



EPISODE 02: Who Killed Stephen Smith? Part One

Mandy Matney 00:00

I don't know who killed Stephen Smith. But I do know that his family has been waiting 2180 days to get justice and I am determined that some day they will get answers. My name is Mandy Matney. I'm the news director at FITSnews.com. I have been investigating the Murdaugh family for more than two years now. And this is the Murdaugh Murders Podcast. So to start off this podcast, I just want to say thank you to everyone who tuned in and listened, and to everyone who gave us a five star review. My fiance, who's also my producer, and I were just shocked and overwhelmed by all of the support. So thank you. Also, this week, I learned what vocal fry was for the first time hear it. Thank you commenters. I am a journalist, not a podcaster for the last three weeks, I have been on the phone all day, every day chasing down leads in this case, unlike the YouTubers, and the other podcasters out there, literally all of the other podcasters working on this case, I'm actually doing real reporting here. It's exhausting. My voice will not be perfect, but the information will be accurate. I can promise you that. Also, it's just plain mean to say that somebody's voice sucks. I'm sorry. But that's like saying somebody's face is ugly. Like I can't change it. So I don't know what you want me to do with that information. To all of you that email me to the girl that said I sound like Kim Kardashian to change your voice. I can't change my voice. This is it, take it or leave it. In our first episode called South Carolina's Chappaquiddick, I give a 30,000 foot view of the saga. All of that information is crucial if you want to fully understand this case, the story is extremely complicated and deserves so much more time and attention before jumping to conclusions. On June 22, huge news broke in this case, I was the first to report that the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division also known as SLED, the same agency investigating the Murdaugh murders opened an investigation into the Stephen Smith death SLED told me that this was based on information gathered during the course of the double homicide investigation of Paul and Maggie Murdaugh. We don't know what information led them to that decision. But it's important to look back on the 2015 case and see what went wrong. So what happened to Stephen Smith, like the probe of the 2019 bow crash that killed Mallory beach, the 2015 investigation and dismissed death was chaotic from the beginning derailed by jurisdictional perplexity and suspicions of investigative interference. Smith was found dead just before 4am on July 8 2015. He was found in the middle of Sandy Run Road in Hampton County, South Carolina

03:10 **911 Operator**

Hampton County 911 what was your emergency?

Caller

I just going down the road. And I see someone laying in the road. You know, in the road.

03:23 **911 Operator**



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yeah.

Caller

Somebody's gonna hit him.

03:30 911 Operator

All right, we'll get an officer headed that way.

Caller

Okay, all right.

Mandy Matney 03:36

At 4:07am, a man named Michael Bridges of the Hampton County Sheriff's Office arrived on scene just seconds after he was dispatched. I'll be clear here. It's hard to understand from all of the reports when exactly the Hampton County Sheriff's Office arrived on scene whatever time deputies arrived. What they found was horrific. I know this because I've seen crime scene photos Stephen's face was covered in blood. The bright young nursing student was dead. He was lying in the middle of a remote country road. Stephen had a seven inch gash on the right side of his forehead and his head was warped by blunt force. Considering he had no other major injuries. Investigators on scene were completely stumped. At first, they thought it was a hit and run and called Highway Patrol to the scene around 5:37am. By 6am. The South Carolina Law Enforcement Division also known as SLED was called to the scene. The coroner ruled a death a shooting homicide forcing investigators to search the area for ballistics evidence. Investigators from the South Carolina highway patrol, the Hampton County Sheriff's office and the state police found virtually no evidence. No bullets, no gunshot residue, no tire marks, no debris from a vehicle, nothing. Here is Corporal Michael Duncan, who was one of the initial investigators for the South Carolina Highway Patrol on scene.

04:54 Corporal Michael Duncan

It is a two lane roadway level, sight distance not an issue. However, its collision occurred approximately at night approximately one o'clock in the morning to four o'clock so visibility will be used with headlights only there's no other ambient lighting in the area. As far as evidence here there is only evidence of where the body was found. There's no car parts, no any type of parts to a car, or truck or any other vehicle. photographs and video were taken of the scene. Sergeant Booker also visited the mortuary took pictures of the body at the mortuary there is no body trauma other than to the head area there is some square scrapes and scratches on his left and right arm on his knuckles so across his face does not appear to be in my opinion struck by a vehicle.

