

Summary – Jackson Walker's Colleagues

YOKNAPATAWPHA COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT

Investigating Officer(s): Det. S. Murphy, Det. E. Parker

Incident No.: 006057-12L-2022

Case Description: Jackson Walker death investigation

YCSD investigators spoke to the colleagues of Jackson Walker and Adam Cooper.

The interviews summarized are some of the most typical or relevant to the investigation and are representative of all the interviews conducted.

Tannith Breland (age 35)

Tannith Breland, a native of Jackson, Mississippi, received all of her educational degrees at Oklahoma State. She has been a professor in the Southern Studies Department at the University of Mississippi for the last seven years. She is also on the staff of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture on campus. Her research focuses on Southern painters, specifically painters who combined American and foreign techniques like Frederick Arthur Bridgman and William Henry Huddle.

Breland has an office next to Adam Cooper's office at Odom Hall. On November 9, 2022, Breland was in her office when Cooper and Walker got into a fight. She recalls Cooper yelling down the hallway to Walker. When Breland looked up, she saw Cooper sprint down the hallway, so she went to her office door in anticipation of some sort of emergency.

Instead, she saw Cooper and Walker arguing strenuously. Walker then turned away from Cooper, and Cooper rabbit-punched Walker. When he regained his balance, Walker turned and flung himself at Cooper.

Both men wrestled on the ground until Grover Herrington, one of Cooper's teaching assistants, separated them. Breland heard the two men continue to yell vulgarities at each other.

Tannith Breland (age 35) continued

Breland was part of the disciplinary committee that decided Cooper should be suspended for the altercation. She was so disturbed by the event that she personally recommended Cooper be fired. Of the seven committee members, two others agreed with Breland, and three did not. Department Chair Savanna Hollis cast the deciding vote that allowed Cooper to keep his job.

Breland was at the department holiday party on December 8 but did not socialize with either Walker or Cooper for any significant length of time. She did add that, though the two men were aloof from each other, they did not resort to another round of fisticuffs. When asked if Cooper could have had something to do with Walker's death, she responded, "Absolutely, the guy is a powder keg."

Breland said Hollis informed her and Cooper the morning after the holiday party that Walker had called in sick that day and that his teaching assistants were handling his final exams. Breland remembered Cooper saying under his breath, "Convenient day to be sick. I guess your TAs are used to doing all your work anyway."

Tannith Breland (age 35) continued

When Breland asked Cooper what he had just said, Cooper told her, "nothing," and returned to his office. It was obvious to Breland that Cooper still held a grudge against Walker.

Grover Harrington (age 21)

Grover Herrington is a teaching assistant in the Southern Studies Department at the University of Mississippi. He is a senior studying the blues and rock and roll heritage of the Biloxi area, where Herrington grew up.

Herrington was inspired to become one of Adam Cooper's teaching assistants not only because Cooper specializes in the music of the South but also because Cooper is one of the youngest people to become a full professor in Ole Miss history.

Herrington attested to Cooper's quick temper. He said Cooper could be pleasant and affable one minute, and then, if something set him off, he could be irrationally angry. Herrington said these episodes of anger usually entailed Cooper yelling at a student.

Most students took the chastisement in stride, but Herrington recalled one student who came to him later in tears, saying Cooper's reaction toward her alleged cheating were inappropriate. Herrington said the incident turned out to be a misunderstanding, and since it happened last year, he couldn't even remember the student's name.

Grover Harrington (age 21) continued

When asked if Cooper ever resorted to physical violence during one of his anger episodes, Herrington said he had only seen it once. That time was the fight between Cooper and Jackson Walker on November 9th of this year.

Herrington said he was going to Cooper's office in Odom Hall when he passed Jackson Walker in the corridor. He greeted Walker, and the professor nodded back as they continued past each other.

Then Herrington heard Cooper yell, "Walker!" from the doorway of his office. Cooper came running toward Walker, pushed Herrington out of the way, and started berating Walker. The two exchanged unpleasantries ending with Cooper saying, "Well, that's what makes you a dumb son of a bitch!"

Walker shook his head, and when he turned back toward his office, Herrington saw Cooper punch Walker in the back of the neck with considerable force. Walker seemed stunned for a moment, then went after Cooper with flailing fists, but nothing landed. The two men ended up on the ground.

Grover Harrington (age 21) continued

Herrington saw an opening and pulled Cooper away from Walker. Cooper swore at Herrington, but since Herrington was much bigger than the two professors, Cooper relented. In a huff, Cooper returned to his office.

During the week Cooper was suspended, Herrington taught Cooper's courses. When Cooper returned to campus, Herrington asked him why he attacked Walker. Cooper told him that Walker had damaged the publishing potential of an academic paper Cooper had written.

The explanation Cooper gave was weak in Herrington's estimation. Herrington thought the fight was more likely over a woman because he had heard rumors that Walker was dating Cooper's ex-girlfriend, Sylvia. Herrington didn't know the woman's last name.

When asked if Cooper could have been involved in Walker's death, Herrington smiled and said he doubted it, but he didn't think Cooper would have ever gotten into a physical altercation with Walker either, and then he saw that happen with his own eyes.

Jordan Lofton (age 41)

Jordan Lofton was born in the Florida panhandle and received her undergraduate and master's degrees at Florida State. Her Ph.D. in Linguistics was completed at the University of Miami.

She became a professor in the Southern Studies Department at the University of Mississippi in 2013. Her research is concentrated on the dialects of the American South. Her papers on the dialects of the Louisiana Creole and Carolinian Gullah peoples are known nationwide.

Lofton didn't witness the fistfight between Walker and Cooper but knew there were tensions between them. She knew teaching assistants had left the service of both men because of their temperaments in the past, but Lofton claimed not to personally know those teaching assistants by name or their individual grievances at the time.

Jordan Lofton (age 41) continued

Lofton was on the disciplinary committee that punished Cooper for his aggression against Walker. She felt both Cooper and Walker should have received reprimands, and Cooper should have been suspended for the rest of the semester if not fired. When Cooper received a short suspension, and Walker saw no punishment whatsoever, Lofton said she complained vehemently to Department Chair Savanna Hollis. Her appeal fell on deaf ears.

Lofton believed Dr. Hollis was coddling the two young professors because she saw them as rising stars in their field. Lofton likened her Department to the Athletic Department—some individuals, like the football coach, are untouchable until they suddenly aren't.

Lofton expected the same treatment for Walker and Cooper. They would both continue to have their temperament problems, but the university would endure them until they crossed some unforgivable line. Then, they would be fired. When asked if she thought murder would qualify as an example of an unforgivable line, Lofton said that if murder didn't qualify, nothing else would.

Jordan Lofton (age 41) continued

Lofton said she last spoke to Walker mid-morning on the Friday before his death. Walker had called to ask Lofton to intercept a group of new international students scheduled during Walker's 11:00 a.m. office hours. Walker told Lofton that he was sick but might be able to meet with the students at 2:00 p.m. Lofton remarked how poorly Walker sounded on the phone and urged Walker to go back to bed. After a bit of persuasion, Walker agreed to have Lofton send the students home and reschedule their meeting for sometime after Christmas.

Katerina Volkov Sumrall (age 62)

Sumrall was born in Novorossiysk, Russia, and orphaned at the age of four. She was adopted by a well-to-do New Orleans couple, Horace and Linley Sumrall.

Katerina was only 17 years old when she enrolled at Louisiana State University for her undergraduate education. She received a Ph.D. at Mississippi State University in 1984, married a year later, and divorced a year later.

In 1988, she accepted a professor position at Ole Miss in the Department of Theatre Arts, teaching Russian ballet. After years of studying Zydeco of the Mississippi Delta, Sumrall switched to the Southern Studies Department, where she concentrates on the cultural impacts of Zydeco and Cakewalk on Gulf Coast history.

When asked about Jackson Walker and Adam Cooper, Sumrall rolled her eyes. She said she doesn't have much time for either man, saying they were made professors way too early in their careers. She said she doesn't have an office in Odom Hall but has heard of the spats between Walker and Cooper and felt that their disagreements were mostly petty.

Katerina Volkov Sumrall (age 62)

continued

She said she arrived at the holiday party last Thursday at the same time as Cooper. When Sumrall saw that Cooper had come to the party alone, she asked whether he had a date, thinking he had brought a woman with him to the last department social function. Cooper told her that his relationship was over several months prior. Sumrall said that, at this point, she felt like a horse's behind and told Cooper that his ex couldn't be as bad as her ex.

Sumrall doesn't remember Walker or Cooper speaking to each other at the party until the opening of the Secret Santa presents. When Walker opened his gift, which was dried meat of some sort, he guessed that Department Chair Savanna Hollis was his Secret Santa, but Hollis wasn't. It took Walker two more tries until he finally guessed Cooper, who then admitted he was Walker's gift-giver. In the most obligatory manner possible, Cooper told Walker he hoped Walker would enjoy the fried meat. Walker thanked him back without much cheer.

Katerina Volkov Sumrall (age 62)

continued

Sumrall recounted that she was quite confused because she had thought that Walker was a vegetarian, but knowing the old animosities between Walker and Cooper, she didn't mention anything to either of them. She just went to get a third glass of eggnog to avoid the awkwardness.