

Jessica Lunsford's Story

Documents show that Jessica Lunsford might have been alive as her grave was filled.

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INVERNESS - For weeks, rumors swirled that the man suspected of killing Jessica Lunsford kept her inside his home for a time, then buried her alive.

Documents released Wednesday suggest those grisly accounts are true.

Investigators found Jessica just as John Couey told them they would.

She was sitting upright in a 4-foot-deep grave, her wrists bound in front of her body with stereo wire. Two of her fingers had poked through the plastic trash bags stretched tight over her body. In her arms she clutched the stuffed purple dolphin that had been missing from her bedroom.

Her body bore no sign of injuries that would have caused death. Medical examiners ruled she died of asphyxiation, or a lack of oxygen.

That leaves open the likelihood that Jessica was alive in her grave as dirt and leaves were shoveled over her.

After his arrest, Couey, the 46-year-old sex offender charged with kidnapping, sexually assaulting and killing Jessica, gave investigators a rough timeline of Jessica's last hours, according to reports in nearly 300 pages of documents released by prosecutors.

Couey, who since has pleaded not guilty and awaits trial, told authorities in two taped interviews after his arrest that he took Jessica from her bed in the middle of the night, slipping past the girl's sleeping grandparents and Corky, the family dog.

He said he took her to his mobile home, about 150 yards from Jessica's home, sexually assaulted her and kept her captive inside a closet. Then, he dug a grave in the backyard, tied her up in trash bags and piled dirt on top of her body.

Jessica may have been in the closet when investigators knocked on the door and talked with Couey's housemates.

But it's possible that no one will ever know.

The dates and times of Couey's timeline are vague, likely the result of Couey's "drug haze," said Citrus County Sheriff Jeff Dawsey.

Couey's half-sister, who also lived at the mobile home on Snowbird Court, told investigators she and Couey often drank and used crack cocaine. Two crack pipes were among items investigators found at the home.

The documents released Wednesday morning filled in more pieces in the puzzle surrounding Jessica's murder. They included references to a note Couey wrote expressing feelings for a younger person, and described twists in the investigation that moved the focus from Jessica's family to Couey.

Jessica vanished from her home overnight Feb. 23.

Her grandparents, Archie and Ruth Lunsford, tucked her into bed about 10 p.m. Archie told investigators he got up about 4 a.m. to let the dog out but didn't notice anything wrong.

Jessica's father, Mark Lunsford, discovered she was missing the next morning. He heard her alarm clock going off. Her bed was empty, her stuffed dolphin gone.

The investigative documents outline the path that ultimately led to Couey.

They show suspicion initially pointed toward Jessica's grandfather after investigators found a man's briefs in a laundry hamper in the family home. The underwear tested positive for blood. Jessica's grandfather and father both passed polygraph tests.

Nearly everyone who had come in contact with the family was under question that first day. Investigators asked about the family's letter carrier, a trash collector and a man who lived nearby.

They also checked sex offenders and predators registered at addresses near Jessica's home. They showed Ruth Lunsford photographs of the more than 200 offenders and predators registered in Citrus County. None looked familiar.

Investigators canvassed the neighborhood, twice stopping at the mobile home and speaking with Couey's housemates. They didn't learn he was living there until days later, when the search was expanded to check the whereabouts of more of the county's offenders. Couey wasn't where he was supposed to be, which raised their suspicions.

His half-sister, Dorothy Dixon, and her daughter, Madie Secord, told investigators they had lied about Couey. He was living with them, but just after Jessica's disappearance, he asked them for a bus ticket and \$200.

Authorities arrested him near a Salvation Army shelter in Augusta, Ga. After his confession, Georgia authorities also found among his belongings in Georgia a pearl-handled knife and a photograph of a woman.

Authorities say they found Jessica's body exactly where Couey told them it would be, between an air conditioner and a set of steps. A short-handled shovel lay nearby. Wet leaves covered the newly turned dirt.

Jessica was wearing a pink tank top, checkered shorts, a white and red bra and panties, they said. She was reported to be wearing a pink nightgown and white shorts the night she disappeared.

Investigators also found several notes written by a "John," which may explain the prosecutor's request for a handwriting sample from Couey. One note was found partially burned in a fire pit in the backyard. It was written to "Marie," which is Jessica's middle name.

More notes found in the garbage and inside the home were addressed "For Marie" and "Hi" from "John." Investigators also found a letter that described the writer's feelings for the recipient, including the writer saying he or she was much older than the recipient.

In Couey's bedroom, investigators found a sleeping bag on top of a mattress. Both had stains on them. They also found a filet knife, magazines and a case for a Shirley Temple movie called Curly Top, in which the actor portrays a young orphan.

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