Mandy Matney 06:08



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In fact, after combing through over 100 pages of documents, it's hard to find any officials who believe that Stephen Seth was a hit and run. hours later Dr. Erin Presnell, a pathologist at the Medical University of South Carolina also known as MUSC, ruled that Stephen was killed in a hit and run incident. While the coroner believes that the death was a homicide in South Carolina, a pathologist who is a medical doctor must perform an autopsy on the victim to decide the cause and manner of death.

Here is what the autopsy report said the cause of death was blunt force head trauma due to a motor vehicle crash. There was a 7.25 inch laceration on the right side of Stephens forehead along with bruises on both sides of his forehead. The right side of Stephen skull had multiple fractures, bruising and contusions. His right eyebrow was cut and his right shoulder was dislocated. He had cuts and bruises on his right hand. There were cuts on his right arm. There were cuts on his right fingers and blood was in his Airways. The autopsy report mentions historical information that led the pathologist to believe that Stephen was killed by a vehicle but there is no mention of any specific historical information that would lead them to this conclusion. Highway Patrol investigators were baffled by this ruling because they were told by SLED and the sheriff's office that they were not needed at the autopsy. They didn't think they were needed because they didn't think that this was a hit and run. The South Carolina Highway Patrol typically does not investigate murders. Highway Patrol investigators went to the scene multiple times to search for evidence time after time they found nothing.

07:55

The body was found right on the YL, head was on one side of the aisle and his feet were on the other. There's no marks from the vehicle. No skid marks in the roadway. Nothing in the grass.

Mandy Matney 08:01

Again, the evidence did not suggest that this was a hit and run; his loosely tied shoes were still on his feet. That is a big deal. I have been a journalist for a long time. And I have many sources to turn to in cases like this. And they all say that this is basic science. When a car hits a person the shoes come off due to force and friction. Stephen's shoes stayed on. Hours after the accident investigators found Smith's car about three miles away on the side of Bamburg highway. His wallet was inside his car. Investigators noted that the car's gas cap wasn't screwed and hanging outside of the gas cap door. Law enforcement officials believed that Stephen ran out of gas and started walking home before he was killed. The toxicology report showed that Stephen was completely sober. Investigators theorized that Stephen was killed by a truck mirror that struck only his face which is why he didn't have any other serious injuries from the reports. It appears like Highway Patrol officials were completely thrown off by the decision to give them the case after the autopsy, Sergeant Moore was calling around to find Stephens body. He then found out that Stephen's body was at the funeral home and his clothes were left in a paper bag completely unattended. This means that the chain of



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custody was broken. Sergeant Moore of the Highway Patrol does not understand why Stephen's death was ruled a hit and run. He'd called Dr. Erin Presnelli out to get more information. Presnelli explained to Moore it was simple. She said because she didn't find a gunshot wound or any bullets or any fragments. And because Stephen was found in the road. The only thing that she could theorize was that he had to have been hit by a motor vehicle that causes death more as pres now if there were Any other injuries on Stephen and she said only a dislocated right shoulder more than asked personnel if she found any glass fragments or any other evidence from a motor vehicle and she said no according to his notes, more than asked personnel why she made the ruling that it was a motor vehicle accident and what she thought caused Stephens head injury. It looks like personnel snap back at more at this point more wrote in his report, quote, she told me it was not her job to figure that out. It was mine. I have read 1000s of police reports in my lifetime and I've never seen anything like this for a public official to describe a confrontation with another official in a report that is very weird. Okay, so let's rewind here. First SLED and the Hampton County Sheriff's office told the Highway Patrol that they shouldn't be at the autopsy because it was not a motor vehicle accident since there was no evidence of it being a motor vehicle accident, and remember SLED came to the scene searching for evidence of a shooting. Also, I want to be clear that SLED was never in charge of this investigation. They were called to the scene for assistance. This investigation was not theirs until they opened it in 2021. At no point is anyone in any of these reports mentioned a possibility that he was beaten to death or struck by an object like a baseball bat, and then they would search for evidence for such things. Also, in all of these reports, I never saw them talking to any neighbors nearby to see if they saw anything or heard anything. And if you know anything about investigations, you know that canvassing the area in the immediate hours after something happens is so essential. People do not remember days later or weeks later, or now years later if they heard something weird on a Wednesday night in July. So now we are left with a situation that is askew from the get go. We're left with an agency that specializes in accident reconstruction investigating a man's death where there is no evidence of a vehicle accident. After poring through hundreds of documents in these case files and listening to hours and hours of audio. It is hard in this case to determine if it's incompetence or corruption or both. That failed Stephen but either way we failed Stephen the justice system failed Stephen and his family Stephen's family immediately rejected the idea that Stephen was killed by a vehicle Stephen was smart, he was hyper aware and he was very careful. They all told me there was just no way he would let a vehicle hit him at night. How would a smart sober kid get hit head on in the face by a truck mirror on a rural lightly traveled road in the middle of the night. It just does not make any sense. On July 11 2015 Stephens' family held away. The family kept the casket open so that people could see what was done to him. On July 14 2015, the first of three death certificates for Stephen Smith was issued by Warner Ernie Washington to Stephen's family. According to the death certificate the time of injury was really Stephens actual or presumed time of death was also 3am Stephens cause of death was blunt force trauma, and it says probably pedestrian in motor vehicle accident possibly struck by side mirror. So at this point in the



