



## EPISODE 87: 'I Can't Believe It Has Happened': Stephen Smith's Body Exhumed

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[00:00:00] **Mandy Matney:** I don't know if we will ever learn all of the answers surrounding Stephen Smith's tragic death. But his mother and her team of supporters have made huge progress in the last week, and we promise to keep pushing until justice is served. My name is Mandy Matney. I have been investigating the Stephen Smith case since 2019. This is the Murdaugh Murders Podcast produced by my husband, David Moses, and written with journalist Liz Farrell.

[00:00:44] Well, Happy Wednesday. Before we get into today's episode, I have a couple important things to share. First off, if you are on social media, please, please, please take part in our Green Day for Justice campaign to show the Smith family your love and support for Stephen. A while ago, Sandy told me that Stephen's favorite color was green, and we are now requesting all of our listeners to post a green square in their social media profiles for the month of April. You can find a link to the squares that we are using in the episode description. We encourage you to share [JusticeForStephen.com](https://JusticeForStephen.com) and [tips@sled.sc.gov](mailto:tips@sled.sc.gov) in your Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok post. This groundswell of support will not only show the community that there is a world of support behind those who speak up, but will also show media agencies this story is worth covering, not because of the gory details, but because it's the right thing to do. We all wanna drink from the same cup of justice. But for some, it takes a little more pressure to fill that cup. We appreciate everyone who has given or anyone who can give to the independent investigation fund. We are so grateful to all of those who can send prayers to Sandy. We appreciate every single person who can share their support with a simple green post.

[00:02:11] And also some fun news. I recently was honored as a special guest on the podcast Rabia and Ellyn Solve the Case. Rabia is a true crime hero of mine who fought for years to get justice for family friend Adnan Syed, who was wrongfully convicted in his ex-girlfriend's murder. I was so inspired by Rabia and the work she did on Adnan's case that it honestly helped shape this podcast. Check out the link to the two episodes that we did in the description. And also exciting: Liz and I both joined our friends Mandy Powers Norrell and Sarah Ford on their new podcast "Palmetto Primetime." Sarah and Mandy are both South Carolina attorneys and are just awesome, badass women who we have been lucky to get to know in the last few years. Y'all



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might remember Sarah. She represented the victims in the Bowen Turner case. Their podcast "Palmetto Primetime" is fantastic. They've interviewed key players in the Murdaugh murders trial like Mark Tinsley and Dr. Kenny Kinsey, and they also did a special two-part series on Liz and I called the "Pesky Podcast Girls." Check it out and be sure to give them a follow.

[00:03:24] And now, in big news. As you all know, Eric Bland and Ronnie Richter do not waste time. Just two weeks ago, they promised Sandy Smith when she hired them that they would get her number one goal accomplished, and that was exhuming Stephen's body for an independent autopsy. And just a few days ago, they made that happen for Sandy. Last week was a whirlwind with a whole slew of people involved, from transferring the GoFundMe money to getting expedited permission from DHEC to exhume Stephen's body to coordinating between SLED for security and the new team of experts. But Eric and Ronnie did it all in record time. As a team of Sandy's supporters guided by the help of SLED Chief Mark Keel, we all decided that it would be best for Sandy's peace of mind and for the integrity of the investigation to keep the exhumation quiet over the weekend. Sandy didn't tell her other kids about the exhumation Friday. She was so worried about other reporters finding out and she didn't want them to have to witness that. I spoke to Sandy about the decision to not announce the exhumation and keep it quiet over the weekend, and I want you to hear this from her.

[00:04:39] **Sandy Smith:** I wanted it because to me, that was private and I didn't even tell my children because I did not want them going through this and I did not want the media putting it all over TV and Facebook and everything until my family got through with our service, our private service, and then whoever wanted to come could come. But to me, that was our private time with Stephen.

[00:05:06] **Mandy Matney:** Friday was special. Every person who attended was invited to be there and Sandy wanted them there. She was in control. We all arrived before dawn at the Gooding Cemetery in Hampton County just around the corner from where Stephen's body was found. The process was quick and professional. I kept looking over at Sandy and seeing this



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overwhelming look of relief on her face — a feeling I haven't seen on Sandy in the four years that I've known her.

[00:05:37] **Sandy Smith:** Friday was emotional but joyful because I knew once he got out of that ground and in that autopsy room that we were gonna get some real answers. So it was joyful and emotional. It was like a happy day. That was the first step, and we got the first step out the way.

