Why is Roger Golubski, an accused rapist and former KCK cop, still walking around free?

In a November deposition, former Kansas City, Kansas, police detective Roger Golubski invoked his Fifth Amendment right not to incriminate himself 555 times.

No, she never called the police. “He was the police. What was I going to say — this policeman just raped me?”

BY MELINDA HENNEBERGER

A 5-foot-9-inch, 250-pound white male accused of sexually assaulting dozens of mostly poor Black women is at large in Kansas City, Kansas.

No need to put out an APB, though, because the suspect, former homicide detective Roger Golubski, who retired in good standing and with a full pension from the Kansas City, Kansas Police Department, isn’t in hiding. There’s no mystery about his whereabouts, right in Wyandotte County, where he’s lived all his life.
In a November deposition in a civil case against him, Golubski mostly declined to answer questions by invoking his Fifth Amendment right not to incriminate himself. He did that a nice round 555 times.

Among the questions he wouldn’t answer were these: Did he have a sideline in selling drugs and “facilitating prostitution” while he was a police detective? Ever get charges dismissed in return for sex? Ever rape a minor in his cop car? Or threaten to harm a woman if she turned him in?

Also this one: “You closed dozens of cases by manipulating witnesses to give false testimony?” And this: “Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, you used your network of women on the streets to provide false information to close your cases, correct?”

Golubski did, however, talk about the four years he spent in a Catholic seminary, studying to become a priest. And noted that though he is so faithful that he kept a prayer book in his police office “until someone stole it,” he never lost sight of how important it is to observe the separation of church and state. (For the record, that’s one line he does not stand accused of crossing.)

He also complained that the department didn’t throw him much of a retirement bash 10 years ago when he left after 35 years on the force. A plate of cookies from Price Chopper is “not my definition of a party,” said Golubski, who is 68. Nor did he get a gold watch. “It must have got lost in the mail.”

He did not go away empty handed; the police department’s platinum-plated gift to Roger Golubski was silence: Roger who? Even now, a department spokeswoman says nobody there knows anything about the allegations against him, though his former partner, Terry Zeigler, only stepped down as chief of police a little more than a year ago.

Women who say Golubski held his badge over them for years are finally ending their silence, though, despite very real fears for their physical safety.

### SAID HE GOES DRINKING WITH DISTRICT ATTORNEY

One such woman, who also gave a deposition in November, testified under oath about meeting Golubski when he arrived at her home, along with a bunch of other Kansas City, Kansas police officers, early one morning in 1999.

Her sons were marched to a squad car, and while other officers searched her home, Golubski never left her side. “I asked him questions about what was going on. He was too busy looking at me, staring at me, telling me how nice I looked and that I had nice legs.”

And how did she feel about that? “I didn’t feel too good, because they had my sons out in the police car, and I was mainly worried about them and he making all of these side comments about my body. I didn’t like that at all. I thought it was inappropriate.”
That was only a preview, she testified. A few days later, while she was “devastated” and “sick” with worry for her boys, Golubski, who was the lead investigator in the case against them, dropped by again.

And once again, “I was talking about my son. He was talking about my legs and how a friend he can be to me … He said he can help me out with my kids. He said he knew the D.A. because they are friends and that they go to the bar.”

She was scared, as he “kept moving close to me. I really didn’t know what he was going to do until he put his hand on my leg and I slapped it off. And then he said he can really help me out, help my sons out. And then he put his hand back. But that time, he pushed the hands all the way up under my skirt … I asked him what was he trying to do. And so I stood up. He stood up. And next thing I know, he pushed me on the couch and unzipped his pants.”

Golubski raped her, she said, all the while telling her he wasn’t going to hurt her and that it would be over soon. When it was, he wiped himself off, took the roll of paper towels he’d used to do that with him, and left. “I was sitting there crying, and he didn’t say nothing.”

This happened many times, she said, and no, she never called the police. “He was the police. What was I going to say — this policeman just raped me?”

On one occasion, she testified, Golubski told her that his partner, Zeigler, had come with him and was waiting in the car outside. The former police chief did not respond to multiple messages from The Star seeking comment, and Golubski’s lawyer declined to comment.

Her account of being targeted when she was most vulnerable is not unlike the story of another woman I interviewed months ago, Teresa Randolph, who said that on the 2008 night that a SWAT team came to her home to charge her father in a fatal shooting, Golubski made his way to her bedroom and closed the door behind him. “I was in my bedclothes, he was sitting on my bed, and it felt almost violating, very uncomfortable.”

Then and in a number of later phone calls, she said, he told her he could help her father if she’d meet him alone. “I always suggested that there would be another party there, and he said, ‘I’ll call you another time.’” The last time they spoke, “he got angry with me and said I was too educated for him.”

**HELPED SEND INNOCENT LAMONTE MCINTYRE TO PRISON**

What Golubski is really accused of is playing God in Kansas City, Kansas, for decades, stealing from some and giving to others, behaving violently with some women and buying groceries for others. Sometimes, his accusers say, he offered carrots like help getting a new apartment in return for testimony, while at other times threatening women that their children would be taken away or that the men in their lives would be sent to prison if they didn’t do as he said.
The case that's finally bringing all of this to light started with Lamonte McIntryre, who served 23 years in prison for a 1994 double murder that he didn't commit, and that Golubski was in charge of investigating. When the former detective was deposed, it was as part of the civil case being brought by McIntryre and his mother Rose, who has said in sworn testimony that Golubski sexually assaulted her and framed her then-17-year-old son when she refused to continue being coerced. In Golubski's legal answer to the suit, he has denied any wrongdoing.

Behind all of the corruption that he's accused of getting away with for so long was the assumption that no one was ever going to believe the word of a bunch of powerless Black women over a man with a badge and a gun, who by the time he retired had risen to the rank of police captain.

But it's long past time for their stories to be told, listened to and acted on.

If even one of them is true, why is Roger Golubski still walking around free, glum that he didn't get a better send-off from the job? When is the FBI, whose investigators have been interviewing those who've known him off and on for years, finally going to do something?

Is no one in the Kansas City, Kansas Police Department at all curious about the extent and the impact of these alleged crimes? Or the potential abuse of power by those who were supposed to be protecting the community? If not, what does that say about the culture of the department, not just then but now?

Is no one in authority willing to take a second look at Golubski's old cases? Or worried about how they'll ever have any credibility until all of the facts are known and acknowledged?

It was Roger Golubski who inspired the Kansas law that spelled out that cops can't have sex with anyone they've arrested or detained. In his honor, such as it is, the state should also change the statute of limitations on rape so that even a case from, say, 1999, could be prosecuted.

In the past, Zeigler has suggested that any allegations against his former partner and the department that he until recently led are old news. They are not. And until they're addressed, what has changed?

Officials can continue to plead ignorance, but at a terrible price, and not only for those whose trust wasn't so much betrayed as it was never allowed to grow. There is no statute of limitations on complicity.

Is no one in the Kansas City, Kansas Police Department at all curious about the extent and the impact of these alleged crimes?
Air Force vet has PTSD not from her service, but from attempted rape by ex-KCK cop

Was everyone in the KCK police department just accustomed to women screaming behind Roger Golubski’s office door?

BY MELINDA HENNEBERGER

She’s an Air Force veteran, like both of her parents and her two sisters, with a brother who went rogue and joined the Marines. But her PTSD has nothing to do with her service. At 44, she is a woman still so shaken by an encounter with former Kansas City, Kansas, police detective Roger Golubski in his office at police headquarters in 2004 that she started having trouble breathing as she told me about it.
“I had just moved here,” to Overland Park, said the woman, who because Golubski told her she’d wind up in the morgue if she ever said anything to anyone, does not want her name in the paper.

She’d just started dating a fellow veteran who lived in KCK at the time. One weekend early in 2004, they were hanging out at his place when an ex-girlfriend of his, who lived right across the street and was maybe not that much of an ex after all, came over in a fury. They called the police, who when they arrived, assumed that her boyfriend was the one responsible for the cuts on her face and chest.

When she followed the officers outside to tell them that no, that’s not what had happened, they arrested her, too. “The officer slammed me on the hood” of the patrol car, she said, and “put handcuffs on me for obstruction,” but only held her for a few hours.

Several days later, she got a call from a Capt. Golubski, who told her, “I saw your mugshot and you are gorgeous.” She needed to come down and take care of some paperwork, he said. “I’d never been in any trouble before and didn’t know how anything was supposed to work,” even if she did know that cops are not supposed to be checking out mugshots and then swiping right.

When she got there, she said, Golubski told her right away that the woman who’d cut her had already been down to talk to him about pressing charges against her. But not to worry, he said, because since she was the prettier of the two, he wouldn’t be filing that case. As a homicide detective, there was no legitimate reason for him to have been involved in the matter at all.

Then, “he takes me into his office, closes the door and turns into a different dude, rubbing on himself” and demanding, ‘Kiss me!’ He snatched that mask off his face so quick it was like his face dropped six inches.”

Then “he pushed me up against the door” and was suddenly all over her, she said, attempting to “do it right there,” at which point, “I lost it. I got loud because I got scared — hysterical, screaming, kicking. Everyone had to have heard me. I know my head hit the door a couple of times.”

**WOMAN SCREAMING BEHIND DETECTIVE’S OFFICE DOOR**

Finally, someone on the other side of the office door banged on it a few times, as if to say, “Knock it off,” I guess like I used to do with my New York neighbor who liked to bounce his basketball off our common wall at all hours. Was a screaming woman in Golubski’s office such a minor irritant — such a “not this again” non-event — in the KCKPD that pounding on the door a few times while strolling on past actually seemed like the right response?

If we could just freeze the action right there for a minute, I can’t tell if this is a police station or the worst frat house on campus. What kind of police can’t or won’t hear the panicked screams of someone in trouble in his own office?

All of those big-cheese KCKPD officials who’ve claimed never to have had any inkling about this man’s many alleged victims must be the most clueless cops in history. Or would be, if they were telling the truth.
And c’mon, if they weren’t worried about scrutiny of their own actions, rather than only Golubski’s, they would have called for an independent audit long ago, and going forward promised a no-tolerance view of alleged serial rapists who’ve investigated the murder of the multiple Black women they happen to have been exploiting, sexually and otherwise.

