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The Last Days of William Harvey: One year after his death in police custody, his family speaks

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Published 9:06 a.m. ET May 5, 2022 | Updated 3:20 p.m. ET May 5, 2022

Shirley Francis rattles off dates from her memory bank akin to a Google search: She knows the exact date she moved her family to Philadelphia: St. Patrick's Day in 1963. The day her husband walked out on their family: May 15, 1970.

April 2, 2021, is another day forever etched in her memory. It is the day her son, William Zachary Harvey died.

Harvey, 60, was found dead inside an interrogation room at the Savannah Police Department headquarters. According to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation medical examiner's preliminary report, Harvey committed suicide by hanging.

But his death certificate, Francis says, reads that his cause of death is “undetermined.”

She's not sure what is true, but she knows what she believes: “My son didn't kill himself.”

Sitting inside her East Savannah home, Francis speaks for two hours about Bill, as he was affectionately called by those closest to him.

In the year since her son's death, she's wonders what really happened to him inside that interrogation room and imagines what his last moments were like. She hasn't spoken publicly about her musings since his death, until now.

The Savannah Morning News spoke to Francis, his sister Felicia Shiggs, his son Akeem Davis, and those close to the formal investigation to piece together Harvey's last days.

Background

Fallout: Savannah Police Chief Roy Minter says fired officers failed to follow policy

More: GBI confirms no video footage exists for William Zachery Harvey in-custody death case

Investigation: Savannah Police Department officers placed on leave after allegedly sharing gif of a noose

Update: William Zachery Harvey's family 'blindsided' by GBI ruling of death as suicide

He was a 'typical kid'

Francis lies in bed watching her stories, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, before sharing the details of Harvey's early life, his last week with her and the memories they shared.

Every now and again, she finds herself having what she calls a "Zack attack."

"He was the oldest. I sit there," Francis points to a corner of her baby blue sofa. "I got both of his pictures off of his obituary, and I just talk to him when I have bad days. I tell my daughter when she comes, 'I'm having a Zack attack,' those days when I get upset."

Since he was a child, Harvey had been Francis's protector. The oldest of five, Harvey comforted his mom when she became a single mother.

"He would hear me crying at night," she says. "I didn't know what I was going to do because I had five kids.

"The girls were real young, and I didn't know what to do," she continues. "He would hear me crying and he would always come and check on me and he'd say, 'Mom, we're gonna be alright, we're gonna be alright.'"

The two, in some ways, grew up together; she had Harvey at 15. By the time he was 13, Harvey was essentially the man of the house.

But before then, Harvey was “your typical kid,” Francis says. Harvey was born at Memorial Health University Hospital on Dec. 7, 1960, and was the only boy among her five children. When he was three, the family moved to Philly; there Harvey was a happy, playful child, who would sometimes put on his little army uniform and a helmet and yell, “COMBAT” in a joking manner to Francis's friends.

The family lived in Phiilly for 10 years, before Savannah relatives, namely her mother, encouraged her to move back home so they could help with the family once Francis's husband left.

Francis said Harvey took the move OK, as the family settled into the Fred Wessels Homes on the city's east side.

At 17, Harvey graduated from the Job Corps program and took up masonry, working jobs for the city and often doing carpentry.

“He was good with his hands,” Francis brags even today. There are a pair of chairs he upholstered for her in her home. He also painted a panther she'd bought years prior in gold with black spots — a striking contrast from its original white color.

He was also a doting father and grandfather. “He knew me too well,” his son Akeem Davis says. “He's been there for my kids. They always ask me what happened.”

Harvey's sister, Felicia Shiggs, describes someone who was dependable and had all-around good spirits. “He liked to pick at me,” she says, then chuckles. “He was just fun-loving. He could quote the Bible.”

Harvey did have his challenges, suffering from substance abuse which led to subsequent arrests and stints in jail or prison — his first in 1993. He also suffered from mental health issues, namely depression and anxiety, Francis says, although he was not formally diagnosed.

