

Mother of whistleblower John Barnett holds Boeing responsible for his death

Kevin Reed
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In an interview with CBS News broadcast on Wednesday evening, the mother of former Boeing employee and whistleblower John Barnett said she holds the airplane manufacturer responsible for the death of her son.

Vicky Stokes and her son Rodney Barnett spoke to CBS News in their first television interview since John Barnett, 62, was found dead from a gunshot wound in his vehicle in a Holiday Inn parking lot in Charleston, South Carolina, on March 9.

When asked by CBS News reporter Mark Strassmann if she blamed Boeing for her son's death, Vicky Stokes spoke through tears, saying, "I think if this hadn't gone on so long, I'd still have my son. My sons would still have their brother, and we wouldn't be sitting here. So, in that respect, I do."

She also said the company had deliberately tried to destroy the reputation of her son. "He didn't go into a lot of detail, but I know he was embarrassed at meetings when he would be called out. ... It would wear anybody down after seven or eight years."

Barnett was in Charleston to resume giving deposition testimony in his whistleblower lawsuit against Boeing over manufacturing quality and safety practices on its passenger airplanes on the day of his death.

While his death remains under investigation by Charleston law enforcement, County Coroner Bobbi Jo O'Neal said John Barnett died from what appears to be a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

The mother and brother of the deceased former Boeing quality manager told CBS News that they want to see John Barnett's fight for the safety of the flying public preserved. Because the investigation into John's death is still ongoing, Vicky and Rodney said they did not want to comment on whether they believe he died

from a suicide or not.

The CBS News interview was the first instance that a major television network reported the death of Barnett amidst a series of midair safety failures by Boeing aircraft and the recent resignations of CEO David Calhoun and head of the company's airline division, Stan Deal.

Following a near-fatal midair blowout of a door plug on a Boeing 737 Max 9 in January, there have been at least seven other instances of Boeing aircraft equipment problems that have exposed lax manufacturing and maintenance processes at company facilities. These recent failures follow the catastrophic deaths of 346 people on two 737 Max 8 crashes in October 2018 in Indonesia and March 2019 in Ethiopia caused by a design flaw in an onboard autopilot system.

CBS News reporter Strassmann asked Rodney Barnett how his brother responded to the latest safety failures at Boeing. Rodney said, "It wasn't joyful, I can tell you that. This whole thing was the flying public. He had their back. All these times, he's had their back trying to stand up and get the safety concerns straightened out."

John Barnett was employed by Boeing for 32 years and had become a quality manager responsible for ensuring aircraft were safe to fly before leaving production facilities. After working at the company's facility in Everett, Washington, Barnett transferred to the Boeing factory in Charleston, where the full line of 787 Dreamliner is produced.

As a quality manager at the North Charleston facility between 2010 and 2017, Barnett began filing "numerous ethics complaints" about a "deep-rooted and persistent culture of concealment" about declining quality practices at Boeing. He said the company failed to follow procedures required by the Federal Aviation

Administration and Boeing's own rules, and his complaints were ignored or dismissed by the company managers.

During an interview for a Netflix documentary on Boeing in 2019, Barnett said, "Boeing quit listening to their employees. So, every time I'd raise my hand and say, 'Hey, we've got a problem here,' they would attack the messenger and ignore the message."

Barnett filed an administrative complaint with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) before he resigned in 2017 and, in 2021, he filed a lawsuit alleging a long list of safety problems, including Titanium shavings falling into electrical wiring, defective oxygen tanks and managers urging him to cut corners. After seven years of litigation, the case was nearing a trial date when Barnett was found dead.

Strassman also interviewed Barnett's attorneys Brian Knowles and Robert Turkewitz about their former client. Knowles said, "The retaliation John faced was something he endured constantly." Turkewitz noted, "He wasn't trying to hurt Boeing, he was trying to save Boeing. He saw this coming, and he said, at some point, this is all going to come down on Boeing."

When asked about how she wished to continue her son's legacy, Vicky Stokes told Strassmann, "That Boeing changes and makes things right in their factories."



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