Hello, Department of Justice, civil rights division, we’ve got a situation you really need to look at here, and I don’t mean through the FBI investigation that’s gone on, off and on, for years, not only moving at the speed of a glacier but melting like one. This is not the first, second or third Black woman I’ve talked to who’s said Golubski stalked, harassed and threatened her, always after the same, “You’re so pretty” line failed. How many would be too many?

I’m sorry to say, I haven’t seen either Gov. Laura Kelly or U.S. Rep. Sharice Davids say boo-hiss about any of the above, either, I guess because that’s how Democrats get and hope to stay elected in Kansas, even if taking a stand for a community that’s been treated like throwaways, no matter who cries about it, is seriously underrated.

But, back at KCK police headquarters in early 2004, “A whole lot of people saw him take me in that office, and they did nothing” beyond that knock, she said. Just that, though, was enough of an interruption for her to break free and get the door open. “Now I’m rattled,” and Golubski is telling her that if she ever says a single word to a single person, they’ll find her body and call it an accident.

Then, in another 180, he’s calmly telling her what a “good girl” she is, as he walks her, still reeling, to the office of Kansas City, Kansas, lawyer Reginald Davis, who was then the municipal prosecutor, working in the same building.

Davis remembers him walking her in, and asking him to dismiss her misdemeanor ticket, which he did. He didn’t notice that she was in a panic, he said.

For many months after that, Golubski called her and said he could still send her to jail any time unless she went out with him. “It was a nightmare. I thought it would never be over.”

It only ended when her father, who is white, called Golubski and told him to back off.

“The whole thing was messed up,” her father told me. “I called and told him I didn’t appreciate it. He kept saying she was the one instigating things, and I was like, ‘Everybody needs to stay professional’... He agreed to leave her alone and he did, thank God.”

PROSECUTOR HAD 'VERY SPECIAL' RELATIONSHIP WITH GOLUBSKI

When I called Davis, who is in private practice now, and asked what he remembered about Roger Golubski, he said they’d had a “very cordial relationship.”
Then, before I even mentioned the woman who’d reached out to me, he volunteered that two moments really stood out in his mind. One, he said, was when Davis saw “a very attractive African American female I used to always try to hit on” in his apartment complex coming out of her place with Golubski.

And then there was the time Golubski “brought a very attractive woman to me and I tried to help her” by dismissing her ticket, as Golubski had asked him to do.

As to why a homicide detective had anything to do with this made-up, minor case, he said he had no idea. “I don’t know why he was involved in this misdemeanor ticket.” But, he said again, “It’s not unusual for prosecutors to dismiss cases at the request of police officers. ... I assumed he was dating her or she was helping him with a case, so I said yeah, no problem.”

“Captain walked her into the prosecutor’s office. I was under the impression he knew her. He introduced her as a good friend, and I read between the lines. Was she a very attractive woman? Strikingly, so obviously, I made a pass at her. I was single. I remember driving to her mom’s house” and they went out on one date.

Golubski “kind of encouraged me to see about going out with her. He said she was a good girl.”

In the years since, the woman telling this story said, she’s often had a recurring dream in which she’s being forced off the road by police officers trying to make her death look like an accident. Several times when I was talking to her about this experience, she started to hyperventilate and had trouble catching her breath.

“I can’t breathe,” is of course what George Floyd said in his last moments alive, as Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kept his knee on his neck. It’s what an unarmed 15-year-old Black kid in Kansas City, Missouri — who was never charged with any crime, by the way — cried six months before that, as an officer kept his knee on the back of his head on the pavement in front of a local Go Chicken Go restaurant.

But it’s also the effect that Golubski and his colleagues, who at the very least decided not to hear a woman screaming in their own office, have had on an entire community.

It’s the effect that he and the department that is covering for him and others still — Roger who? — have on that community even now. If he doesn’t know where bodies — real bodies; that is not a metaphor — are buried, then why do they continue to wrap their arms around an accused serial rapist whose “girls” kept winding up dead? Neither Golubski’s lawyer nor a spokeswoman for the KCKPD returned calls seeking comment.

‘USED HIS LEVERAGE AS AN OFFICER TO OBTAIN SEXUAL FAVORS’

The woman in this story called me because she’d read my last report on Golubski and felt she couldn’t in good conscience fail to step forward, even as she also felt she was putting her life in danger by doing so. “I don’t want anyone else to ever feel like I felt.” If she can take that risk, do you think maybe some of you non-criminals in the KCKPD might someday speak up? No, right?
So far, only a few have done so. They include the late Ruby Ellington, a 25-year veteran of the department who swore in a 2015 affidavit that everyone in the department knew about Roger Golubski, with whom she’d trained at the police academy.

“Golubski used his leverage as an officer to obtain sexual favors” from women in trouble, she said under oath. “Golubski’s misconduct and his exploitation of Black women was well known throughout the Department. Despite this, he was never punished. In fact, he rose steadily through the ranks and became a powerful detective and, ultimately, a captain. ... If a Black female had any kind of criminal charge or other legal problem, Golubski would use that as leverage to get what he wanted.”

But Ron Miller, who was chief of police in 2004? He didn’t know anything about anything, apparently. He said in a 2012 deposition that Golubski was a good detective who “had a pretty good network of informants and he was a guy that kind of kept his informants close to the vest.” You could say that.

Asked under oath whether it was true that another KCK officer had reported walking in on him having sex with a witness — not the same woman, but in the same year — he said no: “I honestly at this moment do not recall that happening. I — I — I don’t have any knowledge of that at this moment. ... I don’t recall that. I mean, I don’t. If I did, I’d certainly tell you. There would be no reason for me not to tell you. ... You can’t assume the chief knows everything. ... I do not recall ever knowing that before you said it.”

Rosie McIntyre, the mom of Lamonte McIntyre, who served 23 years for a double murder he did not commit, after an investigation run by Golubski, has sworn under oath that he sexually assaulted her in his office, too, years before wrongfully arresting her son to get back at her for refusing to ever see him again. Another officer walked in on them as he was attacking her, she’s said. But of course, no one knew anything about that, either. In 2010, Golubski retired in good standing with a full pension he’s still drawing.

Asked, “Did you ever have anyone share with you Golubski’s reputation, if you will, for his affinity towards African American females,” Miller zigged, zagged, and finally said, “That’s not foreign to me, let’s put it that way.”

And where can we find Ron Miller today? Why, serving as U.S. Marshal, in charge of security for those who would in theory at least be investigating Golubski and his whole rotten department.

SOS, Joe Biden and Merrick Garland. If KCK is still part of the United States of America, please send in the lawyers stat, because the Black people who live there have for decades been left for dead.

‘Golubski’s misconduct and his exploitation of Black women was well known throughout the Department.’
Why KCKPD won’t investigate: ‘She was a streetwalker. What else do you want us to do?’

Dorothy Cooper’s family has many unanswered questions about her 1983 murder, and police aren’t helping.

If Christina King and Dorothy Cooper had turned up dead on Ward Parkway, would their murders have been ignored?

BY MELINDA HENNEBERGER

April King was in the fifth grade when her 26-year-old mother, Christina Ranae King, nicknamed “Cricket” by her family, because she was so tiny, was found beaten to death in Kansas City, Kansas. That was on Christmas Day, 1998.
And from that day to this, the most painful memory associated with the most painful loss of April’s life is what her grandma always said that then-KCK police detective Terry Mast told her when she asked him how the investigation was going. “She got off the phone crying and my grandpa asked her why. She said he told her, ‘She’s just another crackhead off the streets and we really don’t investigate’” those homicides. “She didn’t call back no more after that.”

Mast did not respond to my messages or certified letter. One of the most recent posts on his public Facebook page says that some poor guy who’d come through the food line multiple times one day when he was helping his Moose Lodge staff a soup kitchen had reminded him “why I don’t like volunteering, because I don’t understand what this asshole’s gripe was, as a society we don’t owe him or anyone shit.”

Is that why “we really don’t investigate” certain murders? Mast was true to his word to April’s grandmother, Penny Barnett, in any case, because her family never heard another whisper about any investigation.

Barnett died in 2016, but April King is available to receive your apology, Detective Mast. Or better yet, some information about what happened to her mother.

That “crackhead” comment was from another century, of course. But it was just two months ago that Star Cooper heard something all too similar when she called the KCKPD hoping to get them to reopen the investigation into the 1983 murder of her mom, Dorothy Fay Cooper.

Current KCKPD Capt. Rodney Smith, who was sympathetic when Cooper first reached out, called her the morning of March 26th, the day they were supposed to meet, and told her that wouldn’t be happening after all: “He said, ‘My boss said there was no reason for us to open this case. We don’t have any more evidence.’ He got really rude with me after that. He said, ‘I mean, she was a streetwalker. What else do you want us to do?’”

Treat her murder like it mattered, maybe? Because that’s a human being you’re talking about, with a family still suffering and still looking for answers.

**THE CULTURE THAT MADE ROGER GOLUBSKI POSSIBLE**

A spokeswoman for the KCKPD said in an email that “in regards to the comments made to Ms. Star Cooper, we have initiated an internal investigation.”

Comments like that are no small thing, because they reflect a culture, in 1983 and today, that counts certain people as unworthy of even worrying about. And that culture, then and now, is what made depraved former KCK police detective Roger Golubski possible.

It was the view of the women Golubski preyed on as disposable that freed him to treat them as such, for decades using his badge to help him sexually exploit poor women, most of them Black. At least six women connected to Golubski were murdered, and some of those murders were investigated by him, too.
It’s also why Golubski has never been brought to justice: For one thing, that’s because so many others were complicit in his predations. For another, it’s because more of the public, even now, isn’t demanding his immediate arrest.

Thought experiment: Let’s say young women on Ward Parkway kept turning up dead. And let’s say a bunch of them had been extorted and “messed with” by this one cop, who — and now this would have to be a total coincidence — also wound up investigating some of their murders. Would Kansas City just keep walking, and maybe note that those Ward Parkway women really need to make better decisions? Of course not.

And if these homicides had happened years ago, but had never been solved or sweated, would the consensus be that oh well, that was then? No again. There is a reason there’s no statute of limitations for murder.

‘SOME EVIDENCE WAS MISSING’

Cooper was just a baby when her 20-year-old mother, known as Dot, was found naked and quite inexplicably dead, covered only in mud and grass, on the bank of Turkey Creek in April of 1983.