Still, Harvey's arrest — and alleged suicide — was a surprise; his past arrests were for nonviolent crimes, and he was, by all accounts, jovial, even in his last days.

“My son had too many problems before,” she says. “If he was going to commit suicide, he would've done that, you know?”

Bill's Last Days

The last week of Harvey's life is filled with joy. Francis recalls her son spending time with a friend on Sunday and helping her with chores around the house.

On Friday, the two sat in Francis's quaint living room watching the Derek Chauvin trial. Later that evening, Bill promised a man in his mother's neighborhood that he would help him when he got back from "playing the numbers."

Harvey got on his bike and rode a mile to the Pump N Go gas station on Skidaway Road, near his mom's Pennsylvania Avenue home.

The last time Francis spoke to him, she asked him to cover her plants so they wouldn't freeze, then she bid her eldest child farewell.

She never saw him again.

Harvey's family still isn't sure what exactly happened that night, but through word of mouth and conversations with officials, they piece together what they think happened:

At about 10 p.m., Harvey rode his bike to the Pump N Go to "play the numbers" on lottery machines tucked in the front left corner of the convenience store. While there, he and another man, Tommy Ferren, begin arguing over how Ferren was treating a woman at the gas station. At some point, Harvey and Ferren allegedly argued and Harvey cut Ferren on the wrist with a knife Harvey carried. The police were called. Police took Harvey in a police car to the Savannah Police headquarters for questions, and Ferren was transported to the hospital.

But before he was cuffed, Harvey said something that gave one of the officers pause: He acted in self-defense.

"Mr. Harvey made multiple comments, advising he did stab the other man, but it was done in self-defense," says attorney Michael Schiavone, who represents two of the officers fired by Savannah Police as a result of an internal investigation into Harvey's death. While at the scene, Schiavone's client interviewed a friend of Harvey's who confirmed his statements.

He continued, even on the ride to police headquarters on Habersham Street, proclaiming it was self-defense against a guy who was taller and about 30 years younger than him. Schiavone says his client stayed over her shift to interview Ferren and confirm Harvey acted in self-defense.

Meanwhile, Harvey remained at the station under the watch of officers Rodheem Greene and Michael White while Schiavone's client left to interview Ferren at Memorial.

Officers left Harvey in the interrogation room for a little more than eight minutes before he was found hanging from one of his shoestrings.

'The system let him down'

The following morning, Francis was chatting on the phone with her oldest daughter Felicia Shiggs. The two were carrying on about the whereabouts of “Bill Bailey” — another nickname for Harvey — and neither knew where he was.

Francis told Shiggs the last time she spoke to him, she had asked him to cover her plants before he left. When Francis went to check on the plants, a Georgia Bureau of Investigation card tucked in her front door fell to the ground. She thought nothing of it and continued speaking with Shiggs.

During their conversation, Shiggs' niece called to tell them Harvey had died.

As a family, they later met with a GBI official in charge of investigating the death. She told them Harvey died and how. Shiggs said Harvey was still cuffed to a table when he was in a kneeling position. The family, according to Shiggs, also was told that Harvey used a whiteboard as the anchor for the shoestring by which he hung himself.

Francis says the family was told by the GBI investigator Harvey didn't want to disappoint her or his parole officer and decided to commit suicide. How the GBI investigator had this particular insight without a transcript or video of Harvey's questioning or a note remains unclear. When asked by a reporter to verify the statements, GBI referred the reporter to the Chatham County District Attorney's office, which still has the case file.

“I feel that like the system let him down. If somebody tells you, if I tell you right now, ‘I'm thinking about killing myself,’ would you go out and just leave me in a room?” Francis

ponders to a reporter. “You would first try to talk to me about it, and then you try and see if you can you get me some help before you leave me alone.”

