

Details about the death and death investigation of Melissa Byers

Melissa DeFir Byers was born on January 15, 1996. She died of undetermined causes on March 29, 1996. Melissa was the biological mother of Chris Byers and Ryan Clark. At the time of her youngest son's murder in May of 1993, Melissa was married to John Mark Byers.

Melissa's Death

Melissa and John Mark Byers were having problems in their marriage in 1996. Melissa left her husband to live with her parents and had only been living at home for two to three weeks before she passed away. Melissa's return to the home coincided with her son's. Ryan had been living with his biological father for the past six months. Norm Metz, the neighbor living at 73 Skyline, confirmed that Ryan came back to live with his mother and father two weeks before March 29th. Melissa was worried about an upcoming trial involving a robbery of \$20,000 worth of goods and property. Metz said that prior to her death she "seemed to be irritated and had a bad attitude."

On March 29, 1996, at 3:30pm, Ryan and his girlfriend, Amanda, were dropped off from school at the Byers' residence. Ryan stated he knocked on the door to his parents' room and both answered him. He went to watch television with Amanda and then he said they went into his bedroom to listen to music. John Mark called to Ryan twice. The second time he requested a towel. Ryan brought the towel into the master bedroom where he observed his mother cough and throw up. Ryan asked if his mother was alright and Byers told him he did not know. Ryan said Byers then began CPR on Melissa. He told Waser that the neighbor, Norm Metz, came into the bedroom to help his step-father. At this point, Ryan said he couldn't "take it anymore" and so he and Amanda left and drove around, got gas, and bought a soda. They continued to drive around until evening when they went to Ryan's grandfather's house.

John Mark gave a voluntary statement to Waser as well. He said that he and Melissa spent the afternoon in bed beginning at 12pm. Waser wrote, "they went to bed, spent time talking, had intercourse and went to sleep, at approximately 2:30pm they went to sleep." Byers said that they heard Ryan knock on the bedroom door around 3:20pm and then they both went back to sleep. Byers got up to get some milk and asked if Melissa wanted anything. She did not respond. He stated that when he touched her she did not feel right. He got a wet rag and wiped her face before feeling for a pulse. When there wasn't one he started CPR. She threw up some liquid. Byers said he called Norm Metz and asked him to call an ambulance. He stated he continued CPR until the EMTs arrived and took over.

Norm Metz gave a statement to investigator Stan Witt, stating that he received a call from John Mark Byers at about 5pm. When Byers informed him of Melissa's condition, Metz asked why he had not called an ambulance. Byers asked Metz to come over to the house. Metz observed Ryan and his girlfriend on the couch, nude. He went to the bedroom and saw Melissa on the

floor, completely naked. Metz checked for a pulse and told Byers to perform CPR. Melissa gurgled up some fluid and Metz called for an ambulance. Metz had to go back to his own home to make the call because he did not have his glasses. He said that when he returned Ryan and John Mark were attempting to put pants on Melissa. "He ask [sic] John Mark if Melissa was dead. He advised that John Mark advised no and Ryan had a funny eery [sic] look on his face. He advised he went and got a towel and told Mark to keep doing CPR and also told Ryan to take his girlfriend home and get back there."

At approximately 5:30pm, an ambulance responded to Cherokee Village where Melissa was reported as being unresponsive. Norm Metz stated that when the EMTs showed up "Ryan kept mumbling something and he did not seem coherent. He advised that when he left, he almost flipped his car over he left so fast, spinning gravel."

Fred Waser from the Sharp County Sheriff's Department was filling his patrol vehicle with fuel when he heard over the radio that an ambulance had been dispatched in his immediate area. He drove to 75 Skyline to assist. By the time he arrived on the scene there were several responders: Officer Slayton, Chief of Police Ernie Rose, and Paul Brinkley (ambulance driver).

Waser's report indicated that two EMTs were performing CPR on Melissa when he arrived. She was in the bedroom on the floor. She was laying on her back and was not breathing. Waser noted that there was a glass containing white liquid on the nightstand located to the right of the bed. On the left side of the bed there was a glass of clear liquid. John Mark Byers asked Waser if Melissa was alive and he responded that the best way he could help would be to let the EMTs do their job. Byers stated that he would wait in the kitchen. Waser helped the EMTs move Melissa onto a backboard so she could be placed in the ambulance and taken to the hospital. Byers asked to ride in the ambulance with his wife.

Waser asked Chief Rose and Officer Slayton to secure the Byers' residence while he escorted the ambulance to Eastern Ozarks Regional Hospital. Waser remained with Byers while his wife was treated by physicians. He and John Mark Byers were informed that Melissa was deceased at 6:30pm. Byers was asked if he wanted an autopsy performed. He told Waser that he didn't know what to do. Waser advised that it was unusual for a 40-year-old woman to pass away and an autopsy would be recommended to determine the cause. Byers agreed to the autopsy and signed a form giving consent. Waser described the subsequent events as follows: "After signing the request he apparently passed out and fell towards the counter. I grabbed his arm and shoulder and guided his body to the floor. The hospital staff came to his aid and I excused myself to the visitor's room."

The Investigation

Waser met with Sheriff Powell, Chief Burton and Investigator Witt to discuss searching the Byers' residence. It was agreed that a search should be conducted and Byers was approached. He agreed to a search and signed a permission form at 6:55pm.