[00:06:02] **Mandy Matney:** 11 SLED agents were there to help secure the scene and preserve the investigation. It was promising and encouraging to see that much support from SLED. The process of exhumation took about four hours. I watched as the SLED agents, along with Dr. DuPre, who was hired as a private pathologist, each go up to Sandy, look her in the eye, and tell her that they are doing everything that they can to solve Stephen's case.

[00:06:31] **Sandy Smith:** That was very overwhelming to see — that they were asking questions and they were explaining everything, you know? SLED was explaining to her what they were doing and then she was telling SLED what was gonna happen. And it was amazing. It was wonderful. We're all working together to get answers.

[00:06:53] **Mandy Matney:** While it was joyful for her, Sandy was still on edge. She has been harassed by the media on several occasions and I was so worried during those hours that someone was going to ruin this.

[00:07:05] **Sandy Smith:** The media — I don't really trust the media too much because they're just looking for a story and instead of helping with Stephen's story, they're actually hurting it. They're hurting my family by putting stuff out there that is private and certain people are mentioning our names and my children's names and my grandchildren's name. They had nothing to do with Stephen's death. Leave their privacy alone.

[00:07:32] **Mandy Matney:** Sandy was clear. She was so thankful for the public's help in raising the GoFundMe money for the exhumation, but that did not mean that the public and the media earned a right to know every step of the process. She also knew that the public would question the



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exhumation if they didn't document it, so videographer Eric Alan was there to film the process.

[00:07:55] **Sandy Smith:** And I heard about some comments about Eric being out there and I said, well, Eric was there because I wanted him to film it because he's my friend, and I wanted to make sure that we had proof that everything was done accurately.

[00:08:09] **Mandy Matney:** Can I just say: isn't that sad that a mother has to think like that because she has been wronged so many times? And she had to worry about busy bodies interfering while undergoing such a private and emotional moment.

[00:08:26] **Sandy Smith:** I was, and I looked around a lot to make sure that there was nobody stopping. And but once he come out that ground and I had just this peace just went through my heart because I fought so long for this and it happened. It actually happened, so I was happy.

[00:08:46] **Mandy Matney:** She was happy. I kept hearing Sandy saying over and over again "I've waited eight years for this."

[00:08:54] **Sandy Smith:** And it's it happened and I'm still in shock. I can't believe it has happened, but I'm so happy that it has happened.

[00:09:02] **Mandy Matney:** But Sandy's sense of peace unfortunately didn't last long. Hours after Stephen's body was exhumed and taken to Florida for an independent autopsy, people started posting photos of Stephen's disrupted grave. I don't wanna get into this too much, but I want you to hear this and understand how much stress it put on Sandy and her family who all wanted to have a private ceremony for Stephen's reburial after the autopsy on Sunday without a media circus.

[00:09:34] **Sandy Smith:** Right. And it broke my heart. And then people are riding by taking pictures and putting it all over Facebook and, you know, and it's just disrespectful. Very disrespectful. This was family time, not public time, not media time.



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[00:09:49] **Mandy Matney:** The goal all weekend was to get Stephen's body back in the ground safely without additional headaches. Those posting about the exhumation, specifically as the family asked for privacy for 48 hours on the weekend, by the way, they took that sense of peace and control from Sandy. I'm saying all of this to remind you to please think of victims before you post anything on social media. These are real people and there are real consequences involved. But thankfully, word didn't spread too much over the weekend and Stephen's family was able to have a private ceremony as his body was lowered into the ground one last time.

[00:10:31] **Sandy Smith:** Sunday was very emotional — having to watch him go back in the ground again. It was a joy to see him come out 'cause I knew we were getting somewhere. But then Sunday was kind of sad because — but I'm happy because now he's in his final resting place at peace. We were all there and actually, it was beautiful because we were able to throw or shovel the first dirt on his vault. That was very emotional.

[00:11:07] **Mandy Matney:** We'll be right back.

[00:11:18] **Liz Farrell:** Four years ago, we interviewed a friend of Stephen's who told us about how much his death had affected her. Not only was she sad that Stephen was no longer in her life, she was heartbroken seeing Stephen's twin sister Stephanie, who was always by Stephen's side — where you saw one, you saw the other, she said — now walking through life alone. We were going through our notes from that interview recently. Reading her words was yet another reminder of how much this case has affected the people in Stephen's life and in Hampton County. Stephen's friend told us this about how his murder destroyed her trust in law enforcement. "It absolutely gave me a different perspective," she said. "I realized very quickly it was like they didn't care. I can only hope that they find out what happened to my friend — the gay kid, the kid with no money and no last name. He mattered to people. He was loved. I don't know how they sleep at night knowing they did this to Stephen." Those words weigh on us now more than ever.

