed with Autism. Their bond was strong; not only did he lose his mother, but he lost his voice, his best advocate. My grandson and I had to start from scratch to learn how to communicate and build a relationship with his supportive services team.

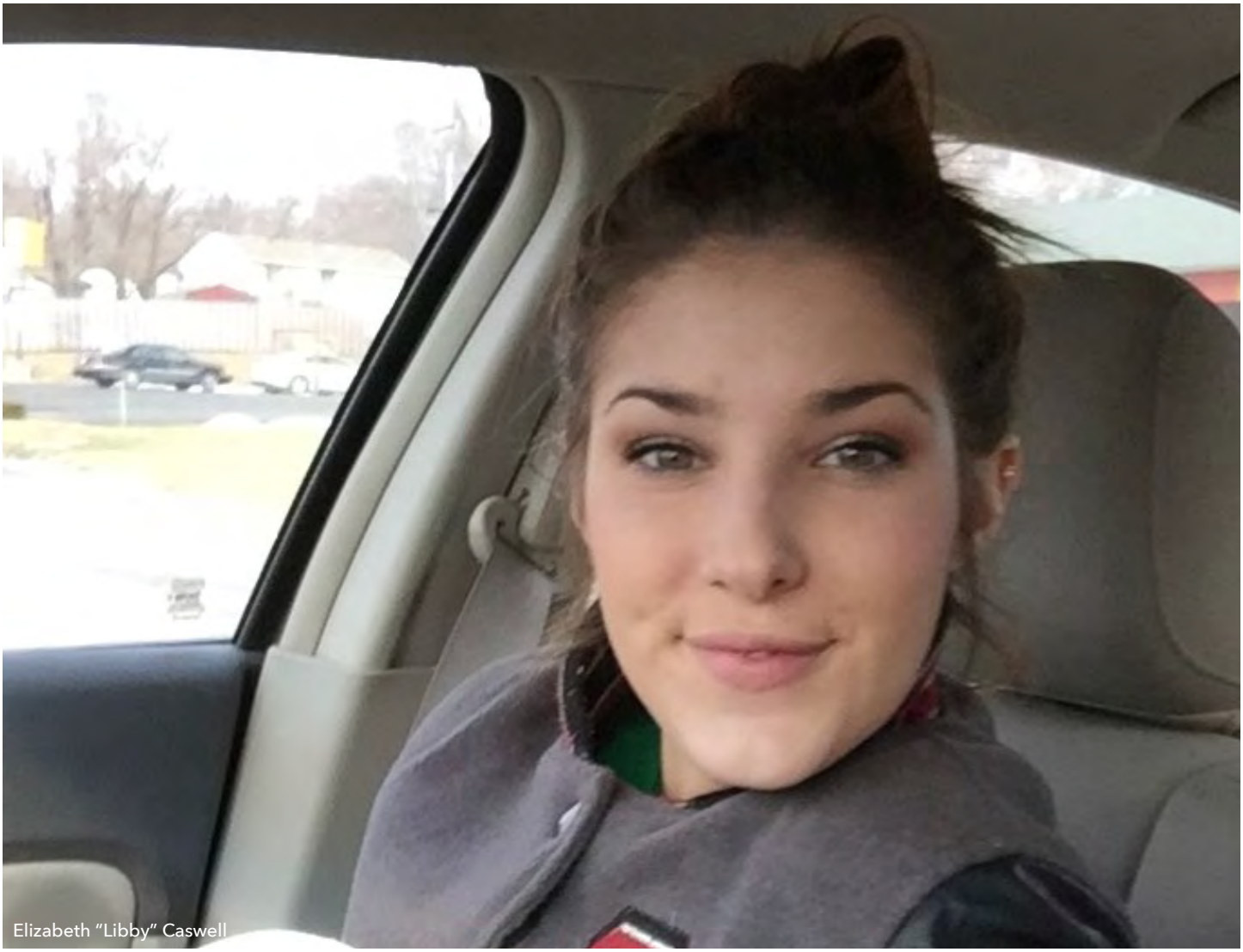
At the time, I could never have imagined how I would become Libby's voice and best advocate after her death. I tried to do this before her death and was charged and fined. With no prior history of calling Independence Police Department, they stated the nuisance law was violated for calling 911 too many times for assistance in my daughter's active abuse. They recommended I remove my 16 y.o. daughter and her infant from the home. They never shared domestic violence resources. To this day, I will not call 911.

IMPACT: It wasn't until I met another mother in Independence, MO, that I learned how to advocate for Libby's case. Her daughter was found with a bullet wound to her forehead, and it was ruled a suicide without an autopsy. The photos of the scene showed a different picture—it was obvious she was beaten, tortured, and shot. Her parents were pleading for IPD to complete an investigation. They taught me how to request records, to continue after loss, and not to accept what I know not to be true—Libby did not die by suicide. These two cases share jurisdiction and officers involved with the case.

CASE: Libby was found deceased in a motel bathroom on December 11, 2017. She was found with her boyfriend's belt around her neck. He fled the scene before IPD arrived, and he stated that it was suicide. His story was never corroborated. The police on the scene declared it a suspicious death. There is forensic evidence that does not support suicide but murder. Seven years later, there still has not been a comprehensive investigation. The case is currently closed.

