

THE UNSOLVED MYSTERIES PODCAST | THE ZIP TIE MURDER

EP71 Transcript

CORY BROWN: At the scene, it appeared like the motorcycle was pushed off the side of the road into the ditch where it was much harder to see. Mr. Kope's body was a quarter mile away from where the motorcycle was located. So right off the bat, you're thinking this isn't normal. Why are you a quarter mile away from your motorcycle? Why is your helmet a half a mile, at least, from where his body was? And why is his cell phone another quarter mile away the opposite direction? It's just one of those things we can't explain at this point in time.

NARRATION:

AT 53, ROBERT KOPE ENJOYS A LIFESTYLE MANY WOULD ENVY. HE'S AN AVID MOTORCYCLE RIDER WHO LOVES TOURING THE BEAUTIFUL BACKCOUNTRY ROADS OF CENTRAL AND NORTHERN CALIFORNIA. ROBERT NEVER SETS A SCHEDULE, STOPPING WHENEVER HE WANTS, TO FISH IN A FRESHWATER LAKE OR TO TAKE SOME PRISTINE NATURE PHOTOS TO SHARE WITH HIS FRIENDS AND FAMILY. IN THE EARLY FALL OF 2015, ROBERT IS RETURNING TO HIS HOME IN SAN JOSE FROM A SHORT TRIP TO VISIT A FRIEND IN OROVILLE THREE HOURS NORTH. AFTER STOPPING FOR GAS IN THE SMALL TOWN OF SONORA, WEST OF YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, HE CRUISES DOWN A RURAL HIGHWAY IN WHAT WOULD ULTIMATELY BE HIS FINAL RIDE. BECAUSE SOMEWHERE ON THAT DARK STRETCH OF ASPHALT, ROBERT ENCOUNTERS A KILLER WHO ENDS HIS LIFE.

I'M STEVE FRENCH, AND THIS IS UNSOLVED MYSTERIES: "THE ZIP TIE MURDER."

CORY BROWN: That day, as I was sitting in the homicide office, we were informed of a possible motorcycle accident with a fatality, and our officers got on scene and determined it was suspicious and called for detectives.

NARRATION:

CORY BROWN IS A DETECTIVE WITH THE STANISLAUS COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT IN CENTRAL CALIFORNIA, EAST OF SAN JOSE. THE DEPARTMENT HANDLES ABOUT 20 MURDERS A YEAR, BUT NONE RIVAL THE CASE DETECTIVE BROWN IS ASSIGNED ON OCTOBER 7TH, 2015.

CORY BROWN: So, the area was on J-59, which is a rural highway throughfare in the eastern side of Stanislaus County and into Tuolumne County. And on the northwest side of J-59 was a motorcycle, laying down.

NARRATION:

STRANGELY, THE RIDER IS NOWHERE IN SIGHT. IT'S THE FIRST INDICATION THAT THIS IS NOT A TYPICAL MOTORCYCLE ACCIDENT. THEN, A QUARTER MILE DOWN THE HIGHWAY, DETECTIVE BROWN SEES POLICE OFFICERS GATHERED OFF THE SIDE OF THE ROAD.

CORY BROWN: So, I walked to that area and observed a male in full motorcycle riding leathers, almost in a fetal position, up against a barbed wire fence that's probably eight or ten feet off the north side of J-59. There was a motorcycle tank bag, like a magnetic bag that would stick to the top of a motorcycle

tank. On the shoulder next to him, there were some items strewn about in the grass that looked like they had been removed from the tank bag. The male had a zip tie around his neck — obviously that's odd. The zip tie was extremely tight, and then, lying in front of the chest area, on the grass shoulder in front of him, was another zip tie of the same type that was looped in a circle but wasn't attached to anything else.

NARRATION:

LAYING IN THE GRASS NEAR THE MAN'S HEAD IS A DRIVER'S LICENSE IDENTIFYING HIM AS ROBERT KOPE, A 53-YEAR-OLD RESIDENT OF SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA.