[00:12:19] A number of people have asked us about the purpose of Stephen's exhumation. If SLED Chief Mark Keel said it wasn't necessary, then why did



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Sandy have it done? The answer is simple: because Sandy needed to do it for her own peace of mind. Her community had failed her. Law enforcement had failed her. Political leaders had failed her. The media had failed her. And people who came out of the woodwork after the Murdaughs were murdered failed her. Four years she has operated with the knowledge that something isn't right here. Up until this past weekend, she has had to fully rely on other people to do the right thing by Stephen and they have repeatedly let her down. Knowing what you know now about how things operate in this part of the country when it comes to power and the law, how is a mother, any mother, who gets repeatedly told by people that her son's death was being covered up, supposed to trust anyone in that situation? Sandy needed this exhumation because she needed to know for herself what happened to her son right before he was left in the road to die like he didn't matter.

[00:13:29] We were going through the old case file over the past week and this interview in September 2015 stuck out to us. Highway Patrol spoke with someone who had information about what happened to Stephen. He heard that, quote, certain young men were riding down 601, saw Stephen broken down on the side of the road, passed Stephen and turned around and, quote, kind of stuck something out the window and ended up hitting Stephen. He said, quote, I think that it happened, they freaked out, and maybe it's just trying to get covered up at this point. He was very clear with Highway Patrol that he believed the boys were messing with Stephen and did not intentionally hurt him; that it was an accident. Like Stephen's friend said, I don't know how they sleep at night knowing that they did this, knowing what happened. And just like Judge Newman said to Alex Murdaugh during his sentencing, we know Stephen must come to them in the night. We feel certain that the people responsible for this who were there that night, whether or not they were driving, will only break free of the haunting that burdens their souls by coming forward now. Stephen's case is not going away. Sandy isn't going away. SLED isn't going away. Eric Bland and Ronnie Richter are not going away. We're not going away. And the thousands of people supporting Sandy's quest are not going away. Sooner or later, the protections that might have existed before will fall away completely, and these young men will be thrown one by one to the wolves by the last one standing.



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[00:15:09] That said, we talked a little bit about this on this week's Cup of Justice, but we wanted to mention it here, too. There has been a lot of speculation about the so-called two persons of interest in Stephen's case. We have been asked a lot about Patrick Wilson and Shawn Connelly. One thing we can say for sure is this: nothing that is being reported now is new information. Those two names appeared in South Carolina Highway Patrol's case file in late 2015, after the *Hampton Guardian* ran a Thanksgiving profile of Sandy Smith. In that story, Sandy said, "I know where Stephen was born, but I don't know exactly when he died. I know what his first words were, but I need to know what his last words were. I want to know who took my son from me. People need to realize that these murderers are still out there and it could be their child next. Everybody knows what happened to my son, but nobody wants to tell me who is responsible," she said. There are too many, quote, big names involved. Sandy did not tell the paper what those names were, but a few weeks after the paper published that story, highway patrolman Todd Proctor got a call from his coworker Michael Duncan, who had been on the case early on, about a man named Darrell Williams, who said his stepson Patrick Wilson had told him that Shawn Connelly had, quote, struck and killed Stephen Smith. According to the case file, Darrell had told Highway Patrol that Randy Murdaugh, who is Alex's older brother, had told him to call them. All of this was first reported by Mandy after the murders in the summer of 2021. Also, we have talked about Patrick and Shawn in episodes 9, 10, 17, and 24. It's not clear why, but after Patrolman Duncan passed this on to Patrolman Proctor, no one at Highway Patrol appears to have interviewed Darrell on the record. Instead, they interviewed Hampton County police officer Nick Ginn, who was somehow connected to Darrell. Nick told them what Darrell had relayed to him. Here is a recording of that statement, which was made on December 21st, 2015.

[00:17:33] **Nick Ginn:** Basically, Darrell called me and he said, look. He said, this is what I was told. He said Patrick, come over here to the house. He said — he told me that Shawn Connelly was drunk and hit something. He said he went back the next day to see what it was he had hit, and he seen a lot of police out there. So he talked to one of the cops and then he had left and then he learned I guess by media that somebody had been killed in that same area. That's why the police were there. So with him telling he said that Shawn called him crying, saying that that's what had happened, and then Patrick



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was telling Darrell, and Darrell told me that Patrick was crying telling him, and after he got finished telling the story, he walked outside of his house and threw up. And he said — Nick, he said — Nick, he said, this is just me thinking, he said, but I think that Patrick was with him. He said, why else would he throw up and get all upset like that because somebody else, you know, had done something?