At that same meeting, the family was shown a picture of the interrogation room similar to where Harvey allegedly committed suicide. That’s when they stormed out.

They left the meeting more frustrated than anything. That frustration was only compounded when in the weeks following Harvey’s death, a Savannah police officer sent a meme mocking Harvey's death in a group text.

“That was the thing that hurt me as much as losing my child,” Francis says. “I didn't look at it; I didn't see it because I probably would have lost my mind.”

In the aftermath of Harvey’s death, SPD fired five officers in connection with Harvey’s hanging death. Through an open records request, SMN learned SPD reinstated two of the officers last year.

'I deal with evidence'

Chatham District Attorney Shalena Cook Jones has had the GBI case file since August but has not made a decision as to whether charges will be filed against the officers connected to Harvey’s death and the meme mocking it.

“When I’m making a decision about whether or not I’m going to hold somebody criminally responsible, I have to drill down the root cause,” Jones told the SMN, adding she wants to be certain Harvey’s injuries were self-inflicted. “It's not that I distrust the officers. I don’t deal in trust; I deal in evidence.”

For this reason, she hired Dr. Bill Smock, the Louisville, Kentucky-based forensic director and police surgeon who testified during the Chauvin trial as a strangulation expert for the prosecution. Jones has not said when she will make a decision on the case.

Jones previously has stated she would issue a response on GBI cases within 90 to 120 days. Currently, there are two GBI cases on her desk: Harvey’s and one related to the killing of Maurice Mincey, the 36-year-old man who was shot and killed by a Savannah police officer during a traffic stop near East Bolton Street and Waters Avenue at about 9:30 p.m. on July 17.

More: The GBI has been called to Chatham County five times this year. Here is the status of those cases.

More: Chatham DA says it depends on evidence if officers will be prosecuted in William Harvey's death

An original July 18 release from the GBI said Mincey, a passenger in a car pulled over for a traffic violation, had allegedly pointed a gun at police during the traffic stop.

Jones has had Harvey's and Mincey's case files 386 and 184 days, respectively.

Since then, there have been six police shootings in Savannah under investigation by the GBI. She said she has not yet received those files.

Without a definitive decision, Harvey's family won't see any closure on the case any time soon.

On Thursday, Mawuli Davis and Francys Johnson, attorneys for Harvey's family, announced plans to file a lawsuit against the City of Savannah. "The Harvey family has waited with dignity and restraint for a simple answer that is yet to come," Davis said in an emailed statement. "What really happened? We will begin that inquiry through civil litigation as we place the City of Savannah on notice of our intent to sue. The waiting is over."

Johnson echoed Davis' sentiments, saying in a statement: "Our investigation concludes that standard operating procedures, which should safeguard the lives of individuals in police custody, were violated.

"Eastern Circuit District Attorney Shelena [sic] Cook Jones should have an answer to whether that conduct was also criminal. The answer remains outstanding and that is unacceptable."

'It keeps going through my mind'

Shiggs hides her tears behind sunglasses and her face mask when she passes the Pump N Go where Harvey died on the bus route she drives. She catches herself having flashbacks of her brother at a bus stop on her route or in her mom's kitchen.

For Davis, his father's death still feels surreal and was a reality check for him in a couple ways. "For one, I could have lost him any time. I'm not taking life for granted. And two, how it happened. We hear about this stuff going on in the world and, now it hits home."

Some days are more difficult than others for Francis. She sits on her sofa alongside her grandson and her oldest daughter and flips through old Mother's Day cards Harvey had given her.

She begins reading one of them, but Francis barely finishes the card before breaking down into tears.

Francis still wonders about Harvey's final moments.

"What kills me is I don't know whether my child wanted me, cried for me, called for me, or anything," she says. "It keeps going through my mind. What was he thinking? What was going through his head when he was dying? How did he take his last breath?"

With no police video or body camera footage of Harvey's death, she'll likely never know.

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