The autopsy ruled the death a homicide, but also said the cause of death was unknown. Since Dorothy had been missing for three weeks, but according to the autopsy had been dead only a couple of days when she was found, where had she been in the meantime?

If police ever had the slightest intention of finding her killer, why had they dropped off the only piece of her clothing they’d recovered, a denim jacket, at the funeral home, instead of keeping it as evidence?

Star’s grandfather tried for three years to get a copy of the autopsy, and never did succeed. The case was still under investigation, he kept hearing, so that just wouldn’t be possible. But if it was under investigation, why didn’t Dorothy’s family ever get an update on this long-running inquiry?

Today, that name sets off 19 alarm bells, but it meant nothing to Star when she went down to the police headquarters with her uncle, Oscar Cooper, to meet with him in the summer of ‘08.

Golubski told them he was looking into the killing but “no one is talking. He told me that he went to look for evidence in the evidence closet and some evidence was missing.”

What evidence, he wouldn’t say. “I said you know, as a little girl I always had a dream that a police officer killed my mom. He said, ‘That’s bullshit.’ I said, ‘Who else can get back in your evidence closet to get rid of evidence?’ He was done talking to me after that. When I tell you that man turned red, he turned red. He was pissed that I said anything like that.”
‘HOLD ON, MY BOSS WAS ON THIS CASE’

Her uncle, Oscar Cooper, told me that once his niece mentioned her dream, “he was really on fire, like y’all need to leave.”

Oscar had been living with his father, his sister Dorothy and her two small children when she went missing. He went with his father to a police station in KCMO, where they lived, to report that she hadn’t come home. They refused to take the report, though.

“They said they couldn’t until it had been 24 hours. It had already been 30 hours, but they still wouldn’t take it. I don’t know why.”

Oscar had seen his sister at a party on the night she disappeared, but no one ever wanted to hear about that, either during the horrible weeks she was missing or the even worse days and years after her body was found.

Dot was working as a prostitute then, her daughter said, “but she still came home every night to make sure my brother and I were in bed,” so her family knew something was seriously wrong when she didn’t.

April King says of her mom, “I know she was known to be a prostitute; she had just been released from jail the day before” some metal scavengers found her body in the driveway of an abandoned nursing home at North 27th Street and Sewell Avenue. “After my dad went to prison, she gave up. From what everyone said, she was a good person, and she lived on the streets.”

The desperation of Christina King and Dorothy Cooper’s circumstances in no way diminished all that these women were to those who loved them. Nor did it make their murders any less illegal. But one detective, officially or not, seems to have been the point man on all of these killings, and why was that?

Oscar Cooper is just shy of 100% sure that Golubski was the officer who came to the house to tell them about Dorothy’s murder. And if Golubski wasn’t involved in the investigation, why could Star Cooper and her uncle only talk to him about it?

After Star read a story I wrote about Golubski a couple of months ago, “it touched me so much that I went down to the KCK police station again. It felt like you were talking about my mom.”

The lady at the desk said she would have to talk to Capt. Rodney Smith.

She called him a few times, and when she heard back, found him solicitous. “He said, ‘I’m all down for you. I don’t care who it was. If it was a police officer or someone on the streets, I want to help.’”

Later, “he’s looking over the files while I’m on the phone with him and he said, ‘Hold on, my boss was on this case.’ He said he’d have to talk to him to see if it was worth opening back up.”

Then, on March 26, she heard back that no, it wasn’t worth opening back up.
WHY HAD ONE OF DOROTHY’S HANDS BEEN CUT OFF?

One of the many questions the Cooper family has is why, at the funeral home, they saw that one of Dorothy’s hands had been cut off.

Was she found that way, Star Cooper asked coroner Alan Hancock, back in 2008? He told her no, he’d done that during the autopsy, because he needed to get her fingerprints. Hancock, who is dead now, didn’t even do the autopsy, though he did sign it.

The autopsy notes adhesions on her wrist, and her family wonders if maybe her hand was cut off to hide that she’d been handcuffed during the weeks she was missing.

But then, they’ve been left to wonder about lots of things, because police have never treated them like they were worth taking seriously, either.

Star Cooper is 39 now and the mom of six, including three foster kids she adopted. After her mom died, she and her older brother bounced around between relatives. “I was molested as a little girl, and no one ever believed me. Life for me growing up, it was hard.”

Just this last year, she got a headstone to mark the grave of the mother she doesn’t remember, but has missed all her life just the same.

And for her, her mom’s case is still open, whether the police department ever looks at it again or not.
Roger Golubski wasn’t the only alleged rapist in KCKPD, but DA ‘declined to prosecute’

Natasha Hodge says a Kansas City, Kansas, police officer raped her while she was handcuffed in February 1996.

“She did report it, and she took them there, but the evidence just kind of disappeared, and nothing, nothing, nothing was ever done.”

BY MELINDA HENNEBERGER

No one can claim that Natasha Hodge, who turns 45 today, on June 27, has breezed through life. She was abused as a child in Kansas City, Kansas, and after she ran away at 16, she was abused during her years on the street.
Since 2009, she's been an inmate at the Topeka Correctional Facility, where she was sent after fatally shooting the "longtime boyfriend" who routinely hit her with lead pipes and brass knuckles. He burned her with crack pipes, smashed beer bottles over her skull, bit chunks of skin out of her back and threatened to burn down her mom's house with her kids inside if she ever left him. He "was a different person when he was using crack," she said in an affidavit. "I have no doubt that he would eventually have killed me."

"That man beat me, threatened me, stalked me, raped me," she said during one of our phone interviews over the course of the last year. "His favorite thing to do was to beat me up and force me to perform oral sex on him. He was vicious, and I do not regret killing him. I just regret coming to prison for 12 years."

The public defender who represented her told her to take the prosecutor's offer of 15 years and be grateful, because a jury would have given her 50. He was probably right about that, too, because for women who kill their abusers, very little has changed.

Yet Hodge's single worst experience, she says, and the one that she still has flashbacks and nightmares about, was her rape by a KCK police officer who never took his hand off his gun as he forced her to service him in a vacant crack house near the railroad tracks off Quindaro Boulevard. In a 2014 affidavit, she said that "In February of 1996, I was raped by Officer William Saunders of the Kansas City Kansas Police Department."

He never uncuffed her, she told me, and "the whole time he was raping me I was crying my eyes out thinking will I see my daughter again? I really thought he was going to kill me, and I kept wondering how long it would be before they found my body."

When he instead dropped her off on Fifth Street afterward, as if nothing had happened — and please put me down as skeptical that anyone who would do this once did it only once — she walked straight to the nearby office of a local attorney she'd heard of, Rosie Quinn.

Both Quinn and Hodge, who haven't talked since 1996, told me the same story.

CONDOM EVIDENCE IS 'DNA ON A SILVER PLATTER'

Quinn immediately took Hodge to the hospital, where they did a rape kit, collecting her clothing and scraping under her fingernails. Then they went to the KCKPD's internal affairs department, where Hodge told a female detective the whole story and picked Saunders' picture out of a photo lineup.

From there, Hodge led that detective and a crime tech team back to the house, where they found Hodge's nose ring and the officer's boot prints still in the carpet. They found the condom he'd tossed into the snow out in the front yard, too, just where Hodge had said it would be.

The detective, who Hodge says told her that there had been other such complaints against that same officer, "didn't seem surprised."
The universe of rape victims who both report immediately and lead police to a mountain of physical evidence is not vast. “They had his condom with semen in it,” she says. “That was DNA on a silver platter.” Yet no one got back to Hodge, then or ever. And can you imagine authorities treating a crime victim for whom they had even the slightest regard so dismissively?

In response to my questions about what happened after Hodge accused Saunders of raping her, a spokeswoman for the KCKPD answered via email: “Regarding the case of Natasha Hodges,” — and yes, they misspelled her name — “the allegations were investigated in 1996. Forensic evidence was submitted to the Kansas Bureau of Investigation in March of 1996. That same year the case was forwarded to the Wyandotte County District Attorney who declined to prosecute.”

The DA at the time was Nick Tomasic, who held that job from 1972 until 2005. When he retired, The Star ran a tribute in which the police chief at the time, Ron Miller, praised him as a respected supporter of law enforcement.

Saunders didn’t answer the messages I left on his cell phone, and neither did the now 88-year-old former DA.

I’ve reported before that the KCKPD culture made a predator as prolific as former KCK police detective Roger Golubski possible by responding to crimes against poor Black women like Natasha Hodge as unworthy of any real investigation. That the DA’s office wouldn’t have been interested in prosecuting a cop on charges that he raped a woman working as a prostitute is as unsurprising as it is unjust. In fact, the thunderbolt here is that the KCKPD says they did turn the evidence over to the KBI, who did refer it to the DA for possible prosecution.

**LAWYER CONFIRMED DETAILS OF ATTACK BY POLICE OFFICER**

The lawyer Hodge hired not an hour after being raped, Rosie Quinn, volunteered many of the same details that Hodge had.

“My understanding was that the police had gone back there and found a used condom,” Quinn said. “There was a police report made and it was that guy Saunders. It was a police matter, and there were officers who told me they’d retrieved” evidence from the scene. “It did happen.” But, she said, “I do not know what became of it.”

What became of it is that prosecutors were so blasé about this attack that no one ever thought to inform Hodge that they weren’t going to pursue the case.

And the message that had to have sent to someone like Roger Golubski, who is accused of raping many women on the street, was this: Help yourself. A cop would have to be awfully confident that he was immune from prosecution to toss a DNA sample in the yard in front of a crime scene, in full view of his victim.
It was years later, in 2007, that Hodge first met Golubski. “He said he was canvassing the neighborhood because someone had been murdered. I said I didn’t have any information about who he was looking for, and he asked me for a date.” After that, she says, he paid her for sex from time to time.

Unlike those who’ve told me they had reason to fear Golubski, Hodge in those days saw him as “what a working girl would consider a ‘good trick’” because he never beat her or tried to get out of paying.

But the victims I’ve interviewed all say that Golubski was not the only KCK officer who used his badge as a weapon against vulnerable women.