[00:18:52] **Michael Duncan:** Right. Right. Did he go into any detail about how it happened? Do you know? I mean.

[00:19:00] **Nick Ginn:** Supposedly, he had fixed his mirror. He had patched it one of the mirrors up on the truck.

[00:19:07] **Liz Farrell:** Notice that Nick isn't saying that Patrick said he was in the truck with Shawn at the time Stephen was killed. Patrick allegedly blamed this on Shawn and Shawn alone, then he allegedly threw up. If you wanna know more about what the case file says as it relates to these two, we recommend revisiting those episodes I mentioned earlier. All of this was really just to say that even though this has been presented as new information, it isn't, and it's important to know that. Why? Because it served no good purpose in putting it out there in the context of this new investigation. As we said in Cup of Justice, it was completely reckless to label Patrick and Shawn as current persons of interest. Not only did it put both men and their families in danger, the Smith investigation has only just started in earnest. We talked to Sandy Smith about her thoughts on the release of Patrick's and Shawn's names. Here she is.

[00:20:06] **Sandy Smith:** Yeah, the rumors are interfering so bad that, you know, the more rumors you put out, the more SLED has to go investigate the nonsense so that they could get to the real truth. But you're just tying everything up when you're giving all these false leads that are not leads at all. It didn't go nowhere eight years ago. What makes him think it's gonna go somewhere now? On that part, you know, putting people's names out there because SLED would not have said a name unless they had proof and they probably would've already arrested that person.





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[00:20:38] **Liz Farrell:** The Highway Patrol's investigation ended without any arrests, which brings us to our next point and it's a really important point. We are only talking about the Stephen Smith case now because it wasn't solved in 2015 or in any of the years after that. If Stephen's case was a hit-and-run involving two local young men named Patrick and Shawn and if that were a provable thing back then, then those two local young men would've been arrested and the case would have been closed. But that's not what happened. Instead, Patrick, who was represented by Cory Fleming at the time, had his three attempted murder charges stemming from an incident in April 2015 reduced to assault and battery charges and then dropped altogether by the 14th Circuit Solicitor's Office. Then, for whatever reason and for all practical purposes, the investigation ended after that Nick Ginn interview with Michael Duncan. It was almost as if the Patrick Wilson and Shawn Connelly story gave investigators a way out of continuing down a fruitless path, which brings us to today. SLED has put new eyes on this case and we feel certain that they're not going down old paths that led nowhere. The exhumation and the independent autopsy are step one. And it turns out beyond providing Sandy with peace of mind, this step was absolutely necessary to this investigation, which will finally include a look at the trail left by Stephen's electronics. The autopsy was completed Saturday and will soon be in SLED's hands. We can say that gunshot wounds and suicide have officially been excluded as causes of Stephen's death, but that's about it for now. Here's Eric Bland with more on that.

[00:22:24] **Eric Bland:** First, we had to discern why was the autopsy necessary. It was necessary to answer the questions of the conflicting conclusions that existed amongst our law enforcement agencies at the front end of this investigation — by the South Carolina Highway Patrol, by DHEC, by SLED, and then also by Dr. Presnell, and ultimately with the certificate of death. So what ended up happening, Liz, is more questions than answers arose, which caused Sandy Smith to have this uncertainty about how her son was killed. So it was necessary because now, SLED is doing a criminal investigation. They've taken it over. We've already discussed it wasn't closed. It was just a cold case. And they've taken it over, and so they wanna approach this as if they're coming onto the scene on July 7th, 2015. And so, they do that. They come on the scene. They're gonna look at where Stephen was in the road. They're gonna look at all the other things. And they do that by looking at the pictures