Byers asked Waser to accompany him outside so he could have a cigarette. The two met with Byer's neighbor Metz, who expressed concern over Byers' step-son, Ryan Clark, as he had not returned to the residence after reportedly leaving abruptly while Melissa was being worked on. In the statement given by Metz, he said that John Mark told him he thought Melissa had overdosed on a drug. Byers said he was concerned that "they were going to accuse him of smothering her." Metz also said that Byers stated "that he did not kill her and that he loved her."

Metz took Byers back to his home, but the two men were advised that no one was to enter the residence during the search. Waser assisted in photographing Melissa at the hospital and bagging evidence. When this was complete, Waser was asked to return to Byers' home because he had "seemed to gain John Mark's trust."

When Waser returned to the Byers' home he was informed that Ryan Clark still had not returned. Byers said he was worried because he had asked Ryan to take his girlfriend, Amanda, home and come right back. By 9:30pm Ryan was still not home. Waser noted in his report that Byers was sitting outside of his home with a woman by the name of Mandy Beasley. She was described as "a friend of the family." A later interview with a woman identified as "Fern" revealed that Mandy was Byers' girlfriend. She said that Byers and Mandy had been hiding drugs in the trunk of Byers' car.

Efforts to locate Ryan Clark were unsuccessful that evening. Ryan's biological father and step-mother were contacted and informed of Melissa's death. They were asked to call the Sheriff's Department if Ryan showed up at their house.

The following day, Waser visited Byers' home and was informed of Melissa's recurring drug habit. Byers stated that Melissa preferred to take Dilaudid. Byers also said that Ryan had spent the night at John Mark's brother-in-law's house. The brother-in-law, Dennis DeFir, brought Ryan back to the home the day after Melissa died. Waser asked to take a statement from Ryan, but was told he was out with friends. He returned to the Byers' home on March 31st, 1996 to interview Ryan. Ryan gave his statement and said that Melissa's purse, which he said she had left in the backseat of the family car, was at his grandfather's house. He said he and his grandfather looked through it but did not remove anything.

In November of 1997, a confidential informant known as "James" told investigator Stan Witt that he believed Byers had been giving Melissa pills the entire day when she died on March 29, 1996. The person taking the statement felt that James was implying he was there and witness this. James stated that Byers had intentionally killed his wife. In a subsequent interview, James stated that he had gotten close to Ryan, John Mark's step-son, while at Highland High School. He claimed that Ryan told him on a number of occasions that his step-father had been in on the murder of the three children in West Memphis. James was asked point blank if he knew that Byers murdered his wife. He said, "No. I cannot but I believe he did in my mind."

In December of 1997, Mandy Beasley told investigator Stan Witt that while she was at the Byers' residence on the day Melissa died, John Mark told her that he hoped the investigators would not find the three syringes that were located in the bottom drawer of a dresser in the bedroom. Mandy said that later that night Byers located the syringes and threw them away after police were done searching his home. She stated that she had no reason to believe Byers murdered his wife, but that she felt that she should come forward with the information about the syringes. She stated that she lived with Byers and "discovered that he was nothing but a pathological liar."

Mandy concluded her statement by discussing how Byers told her that he burned down Brenda Atwood's trailer. She alleged that he told her how he had put gasoline all around the trailer and then used a cigarette as a fuse. "She advised he told her a cigarette made a excellent fuse, that you could light it, and due to slow burning, it would give you time to get away. She advised that Byers told her that Melissa had knowledge of this and she is dead now and dead people can't talk." Mandy also stated that Ryan had assisted in the burglary of the Atwood home.

On December 17th, 1997, a man identified as "Earls" gave a statement to investigator Witt. He said he was at the Byers' residence on March 29th, 1996. He arrived at the home around 1pm and "partied with them, drinking Crown Royal, and taking valium, xanax, and that he saw Mark Byers with a sandwich baggie of K-4 dilaudid." He said he left the home around 3pm when Ryan and his girlfriend were at the home. He did not know if John Mark had anything to do with Melissa's death and said that "everyone seemed to be happy and jolly during the partying time."

On April 1, 1996, the following individuals signed off on the examination and autopsy of Melissa Byers: Stephen Erickson, MD (Associated Medical Examiner), Frank Peretti, MD (Associated Medical Examiner), Charles Kokes, MD (Associate Medical Examiner) and William Sturner, MD (Chief Medical Examiner).

Melissa was described as wearing "a pair of blood-tinged panties". Two bandaged needle puncture wounds were described. Other needle puncture wounds were present in the groin area, on the wrists, and the feet. Melissa had older scars on her wrists. Recent injuries included: "three 1-inch blue-gray contusions on her right upper arm; six blue-gray contusions, ranging from ½ to 2 inches, were present on the anterior aspect of the left upper arm; four, ¼ to 1 inch blue-gray contusions were present on the superior and anterior left upper shoulder."

Two contusions, ranging from ¼ inch to ½ inch, were noted as being located on Melissa's skull.

No semen was found [even though John Mark stated they had intercourse at 3pm]. A drug screen tested positive for hydromorphone (Dilaudid), but negative for alcohol. A heavy metal test was conducted and none were found.

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