**FBI AGENTS DIDN’T RETURN CALLS AFTER INTERVIEW**

In February of last year, Hodge was interviewed by two FBI agents whose business cards she kept. They asked her about Golubski and about her rape. They were going to get back to her in 30 days, she says, but still haven’t, and never returned her calls, either. The feds have been interviewing KCKPD victims on and off since the 1980s.

Hodge told those agents, just as she told me, that early one morning in February of 1996, she was sitting in a U-Haul at a gas station on 18th Street with her friend Chuck. The sun had just come up, and her friend, who was moving some furniture that day, had gone inside to pay for the gas and get some food. “I was gone when he came back.”

An officer tapped on her window and said he’d gotten a complaint about a prostitute on the lot. I’m just sitting here, she told him, waiting for my friend. He handcuffed her, forced her into his patrol car and shouted to another officer outside the store that he was taking her in.

She knew right away that she wasn’t being arrested because he did not radio in, did not check her warrants and did not take her to the station. “He never asked me my name,” and stayed terrifyingly silent when she asked him where he was taking her.

Hodge told her mother, Vonya Ford, about the rape several days after it happened. “I still don’t like to talk about it,” Ford told me. “She was just a kid! She did report it, and she took them there, but the evidence just kind of disappeared, and nothing, nothing, nothing was ever done.”

She saw her attacker once more, years later, one night when he was sent to her house on a domestic violence call. “He didn’t recognize me, but it was like looking into the eyes of the devil.” Better the devil inside the house than the one at the door, she decided, so “I made some lame excuse,” and he went away, just as the case against him had.

In prison, “I try to take one day at a time, because anything more is very overwhelming.” Monday through Friday, she works from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. making shirts, mops, and during the pandemic, COVID-19 masks for the National Guard.

She doesn’t mind that job, because “even days when I don’t like the work, I like the people I work with.”
The prison volunteer who originally told me about Natasha described her as someone who stands out as “very mature and reasoned. She’s reliable.”

Every day after work, she calls her mom, who is raising the younger daughter she’s so proud to say is going to college in the fall. Then she watches “Ellen” — “that’s my girl — and I go outside sometimes, but I really don’t care for the heat. I have exactly three people I consider real friends.” Otherwise, she stays to herself, counting down her time.

And paying for her crime, such as it was, having long since decided that the officer who violated her would never pay for his, just as Roger Golubski hasn’t, and maybe never will.

Her former attorney, Rosie Quinn, also spent time in prison — three years, for tax evasion. At the disciplinary hearing at which her law license was reinstated, Quinn testified that that happened because of a gambling addiction for which she has been in recovery for many years. The same month Quinn was indicted, in June of 2009, her law office in KCK burned to the ground.

And William Saunders, who goes by Ed? He’s 62 now, and after finishing out his career at the KCKPD he retired to Florida, where a palm tree and some well-tended flowers grow in his front yard.

**WILL NEW KCK POLICE CHIEF REOPEN CASE?**

On the phone the other day, I told Natasha that this column was almost ready to go and for the first time in the year that I’ve been talking to her, she started to cry. Because after 25 years, her story was finally going to be out in the world. “It needs to be done,” she said, “because there are other victims out there.”

There are many others, still unheard and unheeded. And other perps, unpunished and collecting a public pension.

The Kansas City, Kansas Police Department just got a new police chief, Karl Oakman, who said last week that he’d like to start a new division to look at old cases. Which is wonderful news. To show the community that this really is a different day, they could start by going back and looking again at reports against police officers. The DA’s office should do that, too.

The KCKPD spokeswoman did not answer my question about whether the evidence in Hodge’s case has been preserved. But since 2013, there has been no statute of limitations on rape in Kansas. And what Hodge correctly called “DNA on a silver platter” might solve other cases, too.

Can you imagine what it would mean to pursue a 25-year-old case against a police officer accused of raping a Black woman with no resources or connections, who in those days was working as a prostitute? “All new world” is what that would say. One in which justice is at least an option, no matter who you are.

Maybe that’s still like expecting the sun to rise in the north and set in the south. But some of those reading this column now know and care about what happened to you, Natasha. Happy birthday.
She’s not the first to accuse this former KCK cop. But she had a rape kit done the next day

“The next thing I know, Roger Golubski pulls up” in his police car. “He said it was after hours and I couldn’t be in the park. He said he’d take me somewhere safe.”

How many women would have to accuse former KCKPD detective Roger Golubski before they’d be believed over him?

BY MELINDA HENNEBERGER

The woman I interviewed recently was not the first to tell me about being sexually assaulted by former Kansas City, Kansas, police detective Roger Golubski. Neither is she the first to tell me that he’d threatened to kill her — and told her he’d “have something done” to her brother, too, she said — if she reported him.
But she is the first I’ve met who went to the hospital afterward and had a full rape kit done.

In other words, authorities might have had DNA that could prove what he is and does in their possession all along.

The hospital then known as Truman Medical Center, where she got the forensic exam in 1990, typically turns rape kits over to the “appropriate jurisdiction crime laboratory.” It’s not clear where hers would have gone, since this happened in Kansas and the exam was in Missouri. But in theory, anyway, these kits are preserved for 30 years in Missouri and for five years in Kansas. She is working with both Truman and the Kansas City Police Department to get her records and trace the kit. If that evidence still exists, the FBI could prove her allegations beyond any doubt.

Sure, or disprove them. Though why, if there were any question, would this woman put herself in danger by coming forward to announce that there may be DNA out there that would show who and what KCK officialdom has been defending all these years?

She’s 54 now, and is prepared to testify. She is planning to call the FBI on Monday, so agents won’t even have to look for her.

Golubski is accused of exploiting and raping mostly poor Black women, whose male companions and relatives he abused differently, threatening arrest and worse, throughout his 35-year career at the KCKPD.

A lot of time has passed since that 1990 hospital visit, of course. Law enforcement agencies across the country have been found to have violated their own policies by destroying rape kits, in some cases within months of receiving them, without ever testing them.

But if that kit has been preserved, then the years of official amnesia and what certainly looked like foot-dragging to the Golubski victims who talked to federal agents years ago, and never heard from them again, are finally coming to an end.

**POLICE LOST FILES, MISPLACED EVIDENCE**

Even if they didn’t keep the kit, so many victims, witnesses and even some cops have come forward at this point that I’m prepared to hope that all of the KCKPD’s lost files, missing evidence and “Gosh, I never heard any of this” denials are about to end exactly as they should have long ago. That is, with Roger Golubski in handcuffs and the organization that made him possible declaring moral bankruptcy.

No matter how many times we’re told that if any of this happened at all, it was so long ago that it no longer matters, the truth for victims is that decades of debilitating fear will really only be over when he is behind bars.

So why did the woman who says Golubski raped her three decades ago call me now — as it happened, just a few days before the news broke about the federal grand jury that’s finally looking into Golubski and friends?
“Because my brother just recently passed,” she said. As far as she was concerned, only when he died, in a June hit-and-run accident in California, did Golubski's threat finally expire.

“After my brother passed, I sat down and had a long talk with God and just told him to give me some answers and help me, and I came to my decision” to report what happened all those years ago, she said.

It took a while for her to follow through, because “I didn't know if I was ready to be revealed. And I'm still scared, because he's still out there. I don't know who he's still connected to. He has friends in higher places or he wouldn't still be walking around.” You'd have to be naive to think otherwise, and none of those accusing the former captain has enjoyed the luxury of being overly trusting in quite a while.

Then, in September, she saw my column reporting rape allegations against another Kansas City, Kansas, cop. A former police officer said that same officer, Ed Saunders, had also tried to sexually assault her. That even someone “on the inside” could be at risk of sexual violence from a fellow officer got to her, she said.

THE KANSAS CITY STAR.

PICKED UP IN POLICE CAR FROM KCK PARK

So finally, two weeks ago, after a lot more thought and prayer, she called me, and recently, we met for breakfast near the factory where she works.

Golubski raped her, she told me, when she was 23 and living with a boyfriend near KCK’s Parkwood Park. One warm night, after she and her boyfriend had argued, she walked out in anger and wound up sitting alone in the park’s pavilion sometime around midnight.

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“The next thing I know, Roger Golubski pulls up” in his police car. “He said it was after hours and I couldn't be in the park. He said he'd take me somewhere safe.”

This is the point in the fairy tale when the wolf still seems harmless to the girl in the woods. Or in the horror movie, it’s when only the audience knows that something not at all good is about to happen.

That started to dawn on her, too, after only a few minutes. “When we were driving, he said he had to make a stop.” After they passed what was then the Church’s Chicken, where J’s Fish and Chicken is now, “we went up 27th past the Delavan Apartments.” Where are we going, she kept asking.

“He ended up turning up some street by these duplexes, and there was some woods and a little field right there. I’m like, ‘What are we doing here?’ And he got out, came and got me out of the back, and told me I had to perform oral on him.

“I’m crying and I’m telling him I don’t want to do that, so then he put his hand around my throat. He choked me and pushed me down in the back seat. He forced me to have sex with him, and then he forced me to perform oral sex, and I’m crying and he told me, after he got done, that if I ever said anything, he would have something done to my brother.”
Though she wouldn’t have known it otherwise, he was so sure he was untouchable that “he told me what his name was, and he told me he could have me killed or arrested if I went to the police, and they wouldn’t believe me anyway. Why would they believe me over him? And after he got through doing what he was doing, the crazy thing is, he took me back to the park.”

**MULTIPLE REPORTS ON HARVEY WEINSTEIN, LARRY NASSAR, TOO**

I wonder sometimes — as in, every single day — how many women would have to come forward before they would be believed over Roger Golubski. Then I remind myself that 87 women told the truth about Harvey Weinstein before he ever saw the inside of a cell. Fifty women had to complain before Larry Nassar was even forced out as Olympic gymnastics team doctor, and 156 spoke in court before he was sentenced.

Most rapes are never prosecuted. But the terror that this one man with a badge, a gun and no fear of accountability inflicted on an entire community was more the symptom than the cause of corruption on a scale I haven’t seen anywhere else in 37 years in journalism.

Golubski’s lawyers never answer questions, other than to say that they can’t respond. But he did get the opportunity to answer for himself in a 2020 deposition in the civil suit being brought by Lamonte McIntyre, who, thanks in large part to Golubski, spent 23 years in prison for a double murder Golubski had to have known McIntyre did not commit. During that deposition last November, Golubski rolled his eyes, shook his head, and invoked his Fifth Amendment right not to incriminate himself a nice round 555 times.

