



**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE**  
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
November 21, 2014

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**Expert Pathologist Challenges Lennon Lacy Hanging Death  
Crime Scene Investigation in Report to NC NAACP**

DURHAM, NC: Dr. Christena L. Roberts, an expert pathologist retained by the North Carolina NAACP to review the procedures followed by local and state authorities in handling the purported "suicide" of the West Bladenboro High School linebacker, Lennon Lacy, who was found dead at 7:25 a.m. on August 29, hanging from a child's swing set, released her report yesterday. The report supports the official autopsy's finding that Lennon's head was not marked by any pronounced visible wounds when it was photographed at the official autopsy, but is critical of many other actions of law enforcement.

Dr. Roberts, after meeting with Dr. Deborah Radisch, the State's Chief Medical Examiner who conducted the original autopsy, raised several challenges to the way the body was handled when it was first discovered hanging from a child's swingset, the way the local Medical Examiner was treated by law enforcement officers at the scene, and the way evidence was collected. Dr. Roberts reported that Dr. Radisch qualified her original findings in several ways:

**1. Dr. Radisch said her determination of Manner of Death (MOD) was a "suicide" was based on information provided to her by law enforcement and the local medical examiner when she received Lennon's body. She would have likely called the MOD "pending" until she received the toxicology reports (Lennon's body was drug and alcohol-free) and further reports from the law enforcement investigation. She noted the Local Medical Examiner or Coroner had categorized the MOD as "suicide."**

**2. Dr. Radisch said she was not provided with photographs or dimensions of the swing set; she was unable to evaluate whether it was feasible for Lennon to hang himself from the swing set structure.**

**3. Dr. Radisch said if investigative information was provided by an independent agency (police, SBI or other investigative agency, not the family) that the manner of Lennon's death could be something other than a suicide, she would reconsider her designation and would likely change it to "undetermined" while awaiting additional investigation.**

**4. Dr. Roberts said "there are variations of the choke hold. The variation called the lateral vascular neck restraint (LVNR) is where the anterior neck is held in the**

lateral vascular neck restraint (LVNR) is where the anterior neck is held in the antecubital fossa (front of the elbow) and the forearm is pulled towards the arm, compressing the vessels in both sides of the neck." Dr. Roberts reported that "during our conversation with Dr. Radisch she agreed that one would be unable to tell at autopsy if death occurred via this type of choke hold and then the body was placed in a suspension noose."

5. The Bladen County Coroner or local Medical Examiner reported that when he placed Lennon's body in the body bag he was wearing white sneakers without laces. These shoes were not on the body when he arrived at the Medical Examiner's office. Review of the photographs show that they are size 10.5. Lennon wore a size 12 and the shoes he had on that night were gray. During our meeting with Dr. Radish she stated she had asked SBI about the shoes but they simply offered it had been explained and did not elaborate further. She also noted that it was not the usual practice for police to remove clothing from the body before transport.

Dr. Roberts' report is below:

### **11/20/2014 Death Investigation of Lennon Lee Lacy**

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This memorandum is to summarize findings from my review of the autopsy report and death investigation in the death of Lennon Lacy, including the review of the medical examiner file and discussion with Dr. Radish.

The background information provided was that 17 year old Lennon Lacy was found dead early in the morning in a mobile home park. He reportedly had been found hanging by his neck from a noose that was secured to a wooden swing set. He was completely suspended with his feet several inches off the ground. Investigative information provided was that he was found by one individual and a different female called 911 and stated that she was going to cut him down. When EMS arrived at 7:30 am they pronounced his death.

An autopsy was performed by Dr. Deborah Radisch at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Raleigh, NC. The details of the autopsy are discussed below. Her autopsy findings along with information provide by police resulted in her issuing an autopsy report with the Cause of Death listed as Asphyxia due to Hanging. The Manner of Death is listed as Suicide on the death certificate and on the Medical Examiner Investigation Report. The family and community expressed concerns that they did not feel Lennon had taken his own life and had many questions about injuries seen on the body at the funeral home as well as questions about the police investigation.

#### Review of the Background and Investigative Information:

When conducting a death investigation to determine COD and MOD it is necessary to gather all of the information about the person's medical, social and psychiatric history and the events of the days leading up to their death.

The information provided to the Medical Examiner Office was that Lennon was depressed over the recent death of his uncle. The family reported that Lennon's great uncle had died. He was asking questions about death that he had not discussed before but there were no expressions of wishing to bring about his own death. He did not express a desire to hurt himself or to a wish to longer be around. He was not making preparations to put his life in order. For instance, some individuals may give away prized possessions or let someone know they care about that they won't be around. He did not write a suicide note or send any text messages that would be thought to represent a suicide note or saying goodbye. The medical records are not available at this time for review but there is no report that Lennon had attempted

suicide in the past or expressed suicide ideations. There is no long term history of depression. There is no history of alcohol or drug abuse.

In contrast to being depressed, Lennon was looking forward to playing the next day in a football game as a lineman. In a conversation that he had the night before his death he explained that his grades from the previous year hadn't been good enough to allow him to play varsity football. He had been working very hard at school to improve his grades and was being rewarded with the opportunity to play in the game the following day. This conversation was with a man who worked for the funeral home at a dinner gathering following some portion of his uncle's funeral events.

The events of the rest of the evening are partially known. Lennon was at home with his mother and father when he told her he was going for a walk at approximately 10:30 pm, which was a normal habit for him. When she awoke the next morning she had no reason to check on him as he regularly got himself ready for school. She went to work and did not know he was missing until later notified of his death.

Information provided was that sometime during the evening Lennon had an argument with his girlfriend. After that time he went to a mobile home located in the park where he was found. Family has expressed concern about one male that resided at the mobile home. He had a history of violence so severe that he could not live with either of his parents and was staying with the people who resided there...

When evaluating if a death represents a suicide that ability to physically carry out the act based on the limitations of the structure is evaluated. The wooden swing set that Lennon was reportedly hanging from appears solidly made in the photographs provided. The photographs provided show that the noose was constructed from a double holed black canvas belt that was tied end to end with a blue canvas belt that has a loop created through the D-type ring.

One end of the swing set has a climbing platform attached. The noose was reportedly tied to the supporting cross beam (appears to be a 2 x 6") and then fed through a metal grommet that was screwed into the wood. This grommet was 22.5" away from the platform. Lennon was 69" tall. The height of the cross beam to the ground was 90". In a photo provided his brother who is 6'4" could not reach up and touch the beam. There were no swings on this swing set to act as a step to reach the beam. There was no item present at the scene that Lennon could have stood on, applied the noose and then kicked away. The only other way to reach the beam and grommet therefore had to be from the climbing platform. No measurements are available at this time for the noose (described below) but it does not appear long enough to have been tied around the beam, fed through the grommet and still allow a large enough loop for him to be able to place over his head. The side structure of the platform is a rather small square that is further obstructed by the v-shaped vertical supports of the swing.

There are a number of concerning factors about the apparent noose. The picture provided show that the black belt was not consistent with the one worn by Lennon. The blue belt is reported to be consistent with a belt worn by a male who resided in the mobile home where Lennon was last known alive.

What is most concerning about the apparent noose is that the person who called 911 said she was going to cut the person she found down. Review of the photographs show that the 2 belts are tied together with a single cut to each at the tie point. The other free ends of the belts are completely intact and have no secondary cuts. Only a very short piece of each belt extends past the tied area and could not have been tied around the cross beam. Note that when meeting with Dr. Radisch she stated that when she examined the belt she thought some portion must be missing because there was no secondary cut in either belt.

Lennon weighed 207 pounds and was reportedly completely suspended. It is very unlikely that a female could lift his body weight, support it for a prolonged period and untie the belt. Also, as she did not have anything to stand on she would have to be well over 6'6" to accomplish this from the ground. Note that funeral home personnel stated that it took 3 men to move Lennon

while making preparations.

There is conflicting information about what occurred at the scene between the representative from the Medical Examiner office and the police. Mr. Kinlaw was the local medical examiner who responded to the scene. He reports that officers didn't want an autopsy performed and he had to have the District Attorney office order one. The case encounter form notes that the SBI agent was requesting an autopsy. Dr. Radisch stated that under these circumstances an autopsy absolutely would have been performed. She asked the DA to order one because of conflict between the agencies.

Mr. Kinlaw also reports that when he placed Lennon's body in the body bag he was wearing white sneakers without laces. These shoes were not on the body when he arrived at the Medical Examiner's office. Review of the photographs show that they are size 10.5. Lennon wore a size 12 and the shoes he had on that night were gray. During our meeting with Dr. Radisch she stated she had asked SBI about the shoes but they simply offered it had been explained and did not elaborate further. She also noted that it was not the usual practice for police to remove clothing from the body before transport.