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and the description that was done by whether it was the — team or some other investigatory team on that road. They're gonna also look back at Stephen's car, where it was. They're gonna presumably verify did he make any phone calls, as that one of the witnesses who claims he was Stephen's boyfriend Mark said. So they're gonna do all that. In the process then, an autopsy would've been done. Well, that's the autopsy that we just did a week ago. So it was necessary when you have a criminal investigation for the chain of custody of Stephen and his body from the moment that it was discovered on the road at three o'clock in the morning all the way through till he was buried. And again, he was buried last Sunday, so we're starting this investigation anew, and that's why it would need to be done. Look. If SLED was not gonna open an investigation, then they wouldn't care at all about the exhumation of Stephen's body, and if that was just something personal Sandy would've done, I would gather to say that we would've bet we would've been met with more resistance by the officials who had to approve us doing the exhumation. So with SLED agreeing that the cause of death was not him being hit by a car and the cause of death is homicide, it required the autopsy to be done. So yes, when we first started, I said we are gonna be totally transparent, transparent as much as I can be it turned out now. Because I have been asked by Chief Keel not to interfere with the state's investigation; that they are doing a full-blown investigation. That's all Sandy Smith ever asked: is to fully investigate it. And wherever the investigation leads and whatever the conclusion of those investigation come to, as long as it was in a meaningful, reasonable, and not result-driven investigation, she's gonna be happy with the result. She's not itching to have somebody be arrested for murder if Stephen wasn't murdered. If Stephen was hit by something in a moving car, then that's what's gonna be. But the fact is I cannot interfere with SLED's investigation because it could jeopardize the sanctity of that investigation. Now, that doesn't mean we're not gonna participate in the investigation. Chief Keel asked me because the MMP and the COJ nation have great ideas and they give them to us all the time. Either they send them to our personal websites or they get in touch with my law firm or they get in touch with Liz and Mandy and we're gonna feed everything we get to Dr. Kenny Kinsey and he's gonna look at them and he has the relationship with SLED and anything meaningful he's going to transfer over to them. We are not an investigative body, meaning COJ meaning Bland Richter. We don't have the authority to make people sit down. And so Chief Keel, I am



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confident, Sandy Smith is confident that SLED is going to do the necessary investigation and he asked me not to turn that over to the public. And so I am gonna honor it. Yes, it's different than what I said in the beginning. But in the beginning, I did not have the confidence that SLED was going to do a full-blown investigation, and now I do.

[00:27:21] **Liz Farrell:** Eric also asked about the damage that was done to Stephen's casket and what that means for the new autopsy.

[00:27:28] **Eric Bland:** So, when Stephen was exhumed last Friday morning, the vault had cracks in it and groundwater seeped into the vault, which damaged the coffin. And inside where Stephen was buried, not to be too graphic, inside the coffin, there was water. Did it affect the autopsy? Absolutely not. All three of the pathologists who did the autopsy plus the SLED people said it was a head to toe complete autopsy. They took slides. It was, according to Michelle DuPre, one of the most comprehensive autopsies she's ever seen. So there was soft tissue left. There was so much of Stephen left. The organs were left. You know, amazingly, after eight years, he was significantly well preserved. And so every possible analysis and examination on Stephen's body from head to toe was done. So I can safely say that the water the infiltration of the water did not compromise the autopsy that was done.

[00:28:49] **Liz Farrell:** Though the details of the autopsy will stay with SLED, we can say that this exhumation was worth it and it's a good thing Sandy had the wherewithal to make it happen. We can also report that SLED is in possession of both Stephen's phone and the rape kit. We also wanna note that the experts that Sandy hired have lauded Dr. Erin Presnell for her work in the first autopsy. They have said that her report in 2015 was very thorough and that it is, quote, unfortunate that her interactions with highway patrol officers afterward ended up reinforcing any doubts about her findings. There's something we wanna note about that, by the way. Earlier today, we saw a report on *Law & Crime* that mentioned the criticism investigators and the Smith family have had about Dr. Presnell's findings. *Law & Crime* said the criticism was, quote, because Dr. Presnell had labeled the death a hit-and-run. That's partially correct. That criticism of Dr. Presnell seemed to be based



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entirely on two things. The first was that Highway Patrol, the state's foremost experts on road fatalities, believed Stephen had not been hit with a vehicle, meaning they didn't believe that his head injury was the result of being hit by a car, but rather being hit by an object — an object that wouldn't have been there if not for another human being, whether or not that human being intended for Stephen to die as a result. With that in mind, Highway Patrol said that when they went to Dr. Presnell for further explanation about her findings, much to their surprise because as they noted in the case file, they had had a great working relationship with her and MUSC, they were met with hostility. It didn't seem like they were critical about her findings as much as they were critical about how she responded to them asking for clarity. So while we're really encouraged to hear that Dr. Presnell's report was thorough, we want to again mention that we are only talking about this case now because of how the investigation was conducted. Highway Patrol didn't believe the case belonged with them. That much is evident from the case file and from the many interviews former patrolmen have done since SLED took the case in 2021. Despite their efforts in 2015 to get someone to recognize that there was something more happening with this case, Highway Patrol was met with resistance. Dr. Presnell's report was the ignition point, the catalyst. It was why the case ended up with Highway Patrol and not SLED where it needed to be.

