

## **Woman killed in Missoula officer-involved shooting - Billings Gazette, The (MT) - December 29, 2018**

December 29, 2018 | Billings Gazette, The (MT) | SEABORN LARSON seaborn.larson@missoulain.com

The day after **Jenessa Cooper** died in what appears to be a "suicide by cop," a person living at Cooper's home told the Missoulian the situation was a severe misunderstanding, and that Cooper was deep in grief from the death of a loved one.

Cooper, a transgender woman, was heartbroken at the sudden and unexpected death of her ex-wife, Diane Abrams, according to friends who agreed to speak with the Missoulian. When they divorced in 2012, Cooper was living by a different name, Thomas Walker Abrams. But this is her story, not his.

Cooper's four friends described the 49-year-old as someone who genuinely cared for others, but also as someone who suffered from untreated depression. Friends in the last month have mourned her death, but none blamed Missoula law enforcement for the consequences of the events on Blaine Street on Nov. 18.

After her death, a "Vote Republican" sign could be seen in Cooper's yard. Many of her friends described her as very much a proponent of civil liberties.

"She was a red-blooded American," Savannah Anderson said.

Anderson met Cooper about five years ago through a personal ad Cooper had posted to Craigslist. "Cross-dressing man seeks female to do Tom Boy things," Anderson recalled.

Anderson typically browsed the personal section for some light entertainment, not to actually connect with someone, she said. But this time she felt a pull to the post, if not a whiff of a new friendship, so she responded. Before long they were getting under the hoods of cars together, where Cooper would sometimes hint about issues with gender identity, Anderson said.

Cooper identified as male then, but Anderson said she soon saw through that and understood what Cooper was really asking when she talked about gender.

"It was right around then that she began to realize what she really knew about herself," Anderson said of Cooper.

So under the hood of one of those cars they worked on, Anderson gave Cooper a "pep talk," pushing her to shine some light on the person she knew she was, instead of hiding beneath the persona Cooper thought she was supposed to be. By the same time next week, Anderson said Cooper had begun hormone treatment to begin the transition process.

It seemed to her friends to be something of an oxymoron: a transgender woman who held deeply

conservative beliefs, Anita Green told the Missoulian.

"Jenessa very much liked her Second Amendment," Green said. "She was proud of the fact that she was able to carry a gun. She didn't apologize for that."

About a year after beginning her hormone therapy to transition, Cooper met Green at a trans support group. While Cooper was quiet, Green was outgoing. Cooper stood solidly by her politics — the antithesis of Green's.

"I'm an extrovert and I love meeting new people," Green said. "It doesn't matter if I disagree with people, I still want to get to know them. I don't know why Jenessa was receptive. It's hard to understand why we gravitated towards each other, but we did."

The philosophical opposites made quite a team when Cooper agreed to serve as campaign manager for Green's 2015 progressive campaign for Missoula City Council. They ran on "wet" homeless shelters and mandating that developers include affordable or market-rate housing when starting a project, according to a 2015 article in the Montana Kaimin.

Cooper's presence on the campaign trail was meaningful to Green.

"I ran in a four-way race and not everybody who was running was very kind," Green said. "Campaigns can be kind of cutthroat and Jenessa was there to help me through some of that."

Green's bid for city office was unsuccessful. In the Kaimin article, Cooper weighed in on why she thought they couldn't wrangle the votes to make it out of the primary.

"I think it was mostly being young and relatively unknown," Cooper told the University of Montana's student newspaper. "But she got her name out there."

Green did not make another run at office and moved to Oregon not long after. She and Cooper began to drift away from each other, the toll distance often takes on tight friendships. But they still stayed in touch from time to time; Cooper called her after the mid-term elections last month, when Democrats won the majority of seats in the U.S. House.

"She called and she said, 'I wanted to congratulate you on your win,'" Green recalled. "She was being a little bit snarky but it was in good fun. We had that kind of relationship."

If her friendship with Green represents Cooper's confidence in the political arena, Bri Sawyer's relationship with Cooper represented the vulnerability she felt in fully presenting as a woman.