After he dropped the woman I met recently back off in Parkwood Park, she says, “I walked back home, scared the whole way,” and when she got there, she told her boyfriend “I was raped by two dudes, because I couldn’t tell him the real story. Then I ended up going to Truman Medical.”

After the full exam, which typically takes between four and five hours, nurses called the police. And that’s when she left, afraid that one of the officers answering the call to interview her might be her assailant.

Her then-boyfriend, to whom she hadn’t spoken in years, told me she’d come home that night “hysterical crying. She told me what happened” — though, no, he said, he never was able to get her to say exactly who had hurt her. “I took her to the hospital. She was messed up a little bit.”

**DEPRESSION, SUICIDE ATTEMPT IN RAPE’S AFTERMATH**

“It affected me bad,” the woman said. So much so that she became seriously depressed and two months later took some pills out of a medicine cabinet in the home on Ward Parkway where she had a cleaning job.
“I ended up trying to kill myself” and was hospitalized for several days. “That it was somebody who was supposed to be protecting me — I trusted him, and got in the car thinking he was going to help me. I go see a therapist right now for that.”

The female friend she immediately told about being raped, though she never said by whom, told me she “was upset and she didn’t want to be alone after that. She was having nightmares.”

That wasn’t the end of the threats from Golubski, either: “I seen him one other time, walking up and down Quindaro, and he told me I’d better keep my mouth closed. I told him I hadn’t said nothing to anybody, and after that, I stayed in Missouri and stopped going to Kansas. I didn’t want him to be able to do that to nobody else in my family, or go after my brother.”

Her view of law enforcement was never the same: “When I grew up, police were nice.” After her encounter with Golubski, “I was scared of every cop I saw. And I’m still scared, because he’s still protected. He has to still have people on the inside.”

That’s why the former KCK cops who talk to me about all of this say things like “People have turned up dead for less here,” than telling the truth about crimes committed by their colleagues.

“You just have to compartmentalize” to survive, another said. “Once you got to a certain point” in the chain of command, that officer said, “it didn’t matter what you did. It’s still scary now, to be honest.”

With the FBI closing in, Golubski’s “people on the inside” must be scared, too. Because if he ever is indicted, we’ll be hearing a lot more about them.

Rev. Rick Behrens and others are calling for change within the Kansas City, Kansas Police Department.
Only 9 seconds after arriving, KC cop pulled the trigger. But why was he even there?

Eric DeValkenaere cried while testifying in his own defense Wednesday.

In the time it takes to read this sentence, KCPD officer Eric DeValkenaere arrived at Cameron Lamb’s home, on a report he’d been speeding, and fatally shot him.

BY MELINDA HENNEBERGER

Between Kenosha gunman Kyle Rittenhouse and Kansas City police detective Eric DeValkenaere, Wednesday was Sobbing Shooters Day. Both men cried hard while testifying in their own defense. “I did what I had to do to stop the person who was attacking,” Rittenhouse said. He’s the teenage vigilante who fatally shot two people and injured a third during the 2020 riots in Kenosha, Wisconsin, that followed the police shooting of Jacob Blake, a 29-year-old Black man.
In December of 2019, DeValkenaere shot and killed Cameron Lamb, a 26-year-old Black man, in his own backyard. It was a mere nine seconds — about the time it will take you to read this sentence — after arriving to investigate reports that Lamb had been speeding. He, too, said under oath on Wednesday that he’d fired because he had to.

He did that, he said, after seeing Lamb pull a gun from his waistband with his left hand and point it at his partner, Troy Schwalm: “I remember thinking no ... this can’t happen, I can’t let this happen.”

Schwalm, who was standing right in front of Lamb’s truck as he was backing it into his basement garage, did not see a gun. In fact, according to prosecutors, Schwalm previously said that he saw that there was no gun in Lamb’s left hand. Lamb was not only right-handed, but had limited use of his left hand after he was shot in the index finger in 2015.

Lamb’s roommate, Roberta Merritt, testified that she had seen Lamb’s gun on the basement steps a few feet from where the shooting occurred, right before police arrived. And if that’s true, then prosecutors are right that the gun found just underneath Lamb’s left arm, which was hanging out his truck window when he died, was planted there. Phone records show he was also placing a phone call, from the cell in his right hand, at the time he was shot.

The first officer who arrived at the scene after the shooting testified that he didn’t see the gun either, but added that his view might have been blocked by his protective shield.

Prosecutors can’t prove the scene was staged, and they don’t have to: DeValkenaere was only charged with involuntary manslaughter — an unintentional killing that results either from recklessness or criminal negligence.

If running into a man’s backyard in the middle of the day, with guns drawn, based on nothing more than a report that he’d been driving way too fast isn’t just as reckless as going 90 mph in a residential neighborhood, I guess I don’t know that word means.

The prosecutor, Tim Dollar, kept saying DeValkenaere had violated Lamb’s rights by going onto private property without a warrant, without permission and without probable cause.

And DeValkenaere kept saying that he had a duty to go in because “we had a reasonable suspicion that crime was afoot.” He had to go in, too, he said, because his fellow officer already had, and “I’m not going to leave him in there by himself.”

If he had stopped to get a warrant, what crime would it even have been for, Dollar asked him. He didn’t know what might have been happening, he said.

“That’s why we didn’t” get a warrant.

Still, “I needed to be in that backyard,” to back up Troy Schwalm. And Schwalm needed to be there why?

**OFFICER ON PRIVATE PROPERTY WITH NO WARRANT, GUN DRAWN**

Dollar asked the defendant once again to agree that he’d been on private property with no warrant, no information of a crime, no legal right to be there, and with gun drawn.
Oh, he did have the right, he said. And “all officers in my situation” would have gone in with weapons drawn. That’s what bothers me the most.

That this isn’t some rogue bad guy, looking to kill somebody, but an officer staying absolutely true to his training and doing what the violent offender squad he was part of does, which is “proactively” try to stop crimes before they start.

Police were not very proactive after Lamb was shot, though; it was 14 minutes before paramedics were allowed to get to him, and he was dead by then. Because they hadn’t known who else might be in the house, they said.

Dollar asked DeValkenaere whether he ever stopped to think about whether there was a better way to approach a guy who’d been seen chasing another car down the street. “You never said, ‘We don’t have probable cause?’”

“Not in the nine seconds I was back there before discharging my weapon, no.” Only nine seconds between his arrival and the time, as he put it, “I discharge a round to his central mass.” Then, he stepped back several yards and fired three more times.

This is a bench trial — DeValkenaere waived his right to a jury trial — so it will be up to Circuit Court Judge J. Dale Youngs to decide whether in doing what he did on Dec. 3, 2019, he recklessly caused Lamb’s death.

Of course I felt for DeValkenaere as he sobbed on the stand. And as he showed his nerves, too, jiggling his leg and twisting the wedding ring around on his finger. I don’t doubt that he’s sorry.

Sorrier still, though, are Lamb’s loved ones.

And even sadder than the sight of the officer breaking down was my view of the courtroom from the jury box where reporters were seated. From there, you could see that those filling the benches on the side of the room behind the officer they were there to support were all white, and that those there to support Cameron Lamb’s family were with the exception of two white activists all Black. That bifurcated courtroom looked like America to me — divided, angry, and grieving very different things.

On my way home from the courthouse, a car pulled around me, driving crazy fast, and a second one followed, chasing the first. If you’d just heard what I did, I thought, you’d slow the hell down.

That bifurcated courtroom looked like America to me — divided, angry, and grieving very different things.
‘We didn’t know police could lie’: Day care worker ‘naive’ until convicted of murder

Carrody Buchhorn and her husband Tim never imagined she could go to prison for a crime she didn’t commit.

Suddenly, police officers Carrody Buchhorn had always been friendly with "were calling me terrible names and saying I was fake crying."

BY MELINDA HENNEBERGER

Right up until Carrody Buchhorn was convicted of murdering 9-month-old Oliver Ortiz in the Eudora, Kansas, day care where she worked, she was sure that those who run the justice system she’d trusted all her life would see — of course they would — that that was just not what happened on Sept. 29, 2016.
“I was confident,” she said in an interview in her home last week, a few days after her release from the Topeka Correctional Facility. This was the first time she’d talked to a reporter in the nearly five years since Ollie died. From that day almost until the verdict came back, “I thought, ‘I didn’t do anything, so why would I be going to prison?’ It was really only when they were deliberating and asked the judge the difference between first degree and second degree that I knew things were not good. I was slow to catch on. Naive.”

We all were, says her husband, Tim Buchhorn, an active duty master sergeant in the U.S. Army. “We didn’t think you could lie on the stand, and we didn’t know the police could lie to us.” Since enlisting at age 19, he has fought for the beautiful idea of America.

“When you spend 40 years thinking one thing, and living by a certain set of values — I’ve spent my entire adult life defending our justice system and believing in the Constitution and believing in the Declaration of Independence,” he said with emotion. “It made me question everything I’d done, because the system didn’t work.”

Maybe it still will work, belatedly, in this case, anyway: His wife’s 2018 conviction was overturned in August, essentially because her original legal team failed to challenge the fact that the cause of death explained in court by medical examiner Erik K. Mitchell doesn’t exist. So she’s home for now, on house arrest and in an ankle bracelet, while she waits for a new trial.

But then again, maybe a second trial won’t be any different. The Douglas County District Attorney, Suzanne Valdez, is determined to send 47-year-old Buchhorn back to prison. Her deputy, Joshua Seiden, spelled this out in a snotty note to Buchhorn’s attorney, William Skepnek: “By this point,” he wrote, “you have most likely reasonably inferred that the District Attorney has no interest discussing the case with you, nor does she believe any of your correspondence merits any substantive response. … Moving forward, please direct all Dickensian tales of Ms. Buchhorn’s plight to me.”

In the state’s Aug. 24 brief arguing against Buchhorn’s release, prosecutors were still depending on Mitchell’s theory that “the most likely mechanism here is that we have a direct effect on depolarization of neurons in the base of the brain, upper spinal cord medulla interferes with the ability to breathe, and that leads to death.” Yet some of the country’s leading pediatric neurologists have called this “just fantastical,” and “magical,” backed up by nothing.