[00:31:18] For generations, the people of Hampton County, the ones who aren't connected, have had a cynical view of law enforcement and the justice system for good reason. Even many good law enforcement officers have had that same cynicism, that same feeling of helplessness when it came to applying the law to the powerful, a sense of, oh, okay. We know what's going on here and we don't like it, so all we can do is ask the questions until we're told to shut up. In other words, when something starts to walk like a duck, such as Stephen's investigation being with the wrong agency, they're used to it being a duck. In a corrupt system, everything starts to sound like quacking and everything starts to look like feathers. It's the entire point of corruption with a capital C. If everything looks corrupt, then nothing looks corrupt, and the truly corrupt can keep on corrupting. But in this case, we really believe that law enforcement was simply criticizing Dr. Presnell's reaction rather than her or her findings per se. They seem to be seeking answers about whether her characterization of it being hit-and-run would be inclusive of Stephen getting hit with an object, such as an object hanging out of a window, which



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is what investigators were hearing happened rather than him getting hit by a car as they were trained to investigate and just weren't seeing here.

[00:32:48] We'll be right back.

[00:32:53] **Mandy Matney:** On Monday, to crank up the pressure, the Bland Richter Law Firm on behalf of Sandy Smith announced a \$35,000 reward for anyone who provides law enforcement with information that leads to an arrest in Stephen Smith's death. By offering a reward, Sandy is again leveling the playing field and forcing the two systems of justice in South Carolina to reconcile with each other. And here is Sandy.

[00:33:19] **Sandy Smith:** Absolutely excited about that. I feel this reward is gonna go somewhere. Somebody is gonna give some answers and I will gladly hand-deliver that reward money.

[00:33:32] **Mandy Matney:** But again, it shouldn't have to take this much just to get justice in South Carolina. While the system will never be perfect, the more time I spend with Sandy, the more I realize how truly unfair the system has been to her family and how Hampton is still very much divided between the haves and the have-nots. So the other day, David asked Sandy if she had any more photos of Stephen that we could share. She said that she didn't have many other photos because of what happened with the bank after Stephen's dad died. "Not Palmetto State Bank?" I was scared to ask. Of course, the bank that funded Alex Murdaugh's shenanigans for all of those years had to be involved in the Smith story, too. She said that they took the house after Stephen's dad died and they threw all of their stuff in a dumpster. This was, again, another shocking reminder of how tough things are for families like the Smiths.

[00:34:34] So what happened exactly? In 2013, Stephen's father Joel Smith bought a house, the one that Stephen was allegedly walking home toward the night he was killed. A few months after Stephen died in 2015, Stephen's father Joel unexpectedly died of a heart attack, but Stephen's twin sister Stephanie told us that Joel was crushed by Stephen's death and that he basically died of a broken heart. She said that her dad was a big teddy bear



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and that they all loved him very much. Joel's kids and Sandy, who was divorced from Joel, had trouble keeping up with payments on the home. Two unexpected funerals already put a strain on the family. So our research team dug up the house records. Joel took out a \$34,000 mortgage from Palmetto State Bank to buy the house in 2013, which he bought for \$32,500. So after his death, Joel's kids continued to live in the house and made mortgage payments where they could. We have said this before, but it is so important to understand. Hampton County does not have much industry at all. Many residents have to drive more than an hour and a half to Hilton Head or Beaufort just to earn not much more than minimum wage. The median household income in Hampton County is just \$38,000. When we say that people are hard-working in Hampton County, we mean it. Some residents have to cram into a bus twice a day to commute to the part-time jobs they've cobbled together for less than a full-time salary. I say this so you can understand the situation that so many find themselves in because they weren't born into wealth or even just not poverty. In 2018, the Smiths fell behind on the mortgage payments, and on October 31st, 2018, Palmetto State Bank began the process to foreclose on their home. They owed \$28,000 on their mortgage. Now, in May 2019, the house went to public auction for unpaid taxes and the bank bought it for \$2,500. Sandy said that the bank emptied the house of the family's property, which included photos of Stephen that are now lost forever. In November 2019, the bank sold the house to a man for \$15,000, and six months later, that man sold the house for \$139,000. The house is now estimated to be worth around \$184,000.

