

FBI investigates possible lynching of 17-year-old in Bladenboro, North Carolina

Evan Blake

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The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has taken over the case of the death of Lennon Lacy, a 17-year-old African American high school student in Bladenboro, North Carolina. Lacy was found dead, hanging from a swing set within a predominantly white trailer park, on the morning of August 29.

The day before, Lacy had attended the funeral of his uncle, with whom he was very close, and who had been suffering from a long-term illness to which he succumbed two weeks prior. Local police investigators said this fact led them to conclude that Lacy's death was a suicide, the result of depression from the loss of his uncle. Within four days of Lacy's death, the local investigating team came to Claudia Lacy, the teenager's mother, to inform her that they had found no evidence of foul play in her son's death, and that they believed he had committed suicide.

Claudia Lacy later told the *Guardian*, "I feel the SBI [State Bureau of Investigation] investigators interrogated me. They were not trying to find out the truth of what happened to my son, they were pushing towards a verdict of suicide." The Lacy family soon contacted the state chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), for their assistance in deepening the investigation into their son's death.

For several months before he died, Lacy was in a relationship with Michelle Brimhall, a 31-year-old white woman who lives across the street from the Lacy family. The age of consent in North Carolina is 16, but the interracial relationship with a large age difference raised judgment within the community. Brimhall told the *Guardian* that she and Lacy "told people we weren't seeing each other so they would stop giving us trouble."

Contrary to the belief of Lacy's family, Brimhall

revealed, "We were still together, I did not break up with him." Brimhall maintains that Lacy did not commit suicide. "No, Lennon did not kill himself. He loved his mother so much, he would never put her through that," she said. Before starting her relationship with Lacy, Brimhall had recently left her husband and moved to Bladenboro with her children.

Roughly 200 people honored Lacy's memory in Bladenboro on Saturday, in a march called by Reverend William Barber, President of the North Carolina chapter of the NAACP. Prior to the march, Barber told the crowd that, "We march today because ... there has been a flawed investigation right from the start. This community, black and white, is being asked to accept facts about Lennon Lacy's death that do not make sense."

Roughly a week after Lacy's death, his family and representatives of the NAACP put together a list of 20 questions and concerns to present to the district attorney, in the hopes of launching a deeper investigation. Their primary concerns include:

- Marks on Lennon's body, which the undertaker, F.W. Newton Jr., who has over 26 years of experience as a mortician, was taken aback by. Lacy's body had abrasions across both shoulders and along both arms, as well as facial indentations on both cheeks, his chin and nose. Newton says that the state of the body reminded him of those killed in a bar fight. Forensic investigators failed to take swabs from under Lacy's fingernails for DNA testing to see if he had been in physical contact with anybody else before he died. Police claim the marks found on Lacy's body were all caused by ants.

- The autopsy report makes no mention of the shoes found on Lennon's feet at the site of his death, which were white sneakers his family had never seen, two sizes too small and missing their laces. His family had

recently bought him a new pair of expensive Jordan training shoes which have been missing since the night of his death.

- Lennon's grave was desecrated a few days after his burial, with someone dumping the flowers 40 feet away on a nearby road, and digging a hole in one corner of the grave plot.

- The police haven't once searched the Lacy residence, or combed through Lennon's belongings, yet within hours of his death they concluded that he had committed suicide.

- Among all those who knew him, there is a consensus that Lennon would not be the type of person to harm himself. As a star football player, he looked intently ahead toward a future playing college football, with aspirations of playing in the National Football League (NFL). Above all, he had no history of mental illness or depression, and his mother claims he was mourning the loss of his uncle "as a normal person would."

Lacy's death has sparked a conversation on race relations in the small southern town, in a state that has a long history of racial violence and police brutality. Between 1882-1968, there were 101 reported lynchings in North Carolina, with 86 of the victims being African-American and the rest white. During the same period, the states bordering North Carolina (Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia) witnessed a further 1,042 lynchings, with 935, or 90 percent, committed against African-Americans. One of Lennon's white acquaintances had a Confederate flag as the background on his Facebook page.

On Friday, coinciding with the announcement of the FBI taking over the investigation, the *Guardian* published an editorial penned by Claudia Lacy, in which she tells her side of the story. She writes, "I knew things were dangerous for him. After Trayvon Martin, 17 and black just like Lennon, was shot by his neighbor in Florida in 2012, that terrified me. Every time Lennon left the house I was scared.

Further, she noted that "Over the past few weeks, I've thought a lot about Ferguson and Staten Island. Lennon wasn't killed by a police officer—of that much we can be sure. But there is a connection. My son, Michael Brown, Eric Garner—three black men who were all treated by police as though they didn't matter. That their lives, and the circumstances of their deaths,

were immaterial."

Based on the evidence revealed so far, it is entirely possible that Lacy's death was a lynching. With Lacy's death coming three weeks after the police murder of Michael Brown, and the wave of protests that erupted in Ferguson, Missouri in the immediate aftermath of the killing, it is also possible that the local authorities in Bladenboro wanted to prevent a similar expression of outrage in their own city. The police concealed or minimized crucial evidence in the case, including the lacerations and bumps on Lacy's body, and the missing Jordan sneakers replaced by non-fitting shoes without laces, which did not belong to Lacy.

The FBI has the same fundamental interests as the local authorities, above all to maintain order, and cannot be relied upon to bring justice in this case. The FBI has also been brought in to investigate the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and its probes are widely expected to arrive at the same result as the local grand juries, leaving the police murderers unindicted. The FBI will also bring to bear its role as representative of the federal judicial system, thus attempting to bring the unrest following these recent killings to an end.

Lennon's brother Pierre stated in an interview with Katie Couric that "It's not about black or white, it's about social class. I just feel like, the poorer you are in America, the less opportunity you have to have justice or anything that's rightfully yours as an American. Someone needs to shine the light on that."



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