HOPE:

- Re-open the Libby Caswell case and complete a proper investigation.
- Revision of current policies and protocols related to DV cases or suspicious deaths, including the Campbell Danger Assessment, to assess for lethality, including available resources for victims of domestic violence.
- Trauma-informed training for Independence Police Department leadership, officers, and suspicious death cases.
- Revision of nuisance law not to include instances of DV-reported crimes.
- Specialized unit or officers with training in strangulation and Hidden Homicides course offered by Alliance for HOPE International.



Elizabeth "Libby" Caswell

In closing, it is critical that law enforcement and legal professionals educate themselves on the impact domestic violence cases have on the abused and their families. Law enforcement agencies must remember that citizens in their city, state, and country depend on them to take their professional oath, honor it, and do the right thing. While a teen, Libby's rights were stripped away long before her death by IPD. Her hope shattered. She felt that nobody could help her, not even her parents. She was forced to endure abuse by her boyfriend and protect her family by complying and going with him.

This empowered her abuser! His violence escalated, and ultimately, he took her life and faced no consequences for murder. I believe IPD played a huge role in her murder by allowing him to have the louder voice and rights in the multiple incidents leading to her death, along with the lack of death investigation. We must advocate and pass laws holding perpetrators and systems of law accountable for cases involving domestic violence.

Thank you,

Cindy Caswell (Mother)

STACY FELDMAN

Date of Death: **03-01-2015**
Age: **44**
Jurisdiction: **Denver Police Dept.**
Location: **Denver, CO**
Manner of Death: **Undetermined**
Case: **Conviction/Life**
10 Factors Identified: **9/10**

Stacy Malman Feldman is my little sister and the youngest of three sisters. She was a light that shone bright everywhere she went. She was always the life of the party, and the funniest person I have ever known. She was engaged to the love of her life in her 20s, and her fiancé called off the wedding three months before it was to happen. Stacy was devastated and moved from the home she had shared with him in Chicago, to Boston to be closer to me. In fact, she rented the apartment in our two-family home, so she lived on the first floor, and my husband and first daughter lived on the upper floors. For the first several months, she was Samantha's nanny. She was dating for several years before she was fixed up by one of her best girlfriends to her future husband. Stacy was ready to be a wife and a mom, and her clock was ticking. She was ready to leave Boston and move to Denver to be closer to our immediate and extended family. When I asked her why she wanted him to move with her to Denver, she told me this, "He told me that he suffered from abandonment issues when he was younger, and because of that, he had to take care of himself, so he was number one in his book. But, he will CHANGE for ME."

On March 1, 2015, nine days before what would have been her 10-year anniversary, my dad called me and said Stacy was dead. I asked what happened, waiting to hear him say she was in a car accident. He said, "I don't know." It was at that very minute I knew that he killed her.

Several years prior, I was on the phone with her late evening, and she was crying about the latest fight. I said to myself and never uttered these words out loud, "If she ends up dead, it will be because he killed her."

He claimed that he left that morning to take the children to Sunday School at the temple, and she was in bed because she didn't feel well. He states that when he arrived back in the middle of the afternoon, he found her collapsed in the bathtub with the shower running cold water. Stacy was not at the temple to pick up the children at noon when Sunday School was over, and he and Stacy were called since no one showed up. He didn't ever call Stacy to see why she didn't pick up the kids as planned. After picking up the children from Sunday School, instead going home to check on his wife, he went bicycle shopping with the kids in the middle of winter.

When first responders arrived on scene, he was hysterical, obstructing the medical team, and needed to be escorted out of the bedroom. He wasn't answering questions and frankly couldn't remember if water was in the bathtub when he found her. The first responders would recount that he was acting strangely. Her husband did not want an autopsy, claiming it is not our religious practice. Thankfully, in Colorado, when a 44-year-old healthy woman dies, an autopsy is standard procedure. The cause and manner of death were UNDETERMINED.



Left to Right: Susan Altman and Stacy Feldman

While the detective and prosecutor left the case open, they were missing an expert who could look at the same autopsy and come to a cause and manner of death. By the grace of God, Dr. Smock, an expert in strangulation and suffocation, and Alliance of HOPE International had an opportunity to review the autopsy three years after her death. an inexperienced fellow in training and was not board-certified.
She did not have experience.

Despite the numerous red flags that went unchecked and unnoticed, Dr. Smock's expert opinion and testimony changed the course of the case. Stacy's husband was arrested for first-degree murder on February 13, 2018, almost three years after her murder. On April 19, 2022, he was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison.

Thank you,

Susan Altman (Sister)

KELSEY HARRIS

Date of Death: **03-28-2021**
Age: **31**
Jurisdiction: **Linn County Sheriff's Office**
Location: **Brownsville, OR**
Manner of Death: **Suicide**
Case: **Reopened. Review Pending**
10 Factors Identified: **7/10** *(pending)*

Kelsey was our middle daughter. She was 31, a high school counselor, coach, and educator in Linn County, Oregon, working on her second master's degree in counseling when she died. Kelsey was found dead on March 28, 2021, a week after reporting a violent strangulation assault by her boyfriend. Her death was ruled a suicide by a death investigator who was on scene for only 14 minutes. There was no autopsy, no toxicology report, and no follow-up investigation by the Linn County Sheriff's Office.

I have spent the last four years trying to get answers—and justice.

Three independent forensic crime scene experts have reviewed her case. All agreed the scene was likely staged and the official reports were negligent. One expert documented in January 2025 that the bullet entered her left side, not the right as initially reported. Kelsey was right-handed, but her phone was found in her left hand, which she allegedly used to shoot herself—highly improbable.

