

Lingering Questions

(Betty Bean's report in Metro Pulse on the week following Andre Stenson's death on Friday, Jan. 9, 1998.)

Andre Stenson worked 50 hours last week, and hadn't been dead 24 hours when an Internal Affairs investigator from the Knoxville Police Department showed up at Calhoun's on the River to ask about him. The tone of his questions offended the crew at Calhoun's.

Manager Claudia Franks says he "... was on a fishing expedition for negative information. ... He wanted to know 'Was he late? Was he temperamental?' It seemed like he was trying to dig up dirt. I told him Andre was an awesome employee. ..."

Assistant Manager Mary Alice Bishop just finished a 6-month training period working in the kitchen with Stenson, 34, whose sudden, violent death after he fled from police officers Jan. 9 has brought tensions between the police and the city's minority community near the flash point. She and others at Calhoun's are angry at insinuations emanating from KPD "sources" that Stenson died of a cocaine-induced heart attack as police attempted to arrest him.

"That stuff about him being on crack is bull****," says bartender Scott Langley. "Andre worked all the time. He drank orange juice by the gallon."

(Autopsy findings reveal Stenson died from a rare, congenital condition that caused his heart to fail under extreme stress. The findings also note two lacerations to his head and a swollen right eye.)

Bishop tears up when she describes the way Stenson's face dimpled when he smiled, and she doesn't like the way media accounts have hammered at the fact that he was a parolee who'd done time for burglary.

"This is the busiest restaurant in the state of Tennessee, so it's important to get employees who are reliable and consistent. ... And that was Andre. He made salads here, and he took pride in doing it right. He had been back at work eight months and was determined to turn his life around. Calhoun's took him back after he had done his time. Two months ago, I gave him two free dinners for him and his wife for being so consistent and reliable. When they called me and told me what happened, I fell in the floor crying. I still can't believe it.

"Andre is dead because he was born black."

Mike Malone, a Calhoun's server and son of council member Carlene Malone, appeared before city council Tuesday night to voice his anger. "The only thing Andre ever asked for was a chance to put his past behind him," Malone said.

He appeared to have a chance to do that when he got his job back and asked his longtime companion, Marcellina, to marry him last year. They'd been together since 1986 and had children: Hannah, 11; Ivan, 7; Adrianna, 5; and Roselyn, 4. His co-workers recall him talking about how much he wanted to do the right thing by his family, after all those years and all the times he'd messed up. Bishop imitates proud father Stenson pretending to admonish the kids when Marcie would bring them to the restaurant:

"He'd shake his finger and say, 'Now, y'all sit down and be good.'"

Jeff Nolan remembers

Jeff Nolan, who worked “hand-in-hand” with Stenson in the kitchen, says Stenson helped him push his car around the corner and tried to lend him a couple of bucks for gas the last time he saw him.

“We were talking about this large sum of money he had to come up with to get his license back. ...”

Nolan, who is in his 34th month of recovery from a 10-year crack habit, says he and Stenson were traveling the same hard road.

“He shared his inner secrets with me. ... They (police, who claimed they found crack cocaine in his car and sprinkled on the ground where he died) lied on him. He was no crack addict. And if he had a medical problem, it happened when they (KPD) met him. I know first-hand when you are a crack addict and you encounter the police, you don’t run. You can’t. ...”

(Toxicology results show Stenson had no cocaine in his system.)

“He’s just out of the penitentiary, just got married, just bought him a little van, had people showing him love. ... My personal thoughts are anger took over where justice left off. ... It took off and it multiplied and it became a deadly force of anger. ... We’re ordained by God to die, but was this by God’s hand?”

“I wasn’t there, but I know what happened. Andre jumped out of the car; they caught him. Andre jerked loose; they were angry. They put a chokehold on him. For them to say they didn’t beat him, that’s a great lie.”

Sometimes after closing, co-workers would give Stenson a ride home, and sometimes he’d refuse, Franks says, because he feared for their safety. And if they were unfamiliar with East Knoxville, he’d warn against stopping for blue lights.

“He’d say ‘Just keep on going until you get on a better side of town.’”

The last time Marcie Stenson saw her husband living, he was wearing the brand-new black running suit she’d gotten him for Christmas. It was Jan. 9, but Andre had been working so many hours through the holidays that he’d had the opportunity to wear it only once before, even though he loved dressing up, looking sharp.

He had it on when he and Alando Murphy went out to Sarge’s Barbecue, where Marcie worked. She served them, and they sat outside and shot the breeze with the owner’s wife.

What he said to her just before he left wasn’t anything particularly out of the ordinary: “He asked me were we busy; I said no. He said ‘I’m gonna go out for a little while. I won’t be late.’”

He’d rented some videos and was going to go home and watch them, Marcie remembers.

Going out with Alando Murphy

Alando Murphy works in the kitchen at Calhoun’s on the River and speaks in the musical, island-inflected patois of his native Jamaica. Stenson’s speech was not so lilting. He is described by virtually everyone who knew him as a friendly, obliging man with a severe stuttering problem that rendered him virtually speechless under stress.

Murphy says he got a call from Stenson Friday afternoon.

“His wife goes to work at 4, and they only got one vehicle for the family – he called, said ‘Alando, my wife go to work.’ So I picked him up, watched some TV show for a minute, then went to a barbecue place – Sarge’s – to eat some food. He was the only one to eat, and after he eat we left.”