CORY BROWN: So, Mr. Kope's cell phone was found even further to the east along J-59, on the opposite side of the road on the south shoulder. My estimate would be another quarter mile down the road is where the cell phone was recovered that was later determined to be his.

NARRATION:

AT FIRST THERE'S NO SIGN OF ROBERT'S HELMET — ANOTHER CURIOUS DETAIL THAT IS EXPLAINED LATER WHEN A WOMAN COMES FORWARD, SAYING SHE FOUND IT ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD. THE WOMAN CLAIMS SHE DIDN'T SEE THE BODY AND JUST THOUGHT SOMEBODY HAD DISCARDED THE HELMET.

CORY BROWN: There was no damage to the helmet. There was no damage to his, the leathers that Mr. Kope was wearing beyond some minor scrapes, I believe.

NARRATION:

THERE'S ALSO NO SIGN THAT ROBERT FOUGHT WITH THE ASSAILANT WHO CHOKED HIM TO DEATH WITH A ZIP TIE.

CORY BROWN: It was tightened down to the point that you weren't going to get a finger underneath it. But with as tight as it went, just physiologically, I think he was probably unconscious within seconds. Like, a carotid restraint applied correctly will normally render somebody unconscious within 10 or 15 seconds. A zip tie like that, that's cutting off not only the blood but the air as tight as it was tightened, that's not a normal way somebody commits homicide.

NARRATION:

AS THE MYSTERY UNFOLDS IN CALIFORNIA, OVER 2,000 MILES AWAY IN VIRGINIA, ROBERT'S OLDER SISTER, MICHELLE SILVA, HAS BEEN WORRYING ABOUT HER BROTHER EVER SINCE RECEIVING AN EMAIL FROM ROBERT'S GIRLFRIEND.

MICHELLE SILVA: To get an email from her was very unusual. And so, I opened it. It said, "No matter the time of day, please call me," and it listed her phone number. I called her. And so, she said, "Well, I expected him home last night, and he didn't come home. I haven't been able to reach him, and he had several appointments today. And when I spoke to him yesterday, he had said, 'I will be home. I have these appointments, and I need to get to these appointments.'" I asked her to file a missing persons report, and I started calling the hospitals and the police stations. In the meantime, with all this going

on, I had a call from my husband, who at the time was out of town down in Atlanta, and he asked me if I was sitting down. And I said, "I'm not, but I can be. But I want you to go ahead and tell me." So, he said, "Well, I just sent an article to your phone." And it was the article that was in the Modesto Bee about a motorcyclist who had been found on the side of the road. And he said, "I hate to tell you this, but I'm almost certain it's Robert." I got off the phone with him and I picked it back up and I dialed the number in the article and left a message for Detective Brown. When Detective Brown called me back, I said, you know, "I'd just rather hear it straight out. Don't try and gloss it over." And so, he did say that it was Robert that was dead.

NARRATION:

ROBERT KOPE WAS KILLED JUST A WEEK BEFORE HIS 54TH BIRTHDAY. HE AND HIS TWO SISTERS WERE RAISED IN TEXARKANA, TEXAS AND IN 1980, ROBERT JOINED THE AIR FORCE WHERE HE WORKED ON HIGH TECH AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS. AFTER A FULL HONORABLE DISCHARGE, HE SETTLED IN CALIFORNIA IN THE 90S AND BUILT A CAREER AS A FACILITIES ENGINEER.

MICHELLE SILVA: He worked hard, but when he was off work, he loved to be tinkering with his motorcycles, riding his motorcycles. I think the motorcycles really gave him a freedom that made him feel at one with nature and the world, that he would just jump on the motorcycle, put one of his fishing poles on the back. He would never take the same route twice, and looked for parks or lakes that he could stop at along the way and throw the line out or, you know, on the way to see a buddy, or to a bike rally or something like that, and just enjoy the trip.