Further, two experts confirmed that a **"suicide"** text sent from Kelsey's phone the night she was found dead was not written by her. Despite presenting reports to the Linn County DA and Sheriff in 2023 and 2025, they initially took no action. Only recently, following the latest forensic report, did the Linn County DA agree to review the case, involve the Medical Examiner, and reopen the file—but that process remains incomplete.

Kelsey was not alone. We've identified at least three suspicious deaths in Linn County between 2020 and 2024—all women with a history of domestic violence, all ruled suicides. One case has since resulted in murder charges. I am now working with the families of Kaittie Stager and Mariah King to advocate for justice, raise awareness of **"hidden homicides,"** and push for legislative reform in Oregon.

What Happened to Kelsey?
Kelsey endured three years of emotional and physical abuse by her boyfriend, culminating in a violent strangulation on March 20, 2021, over how she loaded firewood into a woodstove. She confided in her best friend —her boyfriend's stepsister—who worked for the local police and reported it. Kelsey gave a detailed statement to the Sheriff's Office, saying that during her strangulation, she thought she was going to die.

She was sent to Samaritan Lebanon Community Hospital, where she received medical and forensic services for being strangled and told them she feared for her life. But she received no scans, no referrals to domestic violence resources, and was sent home with only a sedative. She was never referred to the local sexual assault center, Sarah's Place, just a few miles away.

Kelsey was found dead at her home eight days later. Her abuser's strangulation charge was dismissed less than a month after her death, with the deputy DA telling me that **"juries like to see bruises,"** and without Kelsey alive to testify, he had no case.

In the weeks and months after, I faced systemic **FAILURE** after **FAILURE**:

Law Enforcement never followed up to determine the whereabouts of Kelsey's abuser the night of her death, didn't secure digital evidence, or interview our family.


Kelsey Harris

The Death Investigator took six months to file her report, admitted to "accidentally" deleting all crime scene photos, and spelled Kelsey's name wrong on her death certificate, among numerous other errors in her report.

The DA's Office passed me from one person to another. The Deputy DA retired without notifying me. Another prosecutor eventually reviewed the case but said no further action could be taken without more evidence.

Kelsey's phone and devices were returned months later. When I sought forensic help, her Apple Watch was lost. The sheriff's office never reviewed her digital records.

Even Facebook failed us. Her abuser's stepsister memorialized Kelsey's account without our family's knowledge or consent shortly after her death and set herself up as the site Legacy Contact. To this day, our family is locked out of Kelsey's site. We believe her account held evidence of threats and pleas for help in the days before her death.

Despite all this, we have made progress. In April 2023, I testified in support of Oregon HB 2676, which was signed into law by Governor Kotek. The law expands Crime Victims' Compensation to include strangulation kits (SKITs), similar to rape kits. These kits document internal injuries and events before and after assaults —evidence that could be lifesaving. Unfortunately, these weren't yet available when Kelsey needed one.

Kelsey deserved that kit. She deserved a trained nurse. She deserved to be believed.

HOPE FOR CHANGE

Our advocacy continues. In April 2025, the families of Kelsey, Kaittie, and Mariah met with Oregon legislators during Domestic Violence Advocacy Day to push for a Hidden Homicides Law modeled after California's SB 989, which passed unanimously.

We also support SB 710 (DV training for judges) and HB 3093 (DNA collection for felony arrests including strangulation). We are advocating for bail reform and the reclassification of strangulation as attempted murder, not just a felony. Strangulation is a last warning shot —and too often, it's followed by homicide.

CONCLUSION

For four years, I've been ignored and dismissed while trying to answer the same questions any parent would ask if their child died under suspicious circumstances. But I will not stop. Kelsey may be gone, but I will always be her voice. Silence is not an option. *She once wrote in a grad school essay:* ***"I am Kelsey Harris, the middle child, the adventurous extremist, the animal lover activist. The one who helps those without a voice, with a twist of passion, spontaneity and energy. 'Don't settle for anything less than everything you deserve.'"***

Kelsey deserved better. So do so many others. We must stop accepting suicide rulings in the face of domestic violence without full investigations. We need courage, not convenience,in death investigations.

With Hope, Kellee Harris, Kelsey's Mom

MARY ANN HAYES & STEVEN ALTMAN FAMILY IMPACT STATEMENT

MARY ANN HAYES

Date of Death: **09-21-1996**
Age: **53**
Jurisdiction: **Northfield Police Dept.**
Location: **Cook County, IL**
Manner of Death: **Initially suspicious death, later ruled a suicide**
Case: **Reopened. Closed**
10 Factors Identified: **10/10**

STEVEN ALTMAN

Date of Death: **05-11-1984**
Age: **21**
Jurisdiction: **Chicago Police Dept.**
Location: **Cook County, IL**
Manner of Death: **Suicide**
Case: **Closed**

We are voices for the loved ones so viciously and senselessly taken from life. For me, they were my mother, Mary Ann Hayes, and brother, Steven Altman, who were murdered in staged suicides. Both were brutally beaten and then strangled to death. In May 1984, my brother, Steven, was found hanging in my stepfather's place of business in Chicago when he was just 21 years old. His death was immediately determined to be a suicide based on oral statements made at the scene by our stepfather that Steven was depressed and suicidal. Steven was not, and no other family members or friends were asked to verify his statements. No suicide note was present and there was no autopsy, no investigation. Despite previous FOIA requests, nearly forty years after his death the Cook County (IL) Medical Examiner's photos and a brief report were discovered by the investigative producer at WGN TV in 2023. The photos show Steven's face is severely bruised and cut.

