

THE UNSOLVED MYSTERIES PODCAST | HAWAIIAN HOMICIDE

EP76 Transcript

TERI CEPLO: I sped to her house as fast as I could. The house was locked. I could see her dogs in the house, and I did a quick run out in the yard, along the stream, just screaming her name as loud as I could, in case she was laying hurt somewhere and could yell out at me. I just knew... something's seriously wrong here.

NARRATION:

IN 2010, 57-YEAR-OLD AMBER JACKSON IS LIVING HER LIFELONG DREAM — SHE'S LEFT THE U.S. MAINLAND BEHIND AND SETTLED INTO A HILLSIDE HOME ON THE LUSH TROPICAL ISLAND OF KAUA'I IN HAWAII. AMBER IS A FREE SPIRIT KNOWN FOR HER KIND AND OUTGOING PERSONALITY. BUT ON THE EVENING OF JUNE 24th, 2010, SHE DISAPPEARS AND DAYS LATER IS FOUND BRUTALLY MURDERED. HER CLOSE-KNIT ISLAND COMMUNITY IS STILL SEEKING ANSWERS AND JUSTICE.

I'M STEVE FRENCH, AND THIS IS UNSOLVED MYSTERIES: "HAWAIIAN HOMICIDE."

TERI CEPLO: Amber was more like family than friend. She's closer to me than my sister is, and we call it Hānai family here. So Amber was our Hānai sister.

NARRATION:

TERI CEPLO WAS ONE OF AMBER'S DEAREST FRIENDS ON KAUA'I. THEY MET IN 2000 AND QUICKLY FORMED A CLOSE BOND.

TERI CEPLO: Amber and I became friends when my husband, Ken, and myself moved to the island of Kaua'i. She was also a new resident, and she hired my husband to remodel a house she bought. Her and Ken just transformed it into a wonderful place.

NARRATION:

ORIGINALLY FROM RIVERSIDE, CALIFORNIA, AMBER SPENT HER EARLY YEARS DOING SOCIAL WORK IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA. SHE LATER MOVED TO WASHINGTON STATE, WHERE SHE DISCOVERED A TALENT FOR RENOVATING OLD HOUSES. THEN, WHILE VACATIONING IN HAWAII, SHE FELL IN LOVE WITH THE TROPICAL CLIMATE, LUSH LANDSCAPE, AND THE FRIENDLY HAWAIIAN CULTURE. AFTER SEVERAL RETURN TRIPS, AMBER FINALLY TOOK A LEAP OF FAITH, MOVED TO HAWAII, AND QUICKLY EMBRACED HER NEW LIFE ON THE ISLANDS.

TERI CEPLO: She loved Hawaii. She loved buying these houses and fixing them up, and she just had such an eye. She also bought a lettuce farm on the big island. And so, we spent a lot of time going over and staying with Amber when she was running the lettuce farm. We would go to Maui and we would get a condo during whale-watching season and stay together. A couple times a week, and always on weekends, we would all hike or go kayaking, or, you know, there was always some activity. In fact, she would always say, "Living the dream. We're living the dream."

NARRATION:

AMBER, TERI, AND KEN USUALLY MET FOR DINNER EVERY FRIDAY NIGHT AFTER WORK AT THE SAME LOCAL RESTAURANT, SOMETIMES WITH OTHERS FROM THEIR LARGE CIRCLE OF ISLAND FRIENDS. BUT ON WEDNESDAY, JUNE 23RD, 2010, TERI REALIZES SHE NEEDS TO CHANGE THEIR PLANS.

TERI CEPLO: I left Amber a voicemail and I said, "We're gonna be at Kaua'i Pasta the usual time, six o'clock on Thursday, instead of Friday." And our friend Lynn and her husband Steve wanted to join us. And I was certain she got the message, even though I hadn't heard back from her.

NARRATION:

CONFIDENT THAT AMBER WILL CALL IF SHE CAN'T MAKE IT, TERI AND KEN HEAD TO THE RESTAURANT THURSDAY EVENING, BUT AMBER NEVER SHOWS UP.

TERI CEPLO: So, we met at the restaurant and we waited for Amber before we ordered, and we waited, and we waited. The wait staff was so used to us having dinner with Amber. They were coming up asking where Amber was. We were wondering where Amber was. She was not answering her phone. We're getting really worried.

NARRATION:

CONCERNED SHE MAY HAVE HAD AN ACCIDENT, TERI JUMPS IN HER CAR AND HEADS TO AMBER'S HOUSE ON RURAL KAHUNA ROAD, WHILE THE OTHERS CALL THE OFFICE WHERE AMBER WORKS AND LOCAL EMERGENCY ROOMS. WHEN TERI REACHES THE HOUSE, AMBER'S CAR IS PARKED IN THE DRIVEWAY, BUT AMBER IS NOWHERE TO BE FOUND.

TERI CEPLO: I got to her property. The house was locked. I could see her dogs in the house. I did a quick run out in the yard, along the stream, just screaming her name as loud as I could, in case she was laying hurt somewhere and could yell out at me.

NARRATION:

TERI'S HUSBAND SOON ARRIVES WITH THEIR OTHER FRIENDS TO HELP WITH THE SEARCH, AND FIND AMBER'S PURSE AND KEYS IN HER CAR. WHEN THEY LET THEMSELVES INTO HER HOUSE, THEY GROW EVEN MORE CONCERNED.

TERI CEPLO: Amber was an extremely tidy person, made her bed every day. Never dishes left in the sink, you know, right in the dishwasher, whatever. The bed was unmade, and she had baked some coconut macaroons. The baking pans were sitting on the countertop. Some of the macaroons were missing from the tray, but everything was left out. That is not Amber's M.O. So, I called the police and said, you know, "Something's seriously wrong here."

NARRATION:

TERI CALLS THE KAUA'I POLICE DEPARTMENT TO REPORT AMBER MISSING AND OFFICERS ARE QUICKLY DISPATCHED. ASSISTANT CHIEF BRYSON PONCE HAS BEEN WORKING ON AMBER'S CASE SINCE THE DAY SHE DISAPPEARED.

BRYSON PONCE: Initially, that night when she was reported, our officers searched the immediate areas on her property. Amber's vehicle was home, her dog was home, her cell phone, her purse, her keys, and then she's nowhere to be found. Her friends also searched and walked along the stream, along the roadway, the pastures. It's kind of a secluded area, and it's dark. There's not a lot of lighting. So, unless the neighbors, like, were actually right outside, they wouldn't really hear or see anything.

NARRATION:

INVESTIGATORS SPEAK WITH AMBER'S FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS, BUT NO-ONE KNