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Was inquiry flawed from the start?

‘Confirmation bias’ among authorities questioned in suicide judgment

By Laura Crimaldi and Shelley Murphy
GLOBE STAFF

The scene at Sandra Birchmore's apartment suggested a young woman beaming with impending motherhood: a boxed baby stroller and a sonogram image decorated with glitter and affixed to a sign that read, “Congratulations you’re going to be a father.”

But when Canton police officers, called there for a well-being check on Feb. 4, 2021, found Birchmore dead, her body hanging from a doorknob with the strap from a gym bag around her neck, they suspected she had killed herself, speculation that was later affirmed and made official by state investigators.

Now, more than three years later, federal authorities have drawn a shockingly different conclusion that calls into question the competence — or worse — of that initial investigation and pitches law enforcement agencies in Massachusetts into yet another controversy: that Birchmore was murdered by the man she had said was the father of her unborn child, a married police officer in neighboring Stoughton, whom she had met as a teenager

BIRCHMORE, Page A14



BIRCHMORE FAMILY PHOTO

Sandra Birchmore was found dead in 2021.

‘At first you think maybe it’s just incompetence. . . . But this is so much it makes you start to question intentional conduct.’

DJUNA PERKINS,
Lawyer

MOLD, MICE, BROKEN DOOR LOCKS, LEAKING PIPES, CAVED-IN SHOWER WALLS.

Clogged toilets, sinks, and bathtubs. Doorbells that do not work. Broken windows and busted vents. NO HEAT, NO HOT WATER. Tenants of the Franklin Field housing complex say their complaints about unsanitary conditions have been ignored for years.

HOUSING BUT HARDLY HABITABLE



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

By Danny McDonald
GLOBE STAFF

Rosalyn Russell is fed up. Despite living in the squat brick warrens of Dorchester’s Franklin Field, a sprawling public housing complex off Blue Hill Avenue that is managed by the Boston Housing Authority, for most of her 55 years, she wants to move, in part because of her unhealthy living conditions.

She has had mold in her bathroom for more than a year. It’s over the shower and above the door, as she is happy to show a re-

Rosalyn Russell held a heart-shaped pillow she got at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, where she receives treatment. She said there’s been mold in her apartment for more than a year. “Nothing is getting done.”

porter. She put in a work order months ago, she said, but maintenance crews have yet to deal with it. Someone from the city’s inspectional services has been out and taken pic-

tures of the mold, but still, it sits there, untouched.

“Nothing is getting done,” she said inside her home last month. “That work order’s been in.”

Here, among the residents of Franklin Field’s 400-plus units, it’s a common refrain. The population of the public housing development is overwhelmingly Black and Latino, and many live below the federal poverty line. Anecdotally, more than a dozen Franklin Field tenants say they have had experiences

FRANKLIN FIELD, Page A13

Rare sight in Mass. politics: a contest

Most incumbents breeze to reelection, but an upstart brings a race to Cambridge

By Samantha J. Gross and Laura Crimaldi
GLOBE STAFF

Sweating in the late-July heat, a small group of supporters of legislative candidate Evan MacKay gathered in Cambridge’s shady Franklin Street Park, fanning themselves with election fliers listing MacKay’s progressive credentials.

They listened as MacKay explained that the campaign is attempting something exceedingly rare in Massachusetts: a challenge against a long-time Democratic incumbent, in this case state Representative Marjorie Decker. MacKay’s pledge: to fight for a transparent, accountable government in a state renowned as one of the least transparent in the nation. Too few voters are aware of the barriers to public records and meeting access that are routine on Beacon Hill, MacKay said.

“A lot of people don’t have consciousness of the state Legislature,” MacKay, a graduate student in sociology at Harvard, told the group before setting out to knock on doors in the neighborhood. “You will be their educator.”

As the Sept. 3 primary approaches, MacKay is just one of 13 Democrats this cycle attempting the

INCUMBENCY, Page A12

A grisly crime and decades of justice delayed

Case reveals struggles with competency claims

By Sean Cotter
GLOBE STAFF

The judge repeated his question to make sure Nicola Colafella understood: Did you shoot your neighbors?

Colafella, 87, swiveling in his chair in the dim courtroom this spring, paused, as if his thoughts had traveled back 34 years to a scene of chaos and carnage in a Mission Hill three-decker.

“Yeah, I did,” he replied hoarsely, the lilt of his native Italy still audible. “Yeah.”

And with that, a gruesome murder case that had languished in a kind of judicial liminal space for more than three decades finally arrived at an official conclusion. Despite there being no doubt that Colafella had killed two members of a neighboring family and wounded two others, long-

MURDER, Page A8

A follow-up visit to Winvian Farm changed travel writer Christopher Muther’s mind on the Connecticut resort. Travel, N11.

The Globe Magazine is not publishing today. The puzzles can be found on **B4**.

The state’s primary elections are Tuesday. **B1**.

Summer closeout

Sunday: Showers early. High: 79-84. Low: 65-70.

Monday: Sunny, breezy. High: 75-80. Low: 53-58.

Complete report, **A22**. Deaths, **A16-21**.

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