More significantly, he has three distinct ligature marks around his neck. He had been repeatedly hung. However, the Medical Examiner's Postmortem Report states there is nothing "remarkable" about his face and only one inverted ligature mark to his neck. No photos or documents have been released to show if there were other injuries to his body. His case has not been reopened and remains classified as a suicide.

In September 1996, twelve years following Steven's death, my mother was found dead by our stepfather on the bedroom floor of their home. She was on her back with an electric cord wrapped around her neck. There was no knot in the cord and no leverage of any kind. He claimed she had strangled herself by pulling it tight around her neck with two wrists that had both been severely broken two months before her death. It didn't make any sense. The Northfield Police Department initially ruled her death "suspicious" but failed to treat it as a crime scene or investigate further, despite an impending divorce and the presence of nine of the Ten Factors of a Suspicious Death in Intimate Partner Violence. She suffered numerous unexplained injuries: post-mortem marks, bruises, a bloody and broken fingernail, trauma and hemorrhage in her throat high above the ligature, and blood on her ear and clothing. However, the Cook County Medical Examiner and law enforcement disregarded these injuries and changed her cause of death to suicide.

Through the many years, I have pursued the Northfield Police Department to reopen my mother's case. They continue to claim that suicide by self-strangulation is possible and that the Medical Examiner has a case history to support this claim. They have not been able to provide any relevant case. Thus, I requested Alliance for HOPE International and their forensic medical expert, Dr. Bill Smock, to review my mother's death. In their opinion, my mother was murdered.


Mary Ann Hayes


Steven Altman

No case history supports self-strangulation without locking mechanism or leverage. The Alliance presented the evidence and their findings to the Cook County State's Attorney's Office and Cold Case Unit. Although they reopened the case, they failed to investigate further and again closed it. The Alliance and Dr. Smock have also reviewed the photos taken by the Medical Examiner of my brother following his death. They believe his death is highly suspicious and also a homicide.

My mother and brother were two of the kindest and most generous souls – the two people closest to me and my heart. My mother's most admirable aspiration was to provide a loving home full of joy for her four children. Dinner parties and holiday celebrations with extended family and friends were common, and she would often spend days cooking and baking everything from scratch. Some of my most cherished memories are cooking alongside her. Steven loved to eat but stayed out of the kitchen, preferring to play baseball or piece together airplane models, draw, and paint. He had a quick wit and amazing sense of humor that often kept us laughing.

Now in my 60s and for two-thirds of my life I only knew that my brother had hung himself. Nearly forty years later, the truth was discovered in the Medical Examiner's photos which had previously been withheld from me.

The Chicago Police Department still maintains they have no documentation or photos of his death. Eight years after Steven died, our father died from severe alcoholism at the age of 58. Four years later, my mother was murdered. Numerous mistakes were made by law enforcement and the medical examiner but none have been willing to pursue Justice. Thus, last year I took their cases to the media. In April of 2024, WGN TV Chicago and its affiliate, NewsNation, aired an investigative film called Hidden Homicide and will be producing follow-up pieces as I continue on this difficult journey. Along with the Alliance, we are presently working with an Illinois State Senator and District Attorney for the passage of Mary Ann's Law in Illinois.

Their deaths are devastating and a deep loss for all who knew them. But their bright light and souls live on in me. With the relentless help of the Alliance for HOPE International and the amazing support of the other family members who have lost loved ones to staged suicides, I remain hopeful that Justice will be served. Thus, I will continue to promote their vital training on strangulation, advocate for the passage of protocols and legislation for the handling of suspicious deaths, and am one of the Voices for Victims of Hidden Homicides.

Thank you,

Robin Altman (Daughter and Sister)

JOANNA HUNTER

Date of Death: **10-06-2011**
Age: **36**
Jurisdiction: **Solano County Sheriff's Office**
Location: **CA**
Manner of Death: **Suicide**
Case: **Reopened and closed**
10 Factors Identified: **10/10**

Since my daughter Joanna's death on October 6, 2011, I have fought to obtain justice for her. From the beginning, the Solano County Sheriff's Office (SCSO) failed us. They dismissed our concerns, denied requests and lied about the existence of records, reneged on promises, and repeatedly ignored our emails. Their actions have retraumatized our family and contributed to my husband's worsening health, accelerating his dementia and leading to his death in 2018.

There was no preliminary investigation at the scene, despite clear evidence of foul play. Witnesses were never interviewed. Joanna's cell phone was never examined. Leads suggesting possible homicide were ignored. The case has been mishandled and our family dismissed since day one.

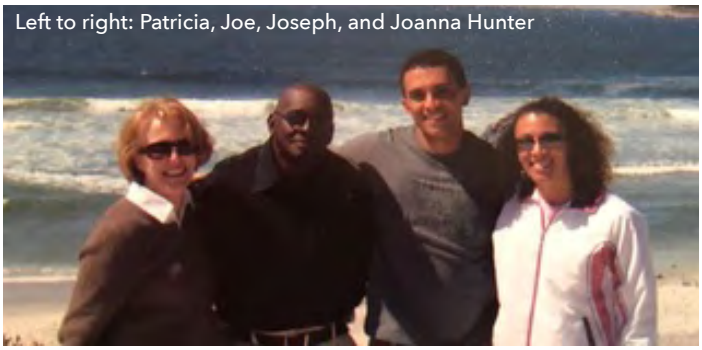
TIMELINE of the first of more than 65 events prior to summer of 2024, including advocacy efforts.

- **October 6, 2011** – Joanna died. No one from SCSO contacted her family.
- **October 7, 2011** - I learn of Joanna's death from someone at our church while I was at work. I immediately suspected her husband, based on years of documented abuse.
- Joanna had previously obtained two restraining orders. Her husband had been arrested and convicted of domestic violence. There were reports of strangulation and gun possession. None of this was considered in the initial assessment.
- **October 7, 2011** ***(later in the day)*** **-** Concerned friends and I contacted the responding deputy and coroner's office to share critical information about Joanna's history. We were ignored.
- The coroner's office informed me that Joanna's death was determined to be suicide. Period.
- My husband and I were devastated. My son, Joseph, and friends spoke with coroner staff about past domestic violence toward Joanna and insisted that her death be investigated as suspicious. The coroner's staff refused to listen to these claims and became defensive.
- **January 11, 2012** – We met with the deputy. He insisted Joanna's note was a suicide note. I provided documentation about past abuse, explaining the note was a signal of her intent to leave. He refused to look at any of it. He was cold, dismissive, and escorted us out without asking a single question. We felt that no one cared about Joanna's case.

To this day, my family and circle of support have continued to fight for justice. Our family believes in public service. I am proud to be a 40-year teacher educator now retired, and my son, Firefighter Captain Joseph Hunter, serves with the Sacramento City Fire Department in California. We have worked and witnessed systems at their best and now at their worst.

We have also been supported by Alliance for HOPE International and their Training Institute on Strangulation Prevention, which trains teams on how to identify staged crime scenes and the dangers of strangulation. According to their research and standards, all Ten Factors of a Staged Crime Scene Involving Domestic Violence were present in Joanna's case.

These are not coincidences. They are patterns, repeated across countless cases. Joanna's death fits the definition of a "hidden homicide."


Left to right: Patricia, Joe, Joseph, and Joanna Hunter

Again, advocacy for Joanna has not stopped since the news of her death. With the support of those around us, the Sacramento Family Justice Center and Alliance for HOPE International, we worked towards changing policies in California with SB 989, "Joanna's Law." The law was signed in September 2024 and went into effect on January 1, 2025. This is the first statute in the nation to address suspicious death cases with a prior history of domestic violence. "Joanna's Law" will provide critical tools in the effort to better investigate these suspicious death cases in California. It will incorporate federal law into California law and provide a pathway for independent case review when families need immediate assistance. We hope to create a national model statute that can be replicated in other states. It will ensure family members will have rights when dealing with their loved ones' suspicious deaths. It will provide access to records when formal investigations are concluded to allow family members to seek an independent review of previous findings.

We look forward to giving a voice to future families of loved ones in California and across the nation who have died under suspicious circumstances. Thank you for your time and interest in learning more about suspicious deaths with a history of domestic violence. This silent crime needs to be heard so justice may be served and those guilty can be held accountable. We do this in honor of my beloved daughter, Joanna Hunter.

Sincerely, Patricia Hunter (Mother)

JOANNA'S LAW:

- Incorporates federal protections into California state law.
- Ensures family members have rights to access records once formal investigations are closed.
- Allows for independent case reviews, giving families a clear path to challenge questionable conclusions.
- Provides a framework for law enforcement to better identify and investigate suspicious deaths that may otherwise be dismissed as suicides or accidents.
- Aims to become a national model for similar legislation in other states.


Joanna Hunter

HEATHER MAYER

Date of Death: **07-04-2019**
Age: **33**
Jurisdiction: **South St. Paul Police Dept.**
Location: **South St. Paul, MN**
Manner of Death: **Undetermined**
Case: **Reopened and closed**
10 Factors Identified: **10/10**

My name is Tracy Dettling, and my daughter is Heather Mayer; she was murdered on 7/04/2019. Heather was a vivacious young mother of 3 beautiful children; she was a loving daughter and a trusted friend, always generous with her time. Heather lent a helping hand to whoever needed it. One of my favorite things about Heather that I want to share with you is that she was at her best when it came to being creative. That was a gift. She loved making things; she made her own jewelry, and pearls were her favorite. She had fun making her own Halloween costumes for herself and the children. One thing Heather made for me is a flower garden. She first put in two grape vines and two blueberry bushes. The rest is a whole lot of various perennial flowers that I get to watch flourish and spread with each passing year. Heather wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty; I have tried to honor her by adding to it each year--I see her in it every day; she was the happiest when she was creating something and breathing life into it. This garden brings me joy because she made it for me and so much sorrow because she isn't here to enjoy it with me, but I feel her spirit with and around me. The other thing I enjoyed so much about my daughter is her sense of humor. Heather could lighten any mood with a simple comment or a crafty joke; with her warm smile, her laughter was infectious. She brought so much joy to us and everyone who knew her. Heather was a light in her children's lives and my life, too. We have a big gaping wound in our hearts that will never be healed.

On July 4, 2019, I received an afternoon call from a police officer telling me that my daughter Heather had hung herself and asked if I could come right away. I was in shock and disbelief. I had just spoken to my daughter two days earlier, and she was looking forward to getting out more, doing more things with her kids, and more family outings; it sounded like life was changing for her. It didn't make sense that she would hang herself. There is absolutely no way Heather would have done this and risked the kids finding her. So, in my mind, this did not fit with our conversation two days before; this did not make sense to me. Heather was NOT suicidal. Heather told me she would never do that; she thought it was selfish, and she would never do that to her children or us; she said she would always call for help if needed. The suspects called the police and said that Heather hung herself, so when law enforcement arrived on the scene, they assumed it was, as the suspects said, a suicide and treated it as such. No investigator was called to the scene, the suspects were not separated, and no individual statements were taken. The scene was not secured. The suspects were allowed to roam freely and were caught lying to the police about where Heather's boyfriend lived and if he was there when this happened. The police did not check for a history of domestic violence or an Order of Protection. They did not ask the family about any prior history of domestic violence or any history of attempted suicide. If they had done their homework, they would have found out that there was a history of domestic violence that included daily beatings, torture tactics, and no history of attempted suicide. They would have also learned that there was an order of protection that was dropped just 16 days before Heather's death.



Tracy Dettling holding a photo of Heather Mayer

Her boyfriend coerced Heather into dropping the order of protection with the help of his lawyer, who directed and dictated a letter that was a complete lie and would convince the Judge to drop the order.

Heather would be dead 16 days later. The lawyer was eventually found to have violated several ethics rules and lost her license for what she did in this case. Every agency failed to do the right thing. The numerous red flags that went unchecked and unnoticed, along with the crucial evidence that was lost and cannot be undone, they can't undo the mistakes made in this case and many cases like Heather's across the country.

This is happening because of the lack of training and understanding around staged crime scenes and domestic violence. These cases are not being prosecuted due to ineffective investigations, inexperienced medical examiners who are missing crucial clues or dismissing forensic evidence, having a predisposed position of suicide based on the 911 call instead of treating the scene as a homicide until the evidence leads you to a different conclusion. People are getting away with murder because of negligence at every level and lack of proper training. This is fixable.

Alliance for HOPE International provides training for multi-disciplined teams such as law enforcement, doctors, nurses, emergency medical transportation staff, prosecutors, and lawyers on staged crime scenes, the lethality, and warning signs of strangulation. As loved ones, we must fight a system we have no idea how to navigate, while no help is offered to family members to assist in these cases. A system that needs more checks and balances to get this right. Since the team at the Alliance for HOPE International's involvement, along with Dr. Smock's expertise, new evidence has given us hope about the possibility of reopening Heather's case. This is one example of how the work of the Alliance for HOPE International is so vital to fighting for justice for our loved ones, helping us to fight for change and create legislation to change laws to right the wrongs and strengthen the checks and balances in our judicial system. The journey has been painful and long, but we will fight and advocate for the desperately needed changes.

Thank you for your time,

Tracy Dettling

KAITTIE STAGER

Date of Death: **10-21-2020**
Age: **26**
Jurisdiction: **Linn County Sheriff's Dept.**
Location: **Harrisburg, OR**
Manner of Death: **Suicide**
Case: **Closed**
10 Factors Identified: **10/10**

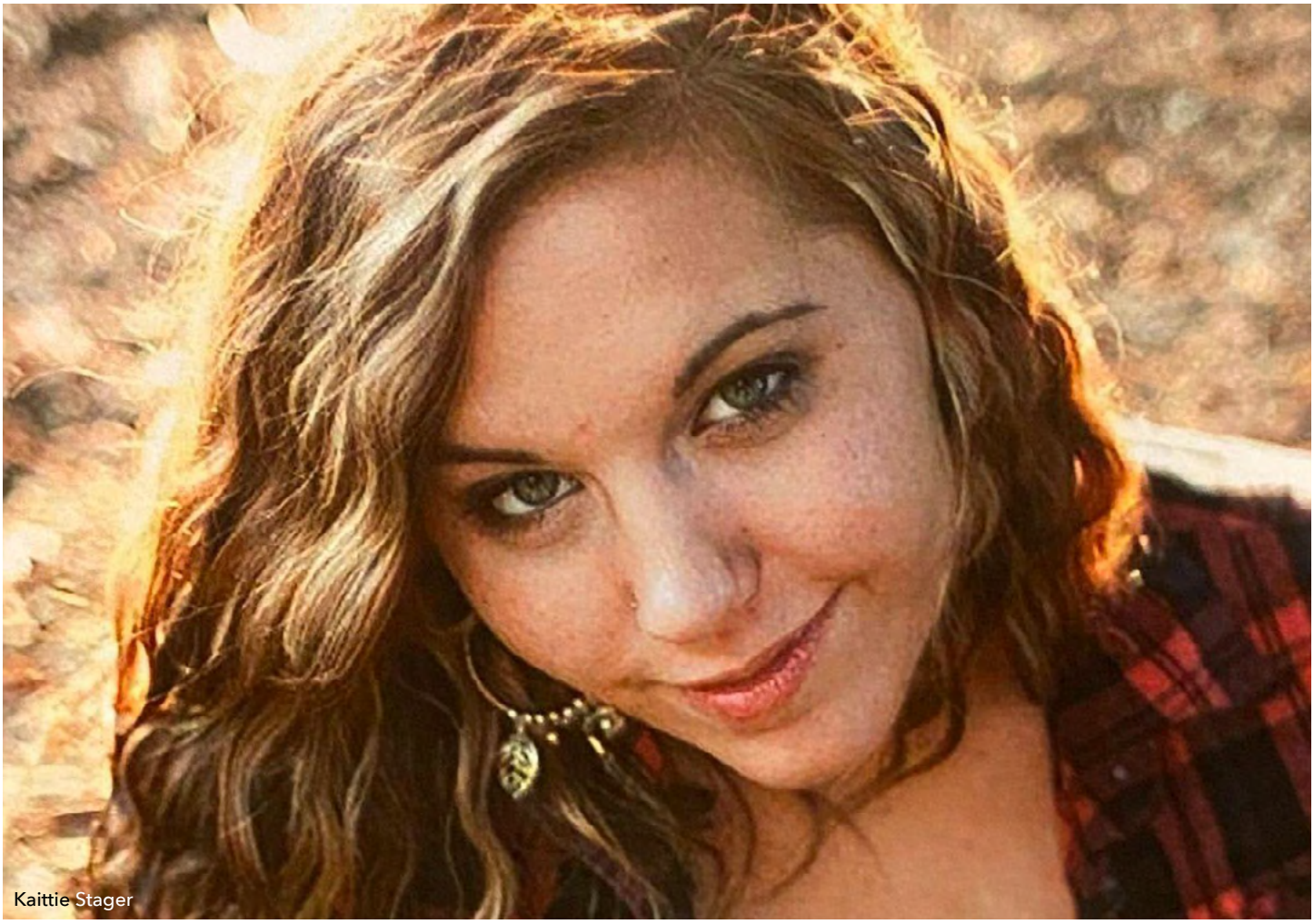
Kaittie was our youngest daughter of three girls. She was born January 1, 1994. Kaittie was a kind and loving person. She was smart, athletic and had a close group of friends and strong ties to her family. After high school, Kaittie attended Aveda Institute of Cosmetology in Portland. Losing Kaittie has completely devastated our family. She was an incredibly beautiful person with a bright future. We are her voice for truth and justice. She is loved and missed tremendously.

Kaittie was only 26 years old when she died under suspicious circumstances in October of 2020. Kaittie knew her abuser for only 12-1/2 months. The abuse was violent and controlling. Within minutes of the first officer arriving on scene, he was calling her death a suicide, despite her body being found and moved by her abuser.

Kaittie's abuser has a long history of domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse. He was on probation for domestic violence at the time of her death. His probation is still current today stemming from an assault on first responders. Kaittie's estate was awarded a wrongful death judgment against him.

There is a movement across the country to pass similar laws to SB 989, which passed in California.. This is a bipartisan movement focused on getting much needed training for first responders and the judicial system in recognizing Hidden Homicides. We feel this law and training will make a big difference and would have made a difference in how the death of our daughter had been investigated. Below are the ten factors listed in Joanna's Law and how all ten factors pertained to Kaittie's case.

1. ***Victim dies prematurely/unexpectedly***; Kaittie was only 26 years old.
2. ***Appears to be a suicide or accident scene***; We believe with training Linn County Sheriff's Office would have recognized the scene had been staged.
3. ***One partner wanted to end the relationship***; Kaittie told her abuser she was leaving on the day of her death.
4. **There is a history of domestic violence (or coercive control)**; This abuser has a long violent history. He had threatened to kill Kaittie on multiple occasions. One of many threats was, "I'm going to f*^# kill you for real, it will all build up and I will snap." He was under investigation for rape at the time and on probation for domestic violence.
5. ***Victim found dead at home or place of residence;*** Kaittie was found at her abusers trailer.


Kaittie Stager

6. ***Victim is found by current or previous partner;*** Kaittie was found by her abuser.
7. ***Prior history of strangulation/suffocation by partner;*** Not only is this evident in Kaittie's case, but also in the case that this abuser was being investigated for rape. He is a trained MMA fighter, trained in how to do this.
8. ***Partner is the last to see the victim alive;*** Kaittie's abuser was the only one who saw her in the position he claims she was in. He later changed his story of the position he found her in.
9. ***Partner has control of the crime scene before the police arrive;*** Not only is this the case in Kaittie's death, but Kaittie had been taken to the hospital before the police arrived. When the responding officer arrived, he did not secure the scene.
10. ***Crime scene altered in some way;*** The responding officer allowed Kaittie's abuser to have full access to the crime scene and Kaittie's personal belongings. The officer and Kaittie's abuser admitted he deleted messages, pictures and other valuable information from her phones.

Thank you all for everything you do for victims of domestic violence.

Shelly and Bob Stager

In Loving Memory of Kaittie Renaye Stager, Our Beautiful Angel

ALYSSE STEED

Date of Death: **04-23-23**
Age: **34**
Jurisdiction: **Port St. Lucie Police Dept. District 19**
Location: **Port St. Lucie, FL**
Manner of Death: **Accident by overdose (2023) Could not be determined (2024)**
Case: **Open. Under review**
10 Factors Identified: **10/10**

I am writing this victim impact statement for many reasons; I hope it moves you as leaders to act, reform, listen, demand, and implement changes. Please note and question why so many of these impact statements have common threads of frustration from hurt parents, siblings, and friends as we advocate for our loved ones and are victimized not only by our loved ones death but by the justice system, local law enforcement, state attorney offices, and medical examiner's offices. As advocates seeking justice, we continue to be placated and pacified with false promises. Instead of grieving, we are frustrated and exhausted by having to voice our truth for our loved ones and family.

On April 23, 2023, I spent the day cooking Wedding soup and Asian Pasta salad while my daughter cleaned the house. Alysse had been arguing with her boyfriend and the father of her three children the whole day.
My daughter was 34 years old, and I did my best to support her while allowing her to make her own decisions. There is evidence of the arguments as she communicated with her friend by real-time text messages.

I heard an argument around 6:30 PM.
The perpetrator left the bedroom and then returned to the bedroom, he locked and shut the door. I heard my daughter say, "Get the fuck off of me."

I ran to the bedroom door and pounded to be let in for approximately 50 seconds, pleading to see my daughter and finally threatening to break down the door.
Finally, I heard my daughter say, "Mom, I'm okay." The perpetrator then left the bedroom and ran out of the house while verbally assaulting Alysse, calling her fat and ugly and saying that nobody wants her around her children. Alysse came into my room and told me he had "choked" her. She asked if she had any marks on her neck—yes, she did. As she was crying and upset, I tried to comfort her and encouraged her to call the police. Again, there is evidence of this incident as she texted her friend.

Alysse then left the home and met the perpetrator. They later returned to the house. He went to the bedroom, and Alysse entered the room at 8:20 PM. At approximately 9:15 PM, the bedroom door opened. Thinking it was Alysse, I said, "Is everything okay?" Instead, it was the perpetrator, and he replied, "No, there is something wrong with Alysse." I ran into the room and found my daughter sitting, her hands on her lap, purple from the chest up. I performed CPR and gave her Narcan until the EMT arrived and pronounced her dead. My head was swimming, trying to make sense of the situation, but nothing made sense.

Things were mishandled right away.
The detective immediately rejected the domestic violence history and is on tape telling me that the strangulation is a "he said/she said situation" and "couldn't be prosecuted since Alysse did not call the police." I pleaded with the officer. What if there was evidence from the autopsy? What if there is evidence on the phone? The detective failed to tell the Medical Examiner's (ME) investigator that Alysse had been strangled hours before the final incident.

As my daughter is on a gurney in a body bag, I asked the ME, "Did the detective tell you she was strangled a couple of hours ago?"

The ME was incredulous with the detective and yelled, "Did the mother tell you she had been strangled?" The detective answered, "She did, but that is not what this is about; this is a drug overdose." Law enforcement failed to take photos of her neck at the scene and allowed the perpetrator to leave with his parents without questioning him at the department or inspecting his body for evidence.

The detective refused to attend Alysse's autopsy and, when confronted by the ME, reportedly explained her injuries as, "maybe she ran into things while using drugs/alcohol." It was evident that my daughter's injuries were caused by a submissive position while fighting for her life. The detective failed to look at the autopsy photos and closed the case. The ME did not push her concerns and ruled the cause of death as, "Accidental fentanyl and alcohol with recent cocaine use." Per lab results, her levels were far below lethal or even therapeutic levels, and the fentanyl did not even convert norfentanyl by the liver. I am a nurse, and these medical findings raised red flags and led me to the Alliance for HOPE International's Training Institute on Strangulation Prevention.

The failures of my daughter's case have impacted me greatly. Instead of being able to grieve, I have spent the last 15 months studying graphic photos of her autopsy, reviewing images of neck dissections, hemorrhages, bruises, and contusions. I must tell you those visions have been ingrained in my brain, leaving me little room to remember her smile, her laugh, her sense of style and humor; it is hard to remember good times as I fight for visitation with her children, who are mini-Alysse's. They are her legacy.



Alysse Steed

I have been able to get my daughter's case reopened. It is now listed as "Could not be determined," and the case remains open.

The medical examiner's office still resists, and I have filed a complaint with the Commission. I am still waiting for justice, relying on a system that has let me down at every turn. Had my daughter been stabbed or if a gun had been involved, there would have been an investigation. Since the case involved strangulation and smothering, so how do they close the case with no further investigation?

I don't understand how we got here and why we allow systems to accept this status quo. Systems seem self-monitored and perpetually self-serving to the police, medical examiner's office, and State Attorney's office.

Systems functioning from a place of laziness, lack of education, or willful unwillingness to investigate cases puts families in turmoil for years. For society to be civilized, accountability for those involved must be enforced so that cultural changes and mistakes are recognized, acknowledged, and corrected, allowing justice to prevail.

Thank You, Mary Beth Steed,
Mother to Alysse Karyn Steed

MEDIA

ELIZABETH "LIBBY" CASWELL

I Heart Radio Podcast

https://www.iheart.com/podcast/1119-what-happened-to-libby-ca-274258476

STACY FELDMAN

Dateline Episode: The Sisterhood (also on Peacock)

https://open.spotify.com/episode/1Zo1daNMS0vUxmGIBTjUHE

KELSEY HARRIS

KPTV-12, Advocates ask Oregon lawmakers to fund DV prevention, survivor help at Salem rally

https://www.kptv.com/2025/06/05/advocates-ask-oregon-lawmakers-fund-dv-prevention-survivor-help-salem-rally/

MARY ANN HAYES AND STEVEN ALTMAN

WGN Films: Hidden Homicide Docuseries

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6G09fGCwp4

JOANNA HUNTER

Joanna's Law - CA SB 989

First Hidden Homicides bill in the nation/passed unanimously

Training Video for First Responders (10 min)

https://www.allianceforhope.org/resources/joannas-law-sb-989-first-responder-training-video-by-sacramento-pd

Fighting for Answers

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRLB3lVZmyY&list=PLKNx7Usqhw7HFy-HhgcUkL1lZUEw2vD1V&index=1

HEATHER MAYER

Star Tribune's Investigative Report, "What Happed to Heather Mayer?"

https://www.startribune.com/heather-mayer-death-bdsm-mother-find-justice-twin-cities/600273507/

ALYSSE STEED

CBS12 News, Investigative Multiseries Report: What happened to Alysse Steed?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBvK9NoRA_I

JUSTICE PROJECT:

HOPE FOR SURVIVORS & JUSTICE FOR VICTIMS OF HIDDEN HOMICIDES.

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