NARRATION:

ROBERT WAS MARRIED FOR A SHORT TIME WHEN HE WAS YOUNGER AND WHEN HE DIED, HE HAD BEEN IN AN ON-AGAIN-OFF-AGAIN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP FOR A FEW YEARS.

CORY BROWN: We were able to determine that Mr. Kope had a girlfriend, who he had recently moved in with, who was in the city of San Jose. Very open, very forthcoming, gave us a lot of history on their relationship together and also allowed us to come to her house without having to obtain a search warrant or anything else. Let us go through Mr. Kope's stuff.

NARRATION:

WITH THE HELP OF ROBERT'S GIRLFRIEND, DETECTIVE BROWN RECONSTRUCTS A TIMELINE OF ROBERT'S MURDER. HE HAD BEEN VISITING A FRIEND IN OROVILLE THREE HOURS NORTH OF SAN JOSE, BUT LEFT ON OCTOBER 6, TO RETURN HOME. HE GOT GAS AROUND 10PM IN THE CITY OF SONORA, AND WAS FOUND DEAD THE FOLLOWING MORNING, JUST 30 MILES FROM THERE.

CORY BROWN: He hadn't planned on leaving as early as he did, but he had remembered that he needed to be back in the San Jose area for a job interview the next day, so he would be traveling home that night when that wasn't originally the plans on the day that he was going to return. She had informed me that he doesn't plan his routes, but he usually traveled back roads. He didn't like traveling the highways on his motorcycle, so he would take the backroads as often as he could.

NARRATION:

DETECTIVE BROWN DELVES DEEPER INTO ROBERT'S LIFE, HOPING TO FIND SOME EXPLANATION FOR THIS BIZARRE HOMICIDE.

CORY BROWN: Looking into Mr. Kope's background, I've found that he was retired from the tech industry. He had a very good career. He was still doing consulting in side projects. No indication of any issues with alcohol, even though there was alcohol in his system that night. No drug use, gangs, gambling debts, none of the stuff that we normally associate with risk activity. Nothing going on in his personal life at that time that would lead me to believe he was at risk to be murdered by somebody that he was having regular involvement with.

NARRATION:

EVIDENCE FOUND AT THE SCENE IS OF LITTLE HELP. THERE'S NO DNA RECOVERED ON THE ZIP TIES, AND THE AREA IS TOO DAMP TO DUST FOR FINGERPRINTS. BUT THERE IS ONE DETAIL IN ROBERT'S BACKGROUND THAT CATCHES DETECTIVE BROWN'S ATTENTION. FIVE YEARS EARLIER, ROBERT HAD BEEN ENGAGED TO A WOMAN WHO DIED BY SUICIDE IN A VERY UNUSUAL MANNER. SHE CHOKED HERSELF TO DEATH USING PLASTIC ZIP TIES.

CORY BROWN: So, when I found out about the former fiancée being found five years prior in San Jose deceased with zip ties around the neck, it's not a common method of homicide. It's not a common method of suicide. She was partially off of a bed. Now the zip ties around her neck were very thin, home use-type zip ties that had been strung together to make them long enough to go around her neck. And the tag ends for those zip ties were one on either side of the neck, at the front. So, it would have been very easy for somebody to grab those by themselves and just pull and then they would have tightened up and would have been very difficult to remove without being cut. I find it a very incredible coincidence that two people associated with each other both died within what's relatively a few short years of each other, both cause of death being zip tie around the neck.

MICHELLE SILVA: My brother had been out with her the night before, and he called me after she had been found, and it's the first time I had heard him be emotional. And he blamed himself because he had been out with her the night before. He said, "We had a great dinner. We laughed, we talked, you know, I dropped her off. And when I said, 'Hey, I have an early day,' she was like, 'That's fine. We'll see each other in a day or two.'" And there was nothing he said that seemed amiss.