"When I first met Jen she didn't tell me she was trans, but she kind of hinted here and there, and asked what I thought about it," Sawyer said.

Like Anderson, Sawyer also met Cooper through a Craigslist ad: "Looking for open-minded friends." Sawyer lived in Lewistown while Cooper was living in Missoula, but their friendship still blossomed to span of the 275 miles between them. Maybe it was the distance that gave Cooper enough security to dress as a woman when she visited, but Sawyer said it never lasted long.

"When we first started meeting, she was really scared to wear her drag," Sawyer told the Missoulian in a phone interview. "She was definitely an ally, and she'd speak up, but she would be very shy about coming out of the closet, herself."

When Cooper would visit Sawyer in Lewistown, they would try to get out once in a while, but ultimately ended up staying in to chat, Sawyer said. Cooper might show up at Sawyer's house in a little bit of makeup, but Sawyer said even that shook Cooper's confidence.

"We had a few people who she encountered who were excruciatingly homophobic," Sawyer said. "Usually she'd come to see me and have a little bit of makeup on. But she'd — the fear, you could see it in her eyes. It was like a deer in the headlights. That was hard for me to watch, too, because that was stopping her from being able to fully transition."

Sawyer, who is pansexual, had gone through this timid phase long ago, she said, and was eager to help Cooper emerge. They even planned to do a few drag shows, Sawyer said, which would have been far outside Cooper's comfort range.

But as years went on, the distance seemed to strain the relationship and visits and messages became less frequent. When she did catch up with Cooper, Sawyer said she noticed Cooper was becoming more and more confident.

Self confidence aside, Cooper was an advocate for her friends, and generous in helping them through their own trials. Sawyer said more than once Cooper sent her money when she was struggling to pay her bills.

"She gave until it hurt," Sawyer said. "'Pay it forward,' she told me."

Green said she, too, was amid hard financial times when Cooper reached out to help bridge the gap of Green's needs.

"She welcomed me over and gave me just a little money for food and she would oftentimes have me over and we would eat together," Green said. "She really was somebody who really cared for her friends and would do so much to make sure her friends were OK. She often times put others before herself."

Anderson said that meant Cooper couldn't afford to go to counseling or purchase medication for her own depression — something Anderson, who was close to Cooper, said she didn't talk about.

"A lot of people suffer in silence," Anderson said.

Sawyer was well aware of Cooper's fight with depression, which sometimes became overwhelming.

"I know the last time we talked she was feeling like she was alone," Sawyer said. "That's something that really sucks."

On Saturday, Nov. 18, Cooper was rocked by the death of Diane Abrams, who Anderson said died of a sudden brain aneurysm at 56. Cooper had married Diane in the late 1990s. Diane was a mother to two daughters. In her obituary, she mentions her marriage to Thomas Abrams and also acknowledges Cooper as a "dear companion."

Anderson last spoke with Cooper around 11 p.m. the night before. Cooper told Anderson Abrams had been taken off life support, Anderson said.

Anderson said Cooper sounded like she would be OK, but now suspects Cooper may have suffered some sort of break that led her to reportedly threaten someone with her gun. If Cooper was supposed to be the strong one, no one is immune from a devastating loss, Anderson said.

"There's no 'supposed to' in grief," she said.

What happens next is told in a search warrant application for Cooper's home following the shooting that resulted in her death. Responding to reports of someone being threatened with a gun at a home on Blaine Street, a police officer positioned himself behind a pickup, Cooper's. The caller had also reported Cooper was planning to commit a "suicide by cop."

The search warrant application states the front door to the home opened as Cooper emerged, brandishing a firearm toward Officer Joseph Burger, who opened fire.

Cooper's firearm and a casing were found next to her body; it's still unclear if she fired on Burger or herself.

Authorities are still investigating the officer-involved shooting. Burger has been placed on administrative leave pending the investigation's outcome. Cooper's Facebook page has been taken down. Her "Vote Republican" sign remains in the yard on Blaine Street.