A jury did find Carrody Buchhorn guilty, after all, the state’s brief said. But as the Kansas Court of Appeals ruled, that’s in all probability because the jury was fed a very big hunk of junk science by Mitchell, a coroner with a history of sketchy rulings and iffy behavior.
GAVE BABY CPR FOR MORE THAN HALF AN HOUR

I should say before going any further that no other bereavement compares to the loss of a child. And the Buchhorns, who have two grown sons of their own, have never lost sight of the enormity of the Ortiz family’s grief.

Just reading the trial transcript is an intense experience, because you can’t help but feel the rising panic of everyone who was at the Sunshine Kids day care that day. EMTs and the fire chief testified about seeing Buchhorn, who’d found Oliver motionless after his nap, frantic and giving him CPR when they arrived. The day care owner, Gina Brunton, told the court that all of the parents loved Buchhorn, and she loved all of the babies, Ollie included.

The expert hired by the defense said he couldn’t really explain why the child had died, since it couldn’t have been as the result of a skull fracture that was already healing. But Mitchell solved that problem: Buchhorn must have stomped on the back of his head, he said, even though she had no history of violence, or any other criminal behavior, and even though the autopsy showed no brain injuries. Yet Mitchell didn’t just say she’d done this, but showed what that would have looked like, dramatically tossing a CPR doll on the ground and stomping on its head in front of the jury.

Carrody remembers picking the little boy up after his nap and laughing at how soundly he seemed to still be sleeping. But then, when she and Brunton saw that he wasn’t breathing, she fell to her knees and started the CPR that she continued for more than half an hour.

Tim was in Salina, Kansas, when he got the call from his wife’s friend, who lives just across from the day care, that something was very wrong. When he finally arrived, more than two hours later, “I tried to ask her what happened and she was hysterical.”

In shock, she stuck around the day care for a couple more hours and then went home and cried all night. It was the next night, around 10:30, that police surrounded the house and took her in for questioning. Still, she didn’t believe anyone could really think she’d hurt a child.

They asked for the clothes and shoes she’d been wearing the previous day, Tim said, “and Carrody apologized to them for her clothes being dirty” and still in the laundry basket. They also took her phone, and Tim’s, to download. With their ready permission, of course. Because again, what was there to hide?

ONLY GUILTY PEOPLE ASK FOR ATTORNEYS, POLICE SAID

It was on her way home from Ollie’s funeral a few days later, when she stopped by the police department to pick up her phone, as requested, that they started treating her like a criminal.

Suddenly, investigators the Buchhorns had always been friendly with “were calling me terrible names and saying I was fake crying. I’d say, ‘Oh my God,’ and they’d say, ‘He isn’t going to help you now.’ ”
They also started talking about a Dr. Mitchell, who had apparently said that this wasn’t a natural death and was suspicious. “They told me Dr. Mitchell was on this and he was the best person we know. They’re saying, ‘Are you calling Dr. Mitchell a liar?’”

After five hours, they asked Carrody, who was still in the dress she’d worn to Oliver’s funeral, if she’d take a lie detector test. And still, she said sure. Because any minute, they’d see how wrong all of this was. It was only when she called home to tell Tim what was happening, and that she wanted to come home and change clothes before her lie detector test, that he said no: “That’s when I said, ‘OK, we’re getting an attorney.’” Only guilty people ask for attorneys, police told her.

That night, Tim called around to some friends — mostly cops, actually — and the first defense lawyer whose name he heard, former prosecutor and Kansas Attorney General Paul Morrison, was the one he hired.

“Neither of us had any clue who Paul Morrison was,” Tim said. “Her whole life up until then was watching kids play football and spending time with family.” For the next six months, nothing happened. Then, on Good Friday, in April of 2017, she was arrested.

Tim was deployed to Kuwait later that same month, and one of the hardest things for Carrody, during the 16 months of house arrest that followed, was that their son Matthew, who is 23 now, insisted on dropping out of K-State and moving home to be with her.

Remarkably, she not only lost no friends but got close again to former classmates she hadn’t heard from in years. Still, “nobody really understood how much she grieved Oliver’s death,” her best friend told me.

A MEDICAL EXAMINER’S QUESTIONABLE TESTIMONY

Then came the trial. She’d been ultra prepared by her lawyers on how she was supposed to look in court: No tattoos could show, nor any hint of a personality. But nothing and nobody had prepared her, she said, for the dazed reality that “I’d get up in morning and oh, I’m going to my murder trial.”

In a video of the autopsy that was played in court, you can see Mitchell asking police for guidance on whom to blame, and see the police leading Mitchell in the direction they want him to go. “Who works at this day care?” Mitchell asks as he works.

“The lady who runs it, she’s been doing it forever,” one of the officers tells him. “Right,” says Mitchell. “She’s probably one of the top-rated in the city,” the officer goes on. “Law enforcement and teachers and fire, that’s where they all take their kids.”

“Somebody specific taking care of these” babies?

“Yeah, that would be one of the ladies, Carrody. ... She said she woke up the child, or went to wake up the child.”
“And this person takes care of this child all day?” Nobody else, the officer said.

On the stand, Carrody acknowledged that yes, little Oliver did cry a lot, and yes, that sometimes happened when she was having lunch. “A crying baby ruins that for you, right?” the prosecutor asked her.

Yes, she said, the baby frequently spit up on her. “Which obviously is something you didn’t like?”

Yes, she had told police that the boy had been on the fussy side — “pissy,” she’d called him. And yes, she had thought she should be paid more, texting a friend only the day before the baby’s death that she was sick of being taken advantage of by the “stupid bitch” who owned the place.

Talking that way, with both salt and pepper, “that’s normal for me,” she told me. But the state made it seem like that added up to a motive for murder.

In former prosecutor Mark Simpson’s closing argument, he put all of these pieces together: “She was disgruntled. She was unhappy with Oliver because he took more effort. And when she was alone with Oliver, it came to a head and she inflicted blunt force trauma and that interrupted the electrical signals in his brain” and killed him. “She knew it and instead of helping him, she put him in the pack ‘n play and let him die. ... The only adult that could have done this is Carrody Buchhorn.”

The only problem with that argument is that the “this” as described by Mitchell is imaginary. You can’t die from head trauma without an injury to the brain. And in fact, there was no evidence that anyone had killed the child.

Mitchell’s creativity on the stand shouldn’t have come as a surprise to either the state or the defense: In 2015, the 2nd U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that a man named Hector Rivas had been denied a fair trial. Because, as a news account at the time put it, his defense team had failed to challenge “the shifting findings of a medical examiner who put him behind bars.”

In that case as in this, the medical examiner was Mitchell. Rivas died in prison in 2016, still waiting for his new trial on charges that he had murdered his former girlfriend, Valerie Hill, in 1987.

Yet in the case against Buchhorn, the state’s closing argument relied not just on Mitchell’s findings but on his credibility. “With Dr. Mitchell, you’ve got a neutral witness,” Simpson told the jury. Unlike the expert witness for the defense, who was being compensated for his time, “he doesn’t get paid more if it’s a homicide.”

The defense expert should be disregarded, he said: “How much credibility can you put in the opinion of a witness who finds no fatal injuries in a deceased person?” Mitchell, on the other hand, knew exactly what had happened, or sounded like he did. And, Simpson argued, “Dr. Mitchell’s experience is far more impressive.” If by impressive he meant notorious, that was true.
After the guilty verdict was announced, Tim said, “as she’s being taken away, she looked at me and said, ‘I’ll be OK. Take care of the boys.’ And I laid awake at night thinking of that.” That on the second worst day of her life, she wasn’t thinking of herself, but of them. He starts to cry a little, saying that, and then so does she, because she hasn’t heard it before.

In the Douglas County Jail for the next 16 months, her cellmate was Scharron Dingledine. You might know that name, because hours after leaving a mental hospital in 2018, she drove a stolen SUV with her 1- and 5-year-old children inside it into the Kansas River. “She’d show me pictures, and ask me if I thought her son she almost killed looked ‘retarded.’”

“That’s the worst word you can say in our family,” Tim said.

Dingledine was still suicidal, and jail personnel seemed to Carrody to be putting her in charge of her safety: The day the other woman was finally transferred out, Carrody was moved, too — to medium security.

Prison was less horrible than that, even though she did get COVID-19, like almost everyone else. And “I did learn that people in prison are not all bad.”

Her family, meanwhile, learned to put minor problems — and everything else was a minor problem — in perspective. Her older son, who had been planning to become an osteopath, instead became a death investigator for Johnson County.

They’ve moved to Lawrence now, from nearby Eudora, because despite the loyalty of Carrody’s friends, she doesn’t feel safe there any more.

The Buchhorns know now that anyone can be made to look guilty, and that prosecutors almost never give up on a conviction, no matter what the facts say. They are still trying to believe in everything they’ve always believed in, but “we’re more aware of a lot of things now,” Tim says.

And just before I leave their home, when Carrody says “I’m confident,” the system will get it right in the end, I’m not sure if she’s talking to me or to herself.

Talking that way, with both salt and pepper, “that’s normal for me,” she told me. But the state made it seem like that added up to a motive for murder.
Kansas coroner had a history of getting it wrong. And yet kept right on testifying

Forensic pathologist Erik Mitchell has taken the witness stand in hundreds of trials.

Erik Mitchell’s theory about how the baby died makes no sense. Even the country’s top pediatric neurologists don’t know what he’s talking about.

BY MELINDA HENNEBERGER

Here is a name you should know, and maybe you already do: Erik K. Mitchell. He’s a doctor — a forensic pathologist — who for decades worked as a coroner in Douglas, Wyandotte and eight other Kansas counties. He’s testified in hundreds of trials around here. And on the witness stand, anyway, he comes across like Santa Claus.
But then, well, Santa is one big jolly fabrication, isn’t he? And Mitchell has either flubbed a few of his autopsies more dramatically than you’d think possible or else has been willing to give prosecutors whatever ruling they needed.

Just the latest oopsie from Bad Santa: A week ago Friday, the Kansas Court of Appeals reversed the second-degree murder conviction of 47-year-old Eudora, Kansas, day care worker Carrody M. Buchhorn. Buchhorn is an Army wife, the mom of two grown sons and a longtime volunteer supporting younger military families. In 2018, a Douglas County jury found her guilty of killing a 9-month-old boy in her care.