NARRATION:

THE WOMAN DIDN'T LEAVE A NOTE BUT HAD PAST STRUGGLES WITH DEPRESSION, AND THE AUTOPSY REPORT LISTED SUICIDE AS THE MANNER OF DEATH.

MICHELLE SILVA: He had explained that he was, I guess, a suspect because he had been the last person to see her and he understood why. You know, he was happy once he was ruled out as a suspect, but he was initially not ruled out by the family. They were very upset. So, he was upset that they were contacting him in a, in a negative manner.

NARRATION:

COULD SOMEONE HAVE BLAMED ROBERT FOR HIS FIANCEE'S DEATH AND TARGETED HIM FOR REVENGE USING ZIP TIES AS THE MURDER WEAPON?

MICHELLE SILVA: When Robert was found dead and he was found a homicide, committed in the same fashion that his previous girlfriend had been labeled as a suicide, of course your mind starts running away and say, "Is this retaliation some years later?"

CORY BROWN: There's a possibility that the fiancée, whose death was ruled a suicide by zip ties, that her family may have held Kope responsible. Those statements were made to me by some people. The problem we run into is Mr. Kope didn't plan any of his routes, and he didn't take the same route twice. He didn't go in a consistent manner where you would be able to lie in wait and intercept him, and he wasn't planning on coming home that night. So even if somebody was trying to plan out his route or catch him on a way, the only person that we have any knowledge of that would have known he was actually leaving is the male friend that he was staying with, and his girlfriend who he texted that he forgot about an appointment so he was coming home.

NARRATION:

DETECTIVE BROWN CONSIDERS ANOTHER THEORY: COULD ROBERT'S DEATH ACTUALLY BE A SUICIDE? DID HE MIMIC HIS FORMER FIANCEE'S MANNER OF DEATH BY USING THE ZIP TIE ON HIMSELF?

CORY BROWN: We went through Mr. Kope's garage. We went through his toolbox. We went through everything we could find in an attempt to locate any zip ties consistent with the ones that were located at the scene to see if we could even say that he had those with him. That it either would push one way or the other towards suicide or not, or if it was a crime opportunity, and those happened to be with him already. And we were unable to locate anything that would match those type of zip ties. The coroner didn't feel it would physically be possible for Mr. Kope to have placed the zip tie around his neck in the manner and positioning that it was. There were items that I believe were missing from Mr. Kope's personal belongings that should have been there to indicate that at least somebody else had come by, and if they came across somebody who had committed suicide and weren't involved in anything, makes me wonder why they wouldn't report something like that. During the performance of the autopsy, which I believe was the next day, the coroner indicated that Mr. Kope had received several broken ribs on his right hand side, consistent with a minor motorcycle accident that appeared his motorcycle may have been involved with. I know people's ribs can be broken by an assault, either being punched very hard and/or kicked. There was no indication on his leathers or his hands or his face that any assault like that had taken place, unless that's the only thing they did when they assaulted him. There obviously was a level of control, either with Mr. Kope being unconscious for a reason — we don't know whether he was rendered unconscious or was unconscious when the person found him — or they were able to exert enough control over him through fear or a weapon that they were able to place a zip tie around his neck without there being any indication on his body of an extreme struggle. So, there would be some criminal sophistication and/or experience there.

NARRATION:

ROBERT'S SISTER MICHELLE SILVA HAS SPENT YEARS SEARCHING HER MEMORY FOR ANY CLUES HER BROTHER MAY HAVE DROPPED ABOUT SOMEONE WHO WOULD WANT TO KILL HIM.

MICHELLE SILVA: My brother had a previous girlfriend that, it was on again, off again.

