

# Savanna Hollis Interview Transcript

**Tuesday, December 13, 2022 – 8:30 a.m.**

Savanna Hollis, Department Chair of the Southern Studies Department at Ole Miss, was the supervisor of both Jackson Walker and Adam Cooper.

Detectives Murphy and Parker spoke with her at her office in the Center for the Study of Southern Culture on the campus of the University of Mississippi.

## **Participants**

Detective S. Murphy

Detective E. Parker

Savanna Hollis

*Detective Murphy:* Thank you for arranging time to meet with us, Dr. Hollis. This is Detective Parker.

*Savanna Hollis:* Nice to meet you, detectives. Wish it was under better circumstances.

*Detective Murphy:* Likewise. Could we get your name and address for the record?

*Savanna Hollis:* Certainly. My name is Savanna Arie Hollis. I live at 188 Fox Trail Run, Oxford, Mississippi.

*Detective Parker:* What do you do here at the university?

*Savanna Hollis:* I'm the department chair and the longest-tenured faculty member of the Southern Studies Department on campus. I'm also on the staff of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, the first regional studies center in the country.

*Detective Murphy:* Do you know Jackson Walker?

*Savanna Hollis:* Yes, he was a Southern Studies professor specializing in civil rights issues, particularly voting rights.

*Detective Parker:* And have you heard that he has died?

*Savanna Hollis:* Yes, his colleague Adam Cooper told me yesterday. I knew something was amiss yesterday morning.

*Detective Parker:* How so?

*Savanna Hollis:* I was on campus early, I'd say about 5:30 a.m., reading final papers for my Southern Gothic Literature course. Around 8:30 a.m., Matia Webb, one of Jackson's teaching assistants, knocked on my office door. She asked if I knew whether Dr. Walker would be coming in that day since he was out sick on the preceding Friday. I told her I hadn't seen him but wasn't looking for him either. Matia said she was. She didn't have the correct answer key for one of Jackson's final exams and couldn't do any grading without it.

*Detective Murphy:* So Jackson called in sick on Friday but not Monday?

*Savanna Hollis:* That's right.

*Detective Parker:* Where had Ms. Webb looked for Jackson?

*Savanna Hollis:* In his office at the CSSC, his office at Odom Hall, around Odom Hall. She expected him at Odom at 8:00 a.m. When she couldn't find him, she came to me.

*Detective Murphy:* What did you do then?

*Savanna Hollis:* I texted him.

*Detective Parker:* Did he reply?

*Savanna Hollis:* Nope, so I called him. I got voicemail instead.

*Detective Murphy:* Then what did you do?

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*Savanna Hollis:* I went to one of Jackson's colleagues, Adam Cooper, and told him Matia Webb was looking for Jackson. Adam said he hadn't seen him, so I asked Adam to drive over to Jackson's apartment to see if Jackson needed anything. I was thinking then he might have been sicker than I presumed on Friday.

*Detective Parker:* Did Adam do what you asked?

*Savanna Hollis:* Yes. When he got to Jackson's apartment, he found Jackson unresponsive. He called the police, then later, he called me. He told me he wasn't sure Jackson was dead, but it didn't look good.

*Detective Parker:* Did Adam return to campus that day?

*Savanna Hollis:* Yes.

*Detective Parker:* Did you have the chance to talk to him about Jackson?

*Savanna Hollis:* Yes. Adam was pretty shaken up. I really regretted sending him to Jackson's apartment at that point.

*Detective Murphy:* What did Adam say, specifically?

*Savanna Hollis:* He told me that y'all grilled him pretty good. Adam said that whatever he told you, you twisted it to make him look guilty.

*Detective Parker:* I think he was doing that pretty well all by himself.

*Savanna Hollis:* He said y'all held him until 2:30 p.m., and a police officer had him trapped in a police car.

*Detective Murphy:* I don't remember that. We let him leave around noon. What time did he return to campus?

*Savanna Hollis:* 3:00 p.m.

*Detective Murphy:* Okay...moving on. Dr. Hollis, what was your relationship like with Jackson Walker?

*Savanna Hollis:* It was fine. I have a supervisory role over all the faculty in the department, and for Jackson, there were no red flags.

*Detective Parker:* No complaints from students?

*Savanna Hollis:* There are always complaints from students, but nothing out of the ordinary.

*Detective Parker:* How about his colleagues? Any friction there? Any untoward comments or advances, that sort of thing?

*Savanna Hollis:* You know about the fistfight, then?

*Detective Murphy:* Fistfight?

*Savanna Hollis:* It was supposed to be handled in-house.

*Detective Murphy:* It's now our business too. Talk about the fistfight.

*Savanna Hollis:* About a month ago, Jackson peer-reviewed one of Adam's papers on how the blues impacted the civil rights movement. Since the content of Adam's paper overlapped with Jackson's expertise, Jackson was more critical than I think he would normally be. Jackson typically doesn't pull punches, so his critiques are particularly sharp.

*Detective Parker:* And Adam took exception to it.

*Savanna Hollis:* Yes.

*Detective Murphy:* Did you evaluate the critique?

*Savanna Hollis:* Yes.

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*Detective Murphy:* Did you find it to be unfair?

*Savanna Hollis:* Terse, but not completely unfair. What had taken it to another level is that Jackson was seen dating Adam's ex-girlfriend at the same time.

*Detective Parker:* Oh. What do you know about that situation?

*Savanna Hollis:* I know her name is Sylvia Mason, but nothing more than that. I stay out of my colleagues' private affairs.

*Detective Parker:* So, what happened after Adam received Jackson's peer review?

*Savanna Hollis:* Adam exploded. He found Jackson in a hallway at Odom Hall, and sucker punched him right outside my office there. Neither guy is a prize fighter, so they wrestled around for a little while until one of our TAs separated them.

*Detective Murphy:* Then what happened?

*Savanna Hollis:* A disciplinary meeting for Adam. He received a formal letter of reprimand and a week-long suspension without pay. He appealed, which was denied by the disciplinary committee. I personally went to Adam to let him know how close he was to losing his job. I told him in no uncertain terms that he had to mend fences with Jackson, or he'd be working somewhere else next term.

*Detective Parker:* What did he say to that?

*Savanna Hollis:* He reluctantly agreed. I told Adam I didn't expect that he and Jackson would be friends, but they needed to have a stable working relationship. These last couple of weeks, it seems like Adam has been honoring that agreement.

*Detective Parker:* Honoring that agreement so much that you sent him to check on Jackson yesterday?

*Savanna Hollis:* You're not implying that when I sent Adam to check on Jackson, Adam killed him, are you?

*Detective Parker:* Not implying a thing. I'm just wondering if you lit the fuse of a powder keg.

*Savanna Hollis:* I did no such thing. I only asked Adam to perform a small gesture of goodwill to help them mend those fences. Neither I nor Adam had any idea that Jackson was dead.

*Detective Parker:* What gave you the impression that enough time had passed for Adam to extend an olive branch to Jackson?

*Savanna Hollis:* Well, at the Southern Studies Department holiday party last Thursday, Adam gave Jackson a gift.

*Detective Murphy:* Unprompted?

*Savanna Hollis:* It was a Secret Santa gift.

*Detective Parker:* Then how do you know it was from Adam to Jackson?

*Savanna Hollis:* Because I rigged the drawing so Adam would pick Jackson.

*Detective Parker:* Seriously?

*Savanna Hollis:* I thought a little bit of social engineering would help their relationship along.

*Detective Parker:* Or get Jackson killed.

*Savanna Hollis:* Come now. Adam was a perfect gentleman at the holiday party. No fistfights. No ill will. No name-calling. Christmas spirit, all around.

*Detective Murphy:* What did Adam get Jackson?

*Savanna Hollis:* Dried buffalo sausage.

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*Detective Murphy:* Buffalo sausage?

*Savanna Hollis:* Yeah. I don't know. It's a decent enough gift, right? I don't think I've had buffalo, but it can't be that bad, right?

*Detective Murphy:* Sure. I guess. Did Jackson eventually find out that Adam was his Secret Santa?

*Savanna Hollis:* Yes. Jackson thanked Adam for the gift. I'll admit it was awkward, but it was progress.

*Detective Parker:* What about the next day? I know you said Jackson was sick, but did he return at any time in the day?

*Savanna Hollis:* No, I never saw Jackson come in, but it was a busy day- It was the last final exam day for students. Jackson's TAs handled his exams at 10:00 a.m. and again at 4:00 p.m. Adam had exams at 10:00 a.m. and noon. He was in class as usual at those times.

*Detective Murphy:* Besides Adam, can you think of any other person who would like to hurt Jackson?

*Savanna Hollis:* No. And I don't think Adam is capable of killing someone.

*Detective Parker:* Just sucker-punching them.

*Savanna Hollis:* I guess he does have a temper. Still, I don't see him killing Jackson.

*Detective Murphy:* All right. I suppose you would make yourself available if we needed to talk to you again, Dr. Hollis?

*Savanna Hollis:* Yes. That would be fine.

**Interview ended – 8:57 a.m.**