But did she? The appeals court suggests that there might not have been a crime at all. And they said Buchhorn is entitled to a new day in court because her lawyers didn’t try hard enough to keep Mitchell from testifying about his truly out-of-nowhere theory about what caused little Oliver Ortiz’s death in September of 2016.

It was Buchhorn who put the baby down for his nap, and Buchhorn who gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation after she was unable to wake him. The appeals court said there is a reasonable probability that the jury would have found Buchhorn not guilty if Mitchell’s highly creative testimony had been challenged more seriously by her defense team.

‘WHEN YOU’VE GOT A DEAD BABY, SOMEONE’S GOING TO PAY’

One of her lawyers, Paul Morrison, the former Johnson County district attorney and state attorney general, insists that he did go after Mitchell’s made-up theory, and also noted that Mitchell had come to Buchhorn’s probable cause hearing with the wrong case file, and then started testifying about someone else’s X-ray. But “when you’ve got a dead baby, someone’s going to pay,” he told me. “And Erik Mitchell’s machinations helped.”

Ortiz had a cracked skull that may already have been healing, and a fresh bump on his head. There was no evidence of either a brain injury or of child abuse, though, and the expert testifying for the defense said he didn’t know how the child died.

Mitchell swore that he did know, and the jury liked that answer better. Yet it was out of nowhere that Mitchell suggested during a pretrial hearing that Buchhorn might have stomped on the child’s head. He testified that “the most likely — and I am going on statistics here — the most likely mechanism here is that we have a direct effect on depolarization of neurons in the base of the brain, upper spinal cord medulla interferes with the ability to breathe, and that leads to death.”

Say what? That the coroner’s explanation makes no sense to me means nothing. But that the country’s top pediatric neurologists don’t know what he’s talking about either is a problem. And those statistics Mitchell mentioned? There aren’t any.
The University of Pennsylvania Children’s Hospital’s Sudha Kessler later called Mitchell’s theory “just fantastical, because it’s not something I have ever been taught, nothing something I teach, not something — it’s just not consistent. It’s not consistent with the medical literature because there is no literature on magical disruption of the brain that causes death and that doesn’t exist.” When she asked her colleagues what they thought of this explanation, she said, “the response that I got was laughter.”

It’s not remotely amusing, of course, to either the family of the child or of the woman who was blamed for this supposed death-by-depolarization. Buchhorn, who had never been in any kind of trouble before, according to the state’s theory killed the baby because she was angry at her boss.

Then, after stepping on Oliver Ortiz, the state argued, she was utterly indifferent to the intense suffering that Mitchell said would have been immediately apparent. So indifferent, according to prosecutors, that she stuck him in a crib and left him to die.

But is the callous and/or careless party here Buchhorn, or Eric K. Mitchell, who has been getting away with various sketchy practices throughout his career? Or really, not so much getting away with as getting rewarded for, by prosecutors who have appreciated his flexibility.

**ORGANS REMOVED WITHOUT CONSENT, STORED SKELETONS IN OFFICE**

Mitchell did not return the text I left on his cell, which his wife told me is the best way to reach him since he doesn’t answer his phone. And that does make sense.

For the 10 years before Mitchell arrived in Kansas in 1994, he was the chief medical examiner for Onondaga County, New York. And that’s where an investigation by the district attorney’s office found that he had overstepped his authority and mismanaged his office. Mitchell resigned rather than be fired, and the DA agreed not to pursue criminal charges.

Overstepping and mismanaging can mean anything, but an Associated Press story at the time said Mitchell had “routinely removed organs from corpses without the consent of the victims’ families and improperly stored skeletons and body parts in his office.”

The investigation started after officials learned that a man convicted on child porn charges had a photo taken of himself with a corpse in Mitchell’s custody. Oh, and morgue employees had taken pictures of themselves in “playful poses” over the corpse of a female suicide victim. So much fun, that office.

While the DA was investigating Mitchell, the coroner helpfully changed his mind about his findings in the murder case against a man named Hector Rivas. Initially, Mitchell had said that the victim, Rivas’ ex-girlfriend, Valerie Hill, had been killed on a Saturday night or Sunday morning of the weekend she died in March of 1987.

Only, Rivas had an alibi for that time period. When the DA reopened what had been a cold case, however, Mitchell reconsidered, and said that Hill might actually have been killed as early as Friday evening, when Rivas had no alibi.
It was as a result, an appellate court later found, that Rivas was convicted in 1993 and spent the rest of his life behind bars. He died there, in 2016, still waiting for the new trial that he’d been owed since his conviction was reversed by the federal 2nd Circuit of Appeals the previous year.

HELPED SEND PETE ‘OLIN’ COONES TO PRISON WRONGLY

In Kansas, another of Mitchell’s mistakes, if that’s what it was, helped convict another innocent man, Pete “Olin” Coones, who served 12 years for a Kansas City, Kansas, murder he did not commit before being released last November.

The victim in that case, Carl Schroll, was actually shot by his wife, Kathleen Schroll, who then committed suicide. But in keeping with the on-the-spot judgment of Kansas City, Kansas Police Department detectives that it was Coones who had shot them both, Mitchell ruled the deaths a double homicide. And said that the textbook graze wound on Carl’s head had instead been caused by blunt trauma.

Mitchell ruled that he’d been hit with an object instead of grazed by a fourth bullet shot from his wife’s gun, which was found by her side.

This was key, because turning that graze wound into blunt trauma allowed the state to argue that someone else had been in the couple’s home that night. Shortly before shooting her husband and herself, Kathleen had called her mother and said that Coones was there and threatening to kill them. Why would she say that? Coones, who like Buchhorn had never been in any trouble before, was taking Schroll to court to recover the money police knew she’d stolen from his elderly father while working as his caretaker.

The bullet that grazed Carl’s head wound up in the stuffing of a pillow near his body. But it was only discovered there 12 years later, by Coones’ legal team and Wyandotte County’s conviction integrity unit. And then, finally, Coones was released — just 108 days before he died of cancer that had gone undiagnosed in prison.

There have been other issues with Mitchell’s findings, and other do-overs of autopsies. In 2012, Mitchell ruled that a 32-year-old woman named Rachel Hammers had died in the Douglas County Jail as the result of seizures caused by alcohol withdrawal. But four years later, after Hammers’ father had sued the county, Mitchell amended his ruling, omitting what he’d said about alcohol withdrawal and noting that on the contrary, there had been no evidence that she’d been going through withdrawal in jail. So what changed? Definitely not Mitchell’s willingness to be of service.

At the 2015 murder retrial of Martin Miller, also in Douglas County, Mitchell came right out and said on the stand that he had based his 2004 ruling that Miller’s wife’s death was a homicide partly on having heard from police that Miller had lied about his whereabouts on the morning she died.

Miller was again found guilty at his second trial. Another appeal is going on right now, and one of the grounds for it is Mitchell’s admission that what police had told him about the case had influenced the findings of his autopsy, which is not supposed to be a political document.
DA's AREN'T SUPPOSED TO RELY ON SKETCHY EXPERT TESTIMONY

Now that Buchhorn, too, is due a new trial, the current Douglas County district attorney, Suzanne Valdez, is naturally delaying that inevitability by referring the case to the Kansas Supreme Court for review. Sure, because what's another who knows how long in prison when you've been there for years already?

Not every district attorney sees his or her duty as seeking and safeguarding convictions rather than justice. Jackson County Prosecutor Jean Peters Baker, for one, has apologized for the wrongful murder conviction of Kevin Strickland, and means to see him walk free.

But the issue in this case that's even bigger than the personal tragedies of the Ortiz and Buchhorn families is how eroded our confidence in our criminal justice system has been by the willingness of prosecutors to rely on expert testimony that they have no reason to believe is true.

That Mitchell, despite his history, has been such a frequent witness for the state is both an indictment of our system and just one more reason for our well-deserved loss of faith in it.

We still don't know how Oliver Ortiz died, as awful as that is.

But the prosecution either knew or should have known Mitchell wasn't right about what the boy's autopsy showed, says Buchhorn's current attorney, William Skepnek. It isn't that Mitchell gets it wrong, in Skepnek's view, but that “he will fill any hole that needs filling.” And that this malleability might have been what protected Mitchell from consequences all these years reflects even worse on those who put him on the stand than it does on him.

That Mitchell, despite his history, has been such a frequent witness for the state is both an indictment of our system and just one more reason for our well-deserved loss of faith in it.
When Lacy Kiper first made the cheerleading squad at Truman High School last year, she was excited. Her grades and confidence improved, and she felt part of a team for the first time in her life. Until she didn’t, that is.

Truman High School cheerleader Lacy Kiper is not allowed out on the football field for the playing of the national anthem along with other members of her team. Her chair would mess up the field, she was told.

She uses a wheelchair and she loves being a cheerleader. But she and her family feel her school tries to shut her out.

BY MELINDA HENNEBERGER
Kiper has osteogenesis imperfecta, a genetic disease that makes her bones break easily. She uses a wheelchair and loves — and I mean loves — cheering and revving up the crowd from the sidelines. This is an 18-year-old with so much heart, they’re lucky to have her. But her coaches and school administrators have a can-do attitude, too. And they keep coming up with new ways to limit her involvement, as she puts it, to “less than bare minimum.”

She can’t go out onto the football field with the other cheerleaders during the national anthem, supposedly because her chair would mess up the field. She can’t go into the school gym during basketball games, supposedly for her own safety, even though her orthopedic surgeon says otherwise. She wasn’t allowed to participate in a team fundraiser at a local grocery store, supposedly because you had to be able to lift 10 pounds to help bag food for customers. And on and on.

“With all these things that I’ve been told no, and that I’m not able to participate in,” she said, during an interview at the dining room table in her home in Independence, “it makes me feel that I’m not a part of this team, or part of anything. It feels like I’m able to do less than bare minimum.”

She was going to quit, as she believes the head cheerleading coach, ex-Truman cheerleader Alex Parrish, wants her to do. At one point, she said, Parrish suggested that maybe she should try out for the school dance team instead, “because maybe they’d let me into the gym.” But then a co-worker at Walmart — yes, Kiper has a part-time job — told her that he, too, had been barred from activities at Truman because of a disability. “That’s when I decided, no, I’m not quitting; I’ve got to fight, because I want it to be known that you can’t treat people like this. This ends here.”