NARRATION:

MICHELLE REMEMBERS ROBERT SAYING THAT THIS PARTICULAR EX-GIRLFRIEND HAD EXHIBITED SOME STALKER-LIKE BEHAVIOR. WHEN HE MOVED ON TO DATING ANOTHER WOMAN, SHE WOULD SHOW UP UNEXPECTEDLY AT PLACES THEY FREQUENTED OR EVENTS THEY ATTENDED, AND WHEN ROBERT'S FUNERAL WAS HELD, THE EX-GIRLFRIEND, WHO HAD BEEN OUT OF HIS LIFE FOR YEARS, MADE AN APPEARANCE.

MICHELLE SILVA: Never underestimate a woman scorned and that's what I feel. If a woman scorned gets it in her mind, I believe they can do anything they want to do. My realistic brain says that's stupid and that would take too much effort on somebody's part. She'd really have to be pissed at somebody to do this, but I don't know.

NARRATION:

AS PART OF HIS INVESTIGATION, DETECTIVE BROWN INTERVIEWS ANY AND ALL WITNESSES WHO MIGHT HAVE BEEN DRIVING DOWN HIGHWAY J-59 AT THE TIME OF ROBERT'S MURDER. HE LEARNS THAT A YOUNG MAN HAD STOPPED AT A MARKET IN LAGRANGE THE MORNING AFTER ROBERT WAS BELIEVED TO HAVE BEEN KILLED AND REPORTED SEEING EVIDENCE OF A MOTORCYCLE ACCIDENT ON J-59.

CORY BROWN: And then that person exited the store and left, in my recollection, a slightly lifted truck and left going east out of the city of LaGrange. We were able to obtain video from the inside of the LaGrange market of this male coming in. We ended up releasing that video footage to local media and got several responses on people who they believe the male in the video to be. And I made several attempts to contact this male. It took quite a bit of time, but he finally got him on the phone and he agreed to meet me in the city of LaGrange for an interview. I asked him about that morning. He made some statements to me that he was driving from, I believe, it was his dad's house. But he had passed by and seen Mr. Kope's body on the side of the road, told me he didn't have a cell phone, so he had driven to the market and told them about the accident, and then he left. And he had also made the statement to me that he was driving his personal car and that he was by himself. I didn't feel that everything he was telling me was obviously correct by what we had viewed on the video.

NARRATION:

THAT'S BECAUSE ON THE SECURITY VIDEO, THE MAN WAS SEEN GETTING INTO THE PASSENGER SIDE OF A LIFTED WHITE TRUCK, WHICH THEN DROVE OFF.

CORY BROWN: And I couldn't get him to change his statement or come up with a reason why he was being either evasive or just flat out lying to me. So, I attempted to set up another date in the future, and after that point in time, he didn't show for that appointment, and I was never able to track him down again. His actions that morning were odd. I don't believe he was 100% truthful with me that he didn't have a cell phone, or that he wanted to identify who he was with at that point in time. He's definitely a person of interest that needs to be spoken to again, but from his own statement at the

market, we know at least he passed by the area. Now whether he rummaged through the items that were there on the scene and took stuff and that's why he's being evasive, or did something else at the scene that we're unaware of, that's what needs to be discussed further with him.

NARRATION:

THE WITNESS LEAVES NO PHONE NUMBER AND IS UNABLE TO PROVIDE A PERMANENT ADDRESS. HE VANISHES SOON AFTER, AND POLICE ARE UNABLE TO CONTACT HIM TO FOLLOW UP. BUT THEY LEARN ABOUT ANOTHER DISTURBING INCIDENT INVOLVING A MOTORCYCLE — AND A LIFTED WHITE TRUCK — THAT MIGHT BE CONNECTED TO THE MISSING WITNESS.