There is conflicting information concerning why photographs were not taken at the scene. Mr. Kinlaw reported that SBI would not let him take photographs at the scene and threatened to take his camera if he did. The case encounter form notes that the SBI agent felt that this case represented a suicide but wanted an autopsy because the young man was dark skinned and bruises may be missed. He noted that the Crime Scene Techs (CST) agreed. The next sentence notes however that no photographs were taken because the CST was at "another homicide".

#### Review of the Autopsy Findings:

The autopsy revealed a dry abraded ligature furrow completely encircling the neck. The width and pattern of the abrasion is consistent with the canvas type belts provided in evidence. The suspension point was on the right side of the neck in an area where a buckle mark consistent with the D-type rings is seen. The ligature furrow is above the superior laryngeal prominence (under the jaw) which is a normal location for a ligature furrow in a suspension hanging.

Funeral home personnel expressed concern that the ligature furrow was much lower than reported in the autopsy report and was down by the collar bone (clavicles). Review of the autopsy photographs confirms the findings at autopsy.

In a case of hanging the internal examination of the neck should be negative. Specifically, there will be no hemorrhage in the anterior strap muscles of the neck and no fractures of the thyroid cartilage or hyoid bone. At autopsy there was no hemorrhage in the anterior strap muscles of the neck and no fractures of the thyroid cartilage or hyoid bone. There was a small amount of blood over the right side of the hyoid bone. Review of the photographs confirms this is consistent with the location of the belt buckle abrasion and the suspension point.

It should be noted that there are variations of the choke hold. The variation called the lateral vascular neck restraint (LVNR) is where the anterior neck is held in the antecubital fossa (front of the elbow) and the forearm is pulled towards the arm, compressing the vessels in both sides of the neck. This is basically a pincher movement with both sides of the neck between the arm and forearm. This hold can be applied without injury to the underlying internal neck structures or if there is a struggle there can be blood in the muscles and fractures of the superior cornu of the thyroid cartilage. During our conversation with Dr. Radisch she agreed that one would be unable to tell at autopsy if death occurred via this type of choke hold and then the body was placed in a suspension noose.

The autopsy report notes that there was no evidence of blunt force trauma. There were no defensive wounds.

Family and funeral home personnel also expressed concerns about injuries that they saw on the body. They noted a "knot" on the right side of his head above the eye which appeared to be approximately 1.0 to 1.5 cm wide in photographs taken at the funeral home.

Review of the identification photo taken at autopsy clearly shows that the bump on the right side of the forehead was not present at the morgue. This knot must have occurred after autopsy. It could represent muscle tissue that was cut in order to open the skull and then was bunched up when the scalp incision was sewn at the funeral home. It could also represent a misalignment of the 2 portions of skull. It may also represent some material (like clay) that was used to keep the 2 portions of skull from sliding.

Concerns were expressed about numerous abrasions of his face and arms. The autopsy report noted that these were abrasions from ant predation. Review of the autopsy photographs confirm these abrasions are consistent with those seen when large numbers of ants predate the body. Dr. Radisch confirmed the ants were in large numbers and still actively biting the body when he arrived at the morgue.

Dr. Radisch also noted that she was not provided with photographs or dimensions of the swing set. Without this information she would be unable to evaluate the ability to create this scenario as was discussed above.

Dr. Radisch noted that her determination of MOD in this case as suicide was based on the information she was provided by law enforcement and the local medical examiner at the time of autopsy and when preparing her report. She would have likely called the MOD pending while awaiting toxicology and investigation but the LME had already signed the MOD as suicide.

She also noted that if investigative information was provided by an independent agency (police, SBI or another investigative agency, not the family) that Lennon's death represented something other than a suicide, that she would reconsider the MOD. She would likely change the manner of death to undetermined while awaiting additional investigation.

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*Founded in 1909, the NAACP is the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization. Its members throughout the United States and the world are the premier advocates for civil rights in their communities. The NC Conference of NAACP Branches is 70 years old this year and is made up of over 100 Adult, Youth and College NAACP units across the state, convenes more than 160 members of the Historic Thousands on Jones Street (HKonJ) People's Assembly Coalition, and is the architect of the Moral Monday & Forward Together Movement.*