[00:37:13] Now, we all know that the housing market has gone nuts recently, but do you still see how that math works, and do you still see how small that amount of money is compared to the six figures of debt that Alex was allowed to have? The bank would likely say that this is because Alex's earning potential was a lot more, which sure. But there's no denying he was given absurd amounts of latitude by the bank. They were understanding when he didn't make his payments. They tolerated his erratic behavior. They put up with his overdrafts and with his excuses. And where did that leave them? Well, in Russell's case, we know it's left him double plugged to an outlet while apparently getting really bad advice from his inner circle about what his next legal move should be. But still — remember how Russell Laffitte and his family insisted that Palmetto State Bank did not give Alex special treatment



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when they repeatedly ignored his missed mortgage payments and allowed him to rack up millions in debt while also carrying six-figure negative balances on his checking account? Remember how we wondered if Palmetto State Bank treated every one of their customers with that much leniency? Remember how Palmetto State Bank's slogan is "Neighbors helping neighbors" and how Russell went on and on on Russell TV and in his testimony about how community banking is relationship banking and his favorite part of his job is helping people? Well, Russell signed the paperwork in the Smith foreclosure complaint, so it turns out Russell apparently only liked to help some people with his lofty banking position. The Smiths, the family whose son was murdered and father unexpectedly died within a few months? They apparently did not deserve the same grace that was given to Alex Murdaugh.

[00:39:15] **Liz Farrell:** We have an update on Curtis Eddie Smith that we wanna talk about. But first, we wanted to address a few listener questions related to the Stephen Smith case. The first is this month. Is there any way to retrieve the phone and/or text logs for Stephen's phone the night he was killed? Does the phone company have a record that would show history even if it was deleted from his device? On a documentary, Stephen's sister mentioned he wasn't shy to call her for help other times when he ran out of gas. If he had a signal, it would make sense that he reached out to someone. So the short answer to this is yes. We believe investigators might have at least part of Stephen's phone records and electronics information. Regarding the thought that Stephen would've called for help before walking three miles home that night, not only is this the logical thought given that first responders found a still-charged iPhone in his pocket, his family continues to maintain that it was extremely out of character for him not to call for help when he ran into car trouble. Here is Stephanie's interview with Highway Patrol on July 15th, 2015, where she tells Patrolman Duncan about car trouble Stephen had had on the evening before he was found dead in the road.

[00:40:26] **Michael Duncan:** On the night on the night that he died or the morning that he died, had you talked to him at all that day?



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[00:40:34] **Stephanie Smith:** The last — Alright. The day, like before he left that day, he was at Brunson Exxon getting cigarettes for my dad, and he called me and told me his car and wouldn't crank.

[00:40:47] **Michael Duncan:** And what time was that?

[00:40:49] **Stephanie Smith:** It was about 5:30.

[00:40:50] **Michael Duncan:** In the afternoon?

[00:40:51] **Stephanie Smith:** Yes.

[00:40:52] **Michael Duncan:** Okay.

[00:40:52] **Stephanie Smith:** And so I checked his car. I went to go jump it off and it was like somebody loosened his battery connections.

[00:40:58] **Michael Duncan:** Okay.

[00:40:58] **Stephanie Smith:** I unscrewed it and loosened 'em. So I tightened 'em back up and I followed him all the way home. He hopped in the shower, got out, and left at exactly six o'clock.

[00:41:08] **Michael Duncan:** Okay.

[00:41:09] **Stephanie Smith:** And that was the last time.

[00:41:10] **Michael Duncan:** Did he say where he was going to?

[00:41:12] **Stephanie Smith:** No.

[00:41:12] **Michael Duncan:** Alright. Had he ever run outta gas before?





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[00:41:17] **Stephanie Smith:** Yes. And that was in the SUV. Except right where he parked his car a little farther down the road, there was this little driveway. You could barely see it. He parked the truck in there and then he walked and right where that fence was where his car was, he would hide there and he called me and my dad and we were sitting there, going back and forth on the road asking him where he was and he was like, you passed me. You passed me again. That's the type of person he was. He would hide.

[00:41:43] **Michael Duncan:** Okay. So he wasn't he wasn't more out in the open and stuff like that.

[00:41:46] **Stephanie Smith:** Yeah.

[00:41:46] **Michael Duncan:** I mean, how many times that, that, that you know of he ran outta gas?

[00:41:51] **Stephanie Smith:** About a couple times 'cause he called me every time to get me to come get him.

[00:41:57] **Michael Duncan:** Okay. Did he have a gas can that you know of that he carried in the car? He didn't carry a gas can?

[00:42:04] **Stephanie Smith:** No.

[00:42:04] **Michael Duncan:** So, so —

[00:42:09] **Stephanie Smith:** The only time he carried a gas can was when he was driving the SUV because it's got mud tires on it, so it don't read gas correctly. And that's the only vehicle he would drive with the gas can.