CORY BROWN: So, when we had put the video out and initially put the story out about what had occurred out on J-59, I received a phone call from a male who lives in the city of Snelling, to the south of Stanislaus County and just slightly to the south of LaGrange. This male also rides motorcycles. He was, rides motorcycles in that area. A couple of months prior to this, he told me that he was riding down Snelling Road and was what he believes intentionally run off the road by a lifted white truck. And then he turned around and actually started chasing this white truck, and it went up J-59 towards LaGrange. He went after it for a little while on his motorcycle. Instead, he finally got the realization that he's by himself. He's unarmed, and he doesn't know who's in the truck, so he stopped following it. He never got a license plate of the vehicle that ran him off the roadway. This was interesting to me for several reasons: that he believes it was done intentionally, and a lifted white truck could be consistent with the light in color lifted truck that dropped the male off who reported Mr. Kope's body on the side of J-59 at the LaGrange market.

NARRATION:

IN 2021, DETECTIVE BROWN RETIRED AND AT THAT TIME, THE MYSTERIOUS WITNESS AND THE WHITE TRUCK WERE THE STRONGEST CLUES IN THE CASE — AND THEY STILL ARE.

CORY BROWN: Out of the homicides that I've worked, Mr. Kope's case is frustrating because of the complete lack of physical evidence to give us any leads. It's just frustrating. The best theory that makes sense to me is Mr. Kope got some gas, that he was traveling J-59 trying to get home. I believe the front tire on his motorcycle was low, which, if there was a truck out there, with somebody trying to take opportunities with motorcycle riders, probably if they tried to run him off the road, it would have been much harder for him to maneuver and he could have caused a minor crash. How he was overpowered, and a zip tie placed around his neck, I wish I had a theory for that. I don't.

NARRATION:

ROBERT'S SISTER UNDERSTANDS THE DETECTIVE'S FRUSTRATION WITH THIS CASE.

MICHELLE SILVA: How many times can you call a family member and say, "Gosh, I'm sorry. I can't tell you anything. We have no new evidence, we have no new leads, we have no information, and we still cannot share anything else because it's an open and active case." It's gotta be difficult on their end to make that call and say there's no news to share.

NARRATION:

FOR MICHELLE, ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT PARTS OF THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE WAS TELLING ROBERT'S MOM AND DAD THAT HER BROTHER — THEIR ONLY SON — HAD BEEN MURDERED. MICHELLE REMEMBERS EVERY DETAIL OF GOING TO HER PARENTS' HOME AND BEING GREETED BY HER FATHER, WHO HAD NO IDEA WHAT HAD HAPPENED.

MICHELLE SILVA: And he said, "Oh okay, come on in. Your mom's not awake yet." And I said, "Well, it's something important, and we really need to talk." So, I went in and helped my dad get my mom up. It's difficult for her. And at that time, the dementia had also started setting in, so I helped get her up, and I helped get her changed for the morning. And I sat them down, and I held both their hands. I said, "I'm very sorry. I have some bad news. Robert has passed away." My dad, he lost all color in his face, and I was certain he was going to pass away himself at that moment, because his body went limp. And he squeezed my hands so tight it hurt. But my mother, in her own world, said, "It's okay. Robert is here with us, and he's going to take care of me." A moment later, my dad looked up, and he gave my hand another squeeze. And he said, "This was God's will, and we have no control." I wish I could be like my dad and say, "This is what God has decided and I can accept this," but maybe I'm too curious and maybe this is wrong, but I would really like to know. I don't like that it's unsolved.

NARRATION:

IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION ABOUT THE MURDER OF ROBERT KOPE, CONTACT DETECTIVE JESSE TOVAR AT THE STANISLAUS COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT AT 209-525-7080, EMAIL JTOVAR@STANSHERIFF.ORG, OR GO TO UNSOLVED.COM.

NEXT, ON UNSOLVED MYSTERIES:

MONICA JOSEPH: I tried to call her when I found out that no one had heard from her, but nothing. And so, my mind's running 1,000 miles per minute trying to figure out where she's at. Why is she missing? What happened to her? Is she hurt? When I found out that her car was torched, I'm thinking, like, something bad happened to her.

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Unsolved Mysteries is a production of Cosgrove Meurer Productions and Cadence 13, an Audacy company.

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Thanks for listening to Episode 71 of Unsolved Mysteries.