

Fact Sheet: Murder of David Josiah Lawson (working document)

(updated 10-8-18)

April 15, 2017

David Josiah Lawson, an African-American California State University student attending the Humboldt campus (HSU), was murdered at a party near campus in the rural, mostly white community of Arcata. As of today, the murder remains unsolved.

ABOUT DAVID JOSIAH LAWSON

- From Perris, California in Riverside County. Attended Rancho Verde H.S. where he was a two-sport varsity athlete.
- Was a Sophomore at Humboldt State U., age 19, majoring in Criminology & Justice Studies
- Hoped to become a lawyer and possibly enter politics.
- While at HSU, he worked at jobs in the local area.
- He was well-known on campus and by some business people in town. Well liked. Considered a leader by those who knew him.
- He had a strong family network, and his family, led by his mother, is working hard to get justice in seeing that his murderer is convicted and that HSU/CSU do more to ensure students are safe
- Lawson was recruited to attend HSU at a College Days event at his high school. (HSU also recruits students from the LA region through events at predominantly Black churches called "Super Sunday" events during Black History Month in February each year.)

EVENTS LEADING TO THE MURDER

- Lawson, his girlfriend, and other HSU friends, attended a party on Easter Weekend at a house near campus. There was a large crowd at the party; police estimated 100.
- A girl said she lost her cell phone and accused Black students, specifically Lawson's girlfriend of stealing it. Reportedly, the girl was connected to Zoellner (see below Arrest and Release)
- Fighting ensued, during which Lawson's girlfriend was stabbed in the arm and Lawson was fatally stabbed.

POLICE RESPONSE

- Arcata Police responded to a call at about 3 am.
- Allegations from some students at the site of the incident are that Arcata Police focused on "crowd control," not helping Josiah until too late.
- Friends say they administered CPR and tried to slow bleeding while awaiting medical help. Not clear when an ambulance arrived. Lawson died at the local hospital.
- A news report about Police communications that night is in the Mad River Union in sources below.

ARREST AND RELEASE

- Kyle Christopher Zoellner, 23, of McKinleyville was arrested on the night of the party and charged with the murder.
- He was released after a five-day court hearing in which judge Dale Reinholtsen, Humboldt County Superior Court, observed competing and contradictory stories among witnesses and finally found insufficient evidence to hold Zoellner.
- The North Coast Journal, in sources below, reported on May 5 about the hearing and provides full text of statement from the Humboldt County District Attorney's Office.

PROTESTS & DEVELOPMENTS SINCE THE MURDER

- HSU students and others have protested persistently at Arcata city meetings, on campus, and in town since the murder. These continued when campus re-opened in August 2018.
- Various investigators have come and gone without a new arrest. The Justice for Josiah organization has called for the police department to rehire former FBI investigator Tom Parker, who was involved in the investigation at some point. The Arcata Police Chief left the job on the one-year anniversary of Lawson's murder, April 2018.
- Lawson's mother Charmaine has appealed three times (Sept. 20, 2017; July 24, 2018; and Sept. 12, 2018) to CSU Board of Trustees meetings for help in convicting the killer and also to make CSU campuses safe for students. See link to September video in sources. Video from previous dates available at the same site.

ATMOSPHERE IN ARCATA

- Tensions exist between the campus and local town communities in Arcata.
- There are reports of racist incidents committed by local community people toward students of color, in particular.
- Students of color report feeling unsafe and unwelcome in Arcata. A student has reported seeing confederate flags waved near or on campus.
- Some note this could be exacerbated by the distance and isolation students from urban areas may feel.
- Various campus administrators who are Black speak about the racism and hostility felt in Arcata. See source below Video: Unsolved Hate among other sources.

DEMOGRAPHICS & DATA POINTS

- Arcata population approx. 18,000, 80% white, 16.8% Hispanic/Latino, 2.6% African American ([U.S. Census https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/arcatacitycalifornia/PST045217](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/arcatacitycalifornia/PST045217))
- Humboldt State has 8,500 students and 578 faculty <https://www.humboldt.edu/about> [The detailed data is only found if you click on "Show more Humboldt State Facts" under "Student-Faculty Ratio 21:1."]
- 43.7% of HSU students are white, 33.7% Hispanic/Latino and 3.2% African American
- 32.1% of Humboldt students come from Los Angeles County.

HSU SITUATION

- It is not clear how much HSU administration is doing to improve the atmosphere and safety for students of color, especially Black students, or to prepare students from urban areas, campus communities, and surrounding communities for one another.
- HSU Pres. Lisa Rossbacher addressed a town hall meeting early on saying she is committed to making students feel safe, and says she attended all five days of Zoellner's court hearing. She also says she is talking with city officials about the case. See Inside Higher Ed link in sources.
- Ms. Lawson reports she has not been able to establish meaningful communications with Pres. Rossbacher to know what the pres. is doing.
- Students have called for multicultural training with outreach to the community among other measures. See video: Unsolved Hate
- HSU has conditions that could worsen the difficulty for students of color and the school's difficulty helping students to feel safe, particularly
 - a shortage of housing leaving students to seek housing off campus,
 - difficulty providing adequate access to health care for some students, and
 - a high unemployment rate in the region, leading to possible competition between community people and students who need to work to afford college. *More study needed*
- Pres. Rossbacher announced her retirement at the end of this Academic Year, effective June 30, 2019

CSU'S REDIRECTION POLICY DUE TO IMPACTION

- Most CSU campuses have been deemed “impacted for new freshman,” meaning they do not have enough space to admit all the eligible freshman. According to <https://www2.calstate.edu/attend/impaction-at-the-csu> this causes impacted campuses to raise requirements on some freshman students.
- Only 7 of 23 campuses are not impacted for first-time freshman (of these some are impacted for certain fields of study):
 - So Cal = DH and CI
 - Central = Bak and Stan
 - No Cal = Hum, Mar, and SF
- Freshman student applicants living in impacted campus service areas may be urged by admissions to attend a non-impacted campus. (<https://www2.calstate.edu/attend/degrees-certificates-credentials/Pages/impacted-degrees.aspx>)

POSSIBLY RELEVANT

- It is reported that Pres. Rossbacher has provided Arcata police with the names of students who have participated in Black advocacy groups at HSU. Rossbacher told a faculty member this was done to advance the investigation in the case. See sources, September comments to CSU Trustees plenary by Renee Byrd.
- A previous murder of a Black student remains on students’ minds today. Corey S. Clark, Sociology, HSU senior, went out to a club in October 2001 and did not return. On October 6, his body was found at an apartment in Eureka, shot point blank. Eureka Police said they could not find a motive, and so could not find a suspect. The murder remains unsolved. See El Leñador article in sources below.

JUSTICE FOR JOSIAH RESOURCES

<http://www.justiceforjosiahlawson.com/>
<https://www.facebook.com/Justice-For-David-Josiah-Lawson-138429150033811>
<https://twitter.com/hashtag/justiceforjosiah?f=tweets&vertical=default&src=hash>
<https://twitter.com/Justice4Josiah7>
<https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/justice4josiah/>

Podcast with Charmaine Lawson: <https://www.calfac.org/radio-free-csu>

Sources:

Mad River Union, May 4, 2017, “A closer look at the party where David Josiah Lawson died,” includes a summary of police radio communications, timing, and discovery of possible murder weapon.

<http://madriverriverunion.com/a-closer-look-at-the-party-where-david-josiah-lawson-died/>

North Coast Journal, May 5, 2017, “Judge Dismisses Murder Charge in Slaying of HSU Student,” report on the hearing with documents: City of Arcata statement, HSU statement, District Attorney news release.

<https://www.northcoastjournal.com/NewsBlog/archives/2017/05/05/judge-dismisses-murder-charge-in-slaying-of-hsu-student>

Riverside Press-Enterprise, June 16, 2017, "Did you know Perris native David Lawson? Vigil walk set Saturday for man stabbed in Northern California,"

<https://www.pe.com/2017/06/16/vigil-walk-set-saturday-for-perris-native-stabbed-in-northern-california/>

El Leñador, October 6, 2017, the HSU bilingual newspaper online ran an investigation into "Murders of HSU Students" looking at parallels between the two murders, particularly the police response, (this article appeared 16 years after the death of student Corey Clark, 6 months after death of David Josiah Lawson.)

<http://www.ellenadornews.com/2017/10/05/murders-of-hsu-students-of-color/>

Related commentary: <http://slausongirl.com/hsu-bilingual-newspaper-draws-parallels-unsolved-student-murders/>

Video: "Unsolved Hate," February 27, 2018, 25 minutes, explains the Lawson murder case, the history and atmosphere in Arcata and on the HSU campus, viewpoints of students, community and campus administrators.

https://youtu.be/fzAJn_UeBh4

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzAJn_UeBh4&feature=youtu.be

KHSU-FM, March 19, 2018, "Unsolved Hate: Filmmaker Follows David Josiah Lawson Murder Case," Interview with filmmaker,

<http://www.khsu.org/post/unsolved-hate-filmmaker-follows-david-josiah-lawson-murder-case#stream/0>

The Lumberjack, April 17, 2018, "Trust in police weakens as Chapman resigns," The Humboldt State student newspaper recounts the major events in the case and questions regarding the investigation into the murder.

<https://thelumberjack.org/2018/04/17/trust-in-police-weakens-as-chapman-resigns/>

The Lumberjack has a long collection of articles with references to Josiah Lawson, which re-count many of the protests and other efforts of students to advocate Justice for Josiah.

<https://thelumberjack.org/?s=%22Josiah+Lawson%22>

Eureka Times-Standard, July 24, 2018, Protest planned in Long Beach over David Josiah Lawson investigation

<http://www.times-standard.com/general-news/20180724/protest-planned-in-long-beach-over-david-josiah-lawson-investigation>

The Mad River Union, August 15, 2018, "Lawson protesters occupying Arcata City Council Chamber," protestors are calling for the return of an investigator, there is a new police chief,

<http://madriverrunion.com/lawson-protesters-occupying-arcata-city-council-chamber/>

Eureka Times-Standard, August 16, 2018, Arcata City Council postponed until Aug. 29; interim police chief expects 'chargeable case' in next few months

<http://www.times-standard.com/general-news/20180816/arcata-city-council-postponed-until-aug-29-interim-police-chief-expects-chargeable-case-in-next-few-months>

CSU Board of Trustees Video, September 12, 2018, plenary session public comment, including comment on the murder of Josiah Lawson

Go directly to the plenary video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydzB8AnObxQ>

More context on Trustees web site: <https://www2.calstate.edu/csu-system/board-of-trustees/past-meetings/2018/Pages/september-11-12-2018.aspx> and choose Sept. 12, 2018, 8:30 am plenary

CFA Headlines, September 12, 2018, CFA supports family of slain Humboldt State student, calls on CSU admin to better protect students, demands all speakers be treated with respect

<https://www.calfac.org/headline/cfa-supports-family-slain-humboldt-state-student-calls-csu-admin-better-protect-students>

Link to full text of CFA Speakers:

<https://www.calfac.org/item/comments-csu-board-trustees-cfa-activists>

Long Beach Press-Telegram, September 13, 2018, Here's how one Riverside County mom is trying to improve safety across the Cal State University system in the wake of her son's murder

<https://www.presstelegram.com/2018/09/12/heres-how-one-riverside-county-mom-is-trying-to-improve-safety-across-the-cal-state-university-system-in-the-wake-of-her-sons-murder/>

North Coast Journal, Sept. 13, 2018, Students Rally, Plan Vigil for #JusticeforJosiah

Rally at HSU on Sept. 12, while Ms. Lawson addressed BOT, Vigil planned for Sept. 15.

<https://www.northcoastjournal.com/NewsBlog/archives/2018/09/13/students-rally-plan-vigil-for-justiceforjosiah>

Eureka Times Standard, Sept. 13, 2018, Slain HSU student's mom speaks to CSU trustees

Students rally at HSU while mother of slain student David Josiah Lawson addresses CSU Board of Trustees. Brief interview with HSU CFA Chapter President Renée Byrd.

<https://www.times-standard.com/2018/09/12/slain-hsu-students-mom-speaks-to-csu-trustees/>

KCRC TV, Sept. 24, 2018, City of Arcata secures more resources for Lawson investigation; Sen. McGuire vows to help

<https://krcrtv.com/north-coast-news/eureka-local-news/city-of-arcata-secures-more-resources-for-lawson-investigation-sen-mcguire-vows-to-help>

Inside Higher Ed, October 5, 2018, The Murder of David Josiah Lawson

You've probably never heard of the black student at Humboldt State who was killed in 2017 and whose murder remains unsolved -- even as journalists nationwide publicized the disappearance and murder of Mollie Tibbets, a white Iowa student.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/10/05/unsolved-murder-black-student-humboldt-state-raises-many-questions>