The two men got into Murphy's car and headed for the Eastside. Stenson, who didn't have a driver's license because he hadn't been able to scrape together the fee (which can be nearly \$1,000) required by state law to restore a revoked license, was at the wheel.

"He was driving because it was his part of town," says Murphy, who had asked Stenson to show him around East Knoxville night spots. Around 10 p.m., Stenson drove down Martin Luther King Boulevard through Five Points and hung a right onto Chestnut, where he stopped at the Corner Store. Afterward, they headed south on Chestnut toward Eddie's Lounge, a short block away.

Murphy says Stenson had been worried he was going to end up back in prison.

"The man (Stenson), he just got a new parole officer, who give him a hard time – the simplest things, he's gonna violate him," Murphy says.

"And all he's trying to do is he's trying to take care of his kids, things like that... He is a working-class man, trying to make a difference... Everybody downgrade a man ... ain't nobody said he got married, went to work every day, take care of his kids. ..."

They had just pulled out onto the street when they saw a police officer on foot, who signaled with his flashlight for them to pull over. Stenson complied.

"The cop say 'Did you know you didn't have your lights on?' He say 'No, I didn't know'... The cop say 'Let me see your license.' The man, he panic and run. He wasn't doing no type of drugs. That is a bunch of bull, what they say. ... If they did find drugs in my car, think I'd be here now? Went and get my car next day, didn't pay no fines or nothing like that. ... They had dogs in there, didn't find nothing. ..."

When Stenson took off running, Murphy says "The officer try to catch him, fell and bust his ass, take his aggravation out on Andre. ... He was pissed off – I don't understand that anyway..."

The evening takes a bad turn

Chestnut Street was alive with activity that night, and several witnesses, speaking on condition of anonymity, agree that the officer was visibly angry:

"That cop was mad because he busted his ass in the street. They were laughing at him up at the club and he wanted some payback," says one.

"Yeah," says another. "They looked stupid. Like the Keystone Kops."

But things got unfunny, fast.

Some say they heard the officer say "I'll get you for that, M***," as he took off after Stenson, who ran down Chestnut toward a vacant lot at the intersection of Chestnut and Selma.

Two brothers say they were home watching ESPN when they saw flashing lights down at the corner and went out to check out the commotion.

"We came out on the porch and heard hollering – like pain. It stopped abruptly, in the middle of a long, painful scream. ..."

"We came down here to the corner, heard somebody say 'They done beat dude down. ... We walked down the sidewalk and seen them (a police officer) pumping on his chest. ... When the ambulance came, after a while, they pulled it back in the field, turned off the lights. ... He was dead when that ambulance got here. ..."

The two brothers say the "pumping" stopped before the ambulance arrived.

Another man who came to see what was happening says he arrived a few minutes before the two brothers. He says he saw "Lights going crazy on the grass. Heard one of them say 'Why'd you resist, ****?' Dude said 'Ahhhhhhhhhh!' They stopped giving him CPR before the ambulance got there. There was a trainload of cops. ..."

An area business owner: “We thought they were over there beating a dog. ... You could hear them beating him. ... We couldn’t do nothing but stand here and look. We didn’t have in our minds that they’re over there killing that guy. ...”

A young woman in a Dolphins jacket says she walked down the sidewalk looking toward the fallen tree where dark figures were struggling, illuminated by jerky beams from flashlights.

“I hollered ‘They’re down there beating him.’ They said “Shut up and get the **** away...”

“We could hear the licks,” says one of the two brothers.

Sarah Griffin’s report

By this time, the lot was marked off with yellow crime scene tape and nurse Sarah Griffin, who had been driving by on her way home from work, also saw an officer performing chest compressions, which are done when there is no pulse.

She and the others say when the ambulance arrived, it first parked across Selma Avenue from the vacant lot where Stenson lay. They all say it pulled into the lot with its lights off several minutes later, with no sense of urgency.

“They didn’t cut on the big spotlights like they would normally do,” Griffin says. She describes Stenson as limp and unresponsive when they loaded him. She appeared before city council Tuesday and said she’s tired of hearing promises to “get to the bottom” of fatal encounters between police and citizens.

“The only ‘bottom’ we ever get to is the bottom of somebody’s grave.”

Confidence lost

These observations contradict police officials’ contention that Stenson was alive, struggling and vocal when he was lifted into the ambulance. Griffin’s account is consistent with those of the anonymous bystanders, who speculate that police planted crack cocaine they claimed was sprinkled around Stenson’s body and in Murphy’s car.

“If I’m running and I’m dirty [carrying drugs], the ****’s going up on the roof right off,” says one young man. “And I ain’t gonna open it. Takes too much time. You don’t keep that **** on you till they run you down ...”

The scene was tense, witnesses say.

“Everybody was sitting here mad, talking crazy to the police,” one man says. “Somebody says, ‘Get they badge numbers,’ and the cops jumped in their cars and left.”

They believe the police are responsible for Stenson’s death:

“Medical problems? Died of a heart attack? He died of flashlights upside the head...”

Another neighborhood resident:

“The black community has lost faith and confidence in the KPD, and if they don’t get their act together, we’re gonna take a contract on them.

“They want us out here like the Black Panthers carrying 12-gauge shotguns to protect ourselves from them? We’ve lost faith and we’ve lost hope.”

A younger man adds:

“They ain’t gonna put them four (officers involved in Stenson’s death) back out here. So, you white folks, watch out. They’ll be coming your way...”