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investigation on July 14 2015. Highway Patrol detectives start interviewing people. This is weird because if you were investigating a random hit and run according to the death certificate, why would you interview people close to Stephen as if it was an intentional homicide. One of the first people interviewed by highway patrol was a man who identified himself as Stephen's boyfriend. However, the family very much disputed this title as boyfriend. He was older. He was apparently paying for Stephen's phone. There was some kind of fling happening between them of some sort, but from what the family says he was not Stephen's boyfriend. He claims to be one of the last people who spoke to Stephen before his death,

14:24

because he already told me it was out again. He was running out of gas, that one of the calls before and then the call dropped.

Mandy Matney 14:31

I'll be clear here. It's hard to follow this man's interview. He talks about a lot of things that he's not asked about. He has said that he has memory problems and that he's done a lot of drugs and also has brain injuries. It's very hard to follow

14:46 **Man**

the frustration sets in as far as you can remember this but but you can't remember that because you're

14:51 **Interviewer**

pulling you got to understand I gotta want a main brain injury. I got and you're trying to you're trying to hit me with just to get a timeline i I mean, I think because I'm thinking in my head that these calls are coming in Thursday morning.

Mandy Matney 15:06

However, he does say some things that seem like they could be relevant.

15:11 **Man**

And he's been harassed in this town they've been they've been messing with his logs on the car. They've been screwing with his battery.

15:19 **Interviewer**

And when you say who you're talking about,

15:21 **Man**

we I don't know the only one that he told me that he made it very clear to me, the guy with the tattoo,



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Mandy Matney 15:28

when they later pressed this man about specifics, he said Stephen was harassed on the night he was killed at Snyder's crossing, is that where he

15:36 **Interviewer**

said he felt like he was being followed?

Man

Yes, he said that he was being harassed at that store. He didn't say he said it was a couple of guys in the pickup truck. If I recall correctly, you said they were rednecks..

Mandy Matney 15:53

On July 17 2015, Corporal Duncan of the Highway Patrol interviews one of Stephens family members during the interview, it's the first time that the Murdaugh name is brought up in the investigation, we're going to alter the voice of the person that speaks here due to the sensitive nature of this topic,

16:10 **Corp. Duncan**

about the rumors that you've been hearing on the street, that you told me earlier today. Possibly, we're involved

16:19 **Altered voice**

on 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 and you know, like, the Murdaugh boys are behind it. And you know, Buster Murdaugh, the one we went to school with and some of his friends. And I'm like, why? Makes no sense? He's never said anything bad about Stephen. He's never been around. Stephen

Mandy Matney 16:41

Duncan doesn't ask Stephens relative. A lot of follow up questions to the statement. They just ask her where she got the information. She mentions a few people and they move on. And then the Murdaugh name comes up again.

16:54

No, lawyers have contacted you about the day that Stephen passed away?