It should end right here, and right now, because what’s happening in Independence is not only hurtful but potentially illegal — even as school officials are so focused on the law that they seem to have lost all sight of Lacy Kiper.

**LAWYER: SCHOOL WAIVER SIGNS AWAY STUDENT’S CIVIL RIGHTS**

My messages to Parrish, Truman principal Ronda Scott, activities director Daniel Bieser and spokeswoman Megan Murphy were answered by a lawyer for the Independence School District, J. Drew Marriott.

“Generally speaking,” he wrote, “the District processes matters involving students with unique needs or identified disabilities in accordance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and all other relevant state and federal laws, as applicable. ... The District is happy to provide you information to ensure that any resulting article fairly and accurately depicts the circumstances. However, the District cannot provide that information without a release from Mr. Kiper.”
That’s Lacy’s father, Charles Kiper, whose lawyer looked at the proposed waiver and said that if Charles signed it, he’d be signing away Lacy’s civil rights. I asked if a more narrowly drawn release might be drafted, and Marriott said no. He also said he and the district disagreed with the view that signing the release would hold the district harmless forever and for any reason.

The disagreement over the waiver is typical of the communication between the Kipers and the school, and I can say that because I’ve seen a lot of it.

Truman Activities Director Daniel Bieser said in one note to Charles Kiper that it had been his refusal to sign a waiver allowing them access to her medical records that had made it so difficult to allow her to do things with the others: “Your unwillingness to allow us to talk with Lacy’s doctors continues to play a large role in the district’s concern with Lacy fully participating in cheer activities,” he wrote. “I do hope that you reconsider signing the HIPAA release, as this could potentially allow Lacy to participate depending on the information we receive.”

But Charles Kiper said he did sign the waiver, only to then have the school ask a doctor who doesn’t even know Lacy make the call that she shouldn’t be in the gym during games because she might get hurt. Her own longtime doctor disagreed, and on Jan. 19 and again on Aug. 19 of this year signed waivers I saw copies of to that effect. “They look for ways to keep her out,” her father said.

The reasons Lacy Kiper is being told that she can’t participate are certainly not consistent. At one point, Parrish seemed to have just assumed that she couldn’t bag groceries with the others at the fundraiser. Then the Kipers were told that the rule was that you had to be able to lift 10 pounds, which she can do now, though years ago she could not.

She was also told that she could participate in other fundraisers, and then was told that on the contrary, only those participating in competitive cheerleading could do so. So if it’s not the case that the school is looking for ways to leave her out, I can see why she’d think otherwise.

“We thought the education system was supposed to encourage our children,” said her stepmother, Lena Powell. Instead, “they want to exclude her more.”

This is not the first time in Lacy Kiper’s life that she’s been left out, but the assumptions being made are stunningly mistaken. Charles Kiper says that even the school secretary recently told him, “No doctor would OK her to go into a gym with her disease.” Not so, but that’s now the party line.

MAKES A’S IN SCHOOL, WORKS PART-TIME AT WALMART

When I asked Lacy Kiper how the other cheerleaders treat her, she said, “not bad. I say hi, and if I ask, they’re glad to help me. It’s just the adults” who aren’t so glad.
If school officials are really only trying to protect her, what they’re protecting her from is life.

If instead they’re acting out of liability concerns, they’re surely creating more liability than they’re protecting themselves from.

And are they oblivious to how much courage it takes to do what Lacy Kiper does every day? If not, it seems like some simple accommodations could remedy a situation that really does not have to be this wounding to a young woman for whom nothing has been easy.

After the grandmother who had raised her from infancy died two years ago, she moved in with her father and stepmother, who encouraged her to become more independent and get more involved at school.

She learned to do a bunch of new things for herself after that. She made A’s last year, and started working after school. “This little girl works up at Walmart,” her father told me the first time we talked. “She rode up there in her wheelchair and got her a job” greeting customers, handing out masks and pushing the shopping carts back where they belong. “I could not be prouder.”

Or more frustrated. At a recent meeting, Charles Kiper says, Amy Chappell, the district assistant director of special services, told him, “I don’t care what you say and what her doctor says, she’s not going into that gym to cheer.”

Other girls on the team this year started practicing together in March, but she wasn’t allowed to start going to practices until August. Though it’s true that she can’t participate in competitive cheering, she wanted to go anyway, and tumble on the mat with the others, as her doctor said she could. What possible harm could that have done to anyone?

The Kipers have met with the principal, Ronda Scott, and here’s Lacy Kiper’s summary of the meeting: “We were in the office for an hour, and she said a lot of words without really saying anything. ‘It’s not against you; it’s safety.’”

Other cheerleaders get injured, so why is she the only one who is being kept under glass?

On Sept. 9, the district compliance officer sent the Kipers a letter informing them that they had investigated their allegations of discrimination and had decided that nope, that wasn’t happening. “The facts do not substantiate a violation,” said the letter, signed by compliance officer Tiffany Purinton.

So what is going on, then? And whatever the intention of school officials, why let her join the squad only to then keep her from doing what she’s perfectly capable of doing, which is cheering her giant heart out?

**Other cheerleaders get injured, so why is she the only one who is being kept under glass?**
‘Who would take care of this aunt?’ Turkish immigrants take in dying KC social worker

The Murat family celebrated Delores Jankovich’s birthday with her last year.

Even with a newborn and two other children, the Murats said, “We cannot leave this lady by herself in this state.”

BY MELINDA HENNEBERGER

It was at an Eid al-Fitr dinner — the “breaking the fast” celebration at the end of Ramadan — four years ago that Benjamin and Ayşe Nur Öztekin Murat met the woman they came to think of as their American aunt, Delores Jankovich.

I can only know Delores, who died in February at age 83, through her Facebook page, where she posted about Freddie Gray, white supremacy, kids in cages and Joe Biden’s rescue dog.
But it’s plain that this former Kansas farm girl and longtime prison social worker loved Ruth Bader Ginsburg, sunsets, Edward Steichen and voting rights. Also Pope Francis, AOC, Johnny Cash and the Murats, the Turkish immigrants who took her in for two long stretches in her final year, and cared for her right up until 10 days before her death.

She did have family — a son with serious health problems, and a brother with both cancer and COVID-19 — as well as many friends. But it’s no longer common, if it ever was, for those of us who were born here to do what the Murats did.

And on the day that I’ve been reading about Biden’s unfortunate decision not to close the Trump-era Homeland Security office that was created to highlight the relatively few, and often highly sensationalized, crimes committed by immigrants, I’d like to highlight this quiet love story between an older American Christian and the young Muslim family who invited her to share their two-bedroom townhome near Arrowhead Stadium.

‘SHE WAS FEELING HER GRANDMA EMOTIONS’

Even that first night they met, says Benjamin, a school counselor, “the kids were playing with her and they connected. She’s never been a grandma, and I believe she was feeling her grandma emotions, and we were feeling the same way,” with all the elders in their family back in Turkey. “She was sent by God to fill our family gaps.”

After she had to have surgery on her foot last year, the Murats visited her at the University of Kansas Medical Center and found her upset that she was being discharged but still couldn’t walk.

“Who would take care of this aunt?” Benjamin wondered. “It was an unforgettable moment in our lives. We said to each other that we cannot leave this lady by herself in this state. It does not suit us; the reason for our life is to make sacrifices for others. We said yes to each other and shared our thought to our aunt. I will never forget, her eyes filled with tears, she asked repeatedly whether we were joking or not, to see if we were sincere.”

For the next three months, she slept on the sofa in their living room, since she couldn’t get up the stairs, and called up to them if she needed to get up in the night. Yet to Benjamin, these were “days like dreams, reading books to children before going to bed, cooking baklava together, having dinner every day, eating together.” No other American had let them in like this, he said.

A physical therapist came three times a week, and when Delores felt well enough to want her independence back, “we moved her to a new apartment.” But one day when they were bringing dinner to her there, “we knocked and no one was responding. … We were praying frantically and called the firemen,” who when they got in found that she had fallen.
They all cried with relief that she wasn’t seriously hurt, but soon she fell again — four more times, in fact. The last time, in November, she broke four ribs and had to be hospitalized.

**EVEN WITH A NEWBORN, THEY WELCOMED HER TO THEIR HOME**

This was right around the time the Murats’ youngest daughter Merve was born, “healthy like a light ball,” her dad says, on Nov. 10. Two weeks later, Delores asked if she could move back in.

With a new baby, their 4-year-old and 8-year-old attending different online schools and Benjamin working mostly at home, too, could they swing it?

“It was difficult,” Ayşe Nur said, “because I just gave birth. I’m thinking, ‘Can I handle it?’ But in our culture, your parents are with you until they die.”

So they said yes, and for the next nearly three months, cared for her in a more intense way.

Their Turkish neighbors brought in meals, and “my wife and our neighbors were meeting the personal needs of our Aunt Delores, helping her to eat and change her clothes,” Benjamin said. “But things are getting harder, and we felt obliged to get support, so we contacted Social Services. They brought a special mattress because she slept constantly and her skin on her back was damaged. They prepared the oxygen tube for comfortable breathing.”

During these final days, “sometimes we pray together, so that our God will include her in his paradise. God reminds her of the beautiful things she has done, that she helped people and that these beautiful things will repay her.”

At the very end of her life, she needed more quiet than they could give her, and went to stay with another friend. Losing her was wrenching for the Murats, but they continue to thank the God who can turn “a relationship that begins with a small dinner” into a family.

I thank God, too, for humans like the Murats, who when I visited them insisted on feeding me a gorgeous plate of cig köfte that they could not even share because they were still fasting for Ramadan. (“You really ate while they couldn’t eat?” asked my husband. You know, I did, and not only because to have done otherwise would have been rude.)

Nothing makes me feel more like waving an American flag than when we live up to that Emma Lazarus poem on the Statue of Liberty. “Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me,” it says. Send the persecuted to us, the “Mother of Exiles.”

But that’s not a completely unselfish impulse, either. Because like the Murats, who took the oath of citizenship two years ago, the “tempest-tost” tend to make great Americans.

“We said to each other that we cannot leave this lady by herself in this state. It does not suit us; the reason for our life is to make sacrifices for others.”