[00:42:23] **Michael Duncan:** Okay. And on the day, and you may or may not know this, and I'm, I'm throwing this out there, do you know if he had filled up earlier that day? Do you know when the last time he put gas in that car?



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[00:42:36] **Stephanie Smith:** No 'cause it's the same time he was supposed to get cigarettes for my dad. He was supposed to fill up and my dad told him, you know, fill it up \$25 and then that car is good. Stephen was the type of person he didn't wanna take my dad's money, so we only did \$10 and that would get him to Orangeburg and back.

[00:42:52] **Michael Duncan:** Okay.

[00:42:53] **Stephanie Smith:** Unless he did a little extra.

[00:42:55] **Liz Farrell:** The gas cap to Stephen's tank was unscrewed and left hanging. Stephanie told us in 2019 that she didn't think Stephen would've undone the gas cap the way it was when first responders found the car. She also told us that when she went to pick him up at the gas station to fix his battery that evening before he died, he wouldn't get out of the car because there were a bunch of guys around there with trucks. She said that's how skittish he was of the guys rolling around Hampton County.

[00:43:21] Another question we got was about the possibility of Stephen getting hit with a log from a logging truck. This was a theory that was posited after his death because there are so many logging trucks in that area. But the theory is problematic for a few reasons. The first is that Stephen's body was not thrown. He was found on the yellow line in the center of the road, meaning he would've had to have been walking in the middle of the road when the logging truck came noisily ambling by. And to have been clipped by this errant log, he would've had to have been standing close enough to the fast-moving truck that had a log sticking off its back. We're not sure how that scenario would work given how logs are loaded onto these trucks. At any rate, Highway Patrol looked into this theory and even went to logging companies in the area to check out the trucks and talk to drivers.

[00:44:10] Now, let's talk about Eddie Smith. On Monday, Curtis Eddie Smith appeared in court for a boundary and statement hearing. It's been a while since we talked about Eddie Smith on the show, so let's do a little refresher. Eddie was arrested in September 2021 for his alleged involvement in Alex Murdaugh's, so-called roadside shooting. We have so much to talk about



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when it comes to that by the way, so we'll unpack all of that more in next week's episode. Long story short, Judge Clifton Newman allowed Eddie to be released on a \$250,000 bond with GPS monitoring and drug testing. In August of last year, the AG's office noticed Eddie had violated the requirements of his ankle monitoring dozens of times, and his bond was revoked. He was thrown back in jail and had been working to get out since. This is why he was in court this week — to have his bond reinstated. So on Monday, Eddie and his attorneys, Jarrett Bouchette and Aimee Zmroczek, appeared in court and successfully argued their motion. Eddie was released from jail and is scheduled to appear in court again at the end of the month. We watched the hearing on *Court TV* and we were shocked at how different Eddie looked. Unlike Alex who had shrunk significantly in jail, Eddie had gained 55 pounds. His attorney said he's had major health issues, and even Judge Newman noted the difference. While Alex was bragging to his sister-in-law about doing his mountain climbers and being in the best shape of his life in jail, it looks like Eddie was sitting in a cell and pondering just how much his life has been ruined by associating with Big Red. In our next episode, we're going to take a look at the bigger picture of Eddie's case and break down what we think happened in early 2021.

[00:46:00] **Mandy Matney:** So in the meantime, I wanna take a moment to honor a very special MMP fan: Stephanie Truesdale. If you follow me on Instagram, Stephanie's work is familiar to you. During the six-week murder trial, Stephanie made these amazing crochet dolls of Creighton Waters, Judge Clifton Newman, Dr. Kenny Kinsey, and even Bubba and his chicken. The dolls are truly a work of art, and it was such a joy to see her work go viral and watch people support her. And in the last week, we've been lucky because Stephanie, who's a teacher, has been on spring break and she has made the whole Justice League in doll form, including Eric, Liz, and myself. The dolls have been a wonderful reminder of all the amazing people we have on our side and all the amazing people who are on Sandy's side to encourage us in this fight and to keep going. We love you, MMP fans. And to thank you, we're gonna do a fun Q&A with MMP Soak Up the Sun members this weekend with a special surprise guest. We'll announce details later. We appreciate you. We love you. Stay tuned, stay pesky, and stay in the sunlight.



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[00:47:38] **Outro:** The Murdaugh Murders Podcast is created and hosted by me, Mandy Matney, produced by my husband, David Moses. And Liz Farrell is our executive editor. From Luna Shark Productions.

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