

Homicide investigation under way after weeks of police negligence in the death of black Louisiana teen

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On November 3, the body of 15-year-old Quawan “Bobby” Charles was found in a sugar cane field in the town of Loreauville some 25 miles north of his home in Baldwin, a small town in St. Mary Parish along the southern bayous.

Charles had been reported missing by his parents, Roxanne Nelson and Kenneth Jacko, but their concerns were dismissed by the police at the time. When the body of the African American teenager was finally found several days later, the initial cause of death was listed as drowning. But after weeks of protests and demands for justice, the Iberia Parish Sheriff’s Department has opened a homicide investigation into Charles’s death.

After the initial autopsy claimed that Charles had likely died from drowning, local police were slow to investigate any possible foul play despite his badly disfigured body and suspicious injuries on his face. When Nelson first called the police to report her son missing she was told he was most likely at a football game and not to worry.

Charles had reportedly left his mother’s home without permission that night sometime before 7 p.m. When he failed to answer his mother’s phone call, Nelson became worried and went to pick Charles up from his father’s house where he had been staying at the time. When the parents broke into his locked bedroom door, he was nowhere to be found. It was then that the parents called police to report him missing.

The police told Charles’s parents that he was probably with friends, and no missing person report was filed and no effort was made to locate him by the police department in town. It was only after Nelson and Jacko decided to investigate themselves, that they

found out their son was picked up by a friend and his mother.

Janet Irwin and her 17-year-old son Gavin, who are white, had picked Charles up at his father’s home and took him to their trailer home in Iberia Parish. The events following remain unclear, but Charles’s body was found not far from Janet Irwin’s home soon after Nelson and Jacko called Iberia police to look for their son.

Charles’s family rejected the official story of his death being a drowning accident, as his face looked to be savagely beaten. The family released photos of Charles’s mutilated face online, drawing a direct comparison to the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, a black teenager from Chicago who was beaten and tortured to death by racist whites in Mississippi. The exposure of Till’s killing and publication of photos of his open casket fueled the civil rights movement.

Charles’s family feels that local police similarly have taken a cavalier attitude in his case, with some activists calling it a modern-day lynching. “Quawan’s face—you can see that it’s just about gone,” Celina Charles, Quawan’s cousin, told the *Acadiana Advocate*; “The coroner told us that there was no blunt force trauma to the head and no sign of strangulation, but when you look at him, you see something totally different from what the coroner said.”

The family has commissioned an independent autopsy to take place after growing frustrations with the way Charles’s case had been handled from the very beginning. A lawyer representing the family, Ron Haley, said in a statement, “It appears that something hateful happened to Bobby. Whether this was an intentional act or grossly negligent indifference for

human life, it's still horrible.”

According to the initial autopsy report, Charles's death was ruled a drowning due to the presence of muddy water found in the airways, and the injuries to his face were attributed to “aquatic animal activity,” according to the coroner's report.

Haley claims however that the bodies of water near where Charles was found are no more than two feet deep. “If in fact he did die of drowning—and we're saying that as an if—we're calling into question how exactly that would have happened,” Haley said. “Can somebody who's 5-foot-6 typically drown in two feet of water? No, not unless there's another cause associated with that.”

On Saturday Charles's family and other local activists and community members marched in protest on the streets of Baldwin, with some 100 people gathering around the Baldwin Police Department shouting slogans of “No justice no peace!” and signs that read “Stop killing our sons now!”

Activist Jamal Taylor told the *USA Today*, “We want cooperation. The family needs the details. They need to know where they're at in the steps of the investigation.” Taylor said, “That mom deserves truth.” Activists have called for the removal of Baldwin's police chief and the mayor, as well as the coroner.

Iberia Sheriff Tommy Romero issued a statement Saturday saying, “I want to assure the public that I, and my team, are doing everything we can, and following every lead, to gather evidence into what happened in the untimely death of Quawan ‘Bobby’ Charles. Any loss of life is a tragedy and that is especially true when it is a young person.”

Detectives have interviewed at least one person who saw Charles the night of his death in the same area he was found and have uncovered video evidence that reportedly shows the teen alone in the same that area supposedly taken the night of his death.

A large rally in the state's capital, Baton Rouge, is being planned by the Charles family along with local and national activist groups, with a march on the governors' mansion expected to take place on November 28. The Louisiana ACLU is demanding an independent investigation as well. “The disrespect and lack of transparency demonstrated by local officials in response to Bobby's tragic and suspicious death is unacceptable, “executive director of Louisiana ACLU

Alanah Odoms Herbert said in a statement. “We join the family in demanding a full and transparent investigation into the circumstances surrounding Bobby's death.”

Charles's death and the police response have garnered national attention and sparked massive discussions on social media. The case has since been covered by *TMZ* and the *Washington Post*. Musician and celebrity personality Beyonce posted his photo on her website with the words “rest in peace Quawan Charles.”



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