Altered Voice. Randy Murdaugh was the second person to call my dad after the corner. And he said he wanted to take the case. It would be free of charge and everything. And my dad's a little iffy on that. So it's kind of weird. No lawyer's here and says it'd be free and you can have whatever money you want.



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Mandy Matney 17:20

Okay, so I know that the Highway Patrol is not used to investigating homicides. But here Duncan doesn't ask any follow up questions about this. He just learned a few minutes before that this relative heard rumors that the Murdaugh boys were involved in Stephen's death. Then a few minutes later, he heard that Randy Murdaugh was the first person to contact the family after the corner to offer his services. Granted, Hampton is a very small town, but Duncan appears to not even make the connection between the Murdaughs being mentioned twice in the interview. He just asks a few more questions that don't have anything to do with that and he ends the interview. And Duncan's notes from the interviewer he does not mention the Murdaughs. According to his notes, this relative told him that Stephen became very secretive about two weeks before the incident and his relative didn't know of anybody who had a problem with Stephen. Later that day, Duncan called Sandy Smith Stephens mother, Sandy tells Duncan different things about her son. She says that he had recently been cutting school which is unusual for him.

18:28 **Sandy Smith**

He was a study person he studied. He would come to my house and stay there until about one o'clock in the morning before he would go home.

Mandy Matney 18:37

During the interview, Duncan asked Sandy if she's heard any rumors about her son's death,

18:41 **Sandy Smith**

no rumors going around. Everybody keeps coming up to me. And it was Murdaugh

Corp. Duncan

the Murdaugh boys?

18:49 **Sandy Smith**

Yes, whoever they are.

Mandy Matney 18:52

Duncan didn't ask any follow up question to this. He doesn't appear to connect the rumors with anything Stephens. Other relatives said just hours before. He asked Sandy a few more questions. And Sandy told Duncan about a young man who worked at bylo who was making Stephen feel uncomfortable recently. In his case notes Stephen writes about the man at bylo and suggests that another detective follow up by tracking him down. There was no mention of the Murdaugh rumor in his notes again.

19:21 **Corp. Duncan**



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So is there something that you found out or eat somebody else that you feel like I need to talk to? That just kind of comes about let me know.

Mandy Matney 19:35

Hearing Sandy's voice here just breaks my heart. She's so polite and sweet and hopeful that the investigation will give her and her family answers. Fast forward almost six years on a Saturday night Sandy texted me. Days after her son's case was reopened by SLED, almost every major news organization in the country was saying Stephen Smith's name. She said quote, There is nothing in this world I want More than to hold my baby in my arm one more time the media wants a story. I just want justice.

A lot happened in the Stephen Smith case after Sandy's interview in July 2015. The case took a couple of strange turns before it went cold in 2016. And we will get to all of that in a later episode. It's too much for one episode. So that brings us to the latest developments and the double homicide case. So there haven't been a lot of updates in this case recently, but I don't think that that's concerning. We have to remember that it took the Attorney General's office two months to charge Paul Murdaugh with three felonies after the DUI boat crash that killed Mallory Beach. So we still don't know who if anyone will be charged in the double homicide of Maggie and Paul Murdaugh. But I do know that we have to give law enforcement space and time before jumping to conclusions. In another development this week. A spokesperson for the powerful Murdaugh family released a statement about a reward that they are offering for information and the high profile investigation. Alex and a son, Buster Murdaugh offered the \$100,000 reward. In another update Maggie Murdaugh's cell phone was found along a rural South Carolina road just outside of the family's hunting property where they were found dead. And we still don't know what information SLED obtained in the double homicide investigation that led them to reopen Stephen's case. I've seen some talking heads on TV say that it was reopened because of something that was found on scene. But we don't know that we can't guess that we have to wait on law enforcement. And I just want to say again, be careful when you watch national news and YouTubers and other podcasters really most media unfortunately in this case, because no one has been careful with their facts. We don't know a lot of things and we can't jump to conclusions and we certainly can't just make things out to fill up airtime.

So for the latest developments on this case, visit FITSnews.com or follow me on Twitter at twitter.com/mandy M A N D Y Matney M A T N E Y. And don't forget to leave a five star review unless you're going to be nasty and talk about my vocal fry.

The Murdaugh Murders Podcast is created by me, Mandy Matney and my fiance David Moses produced by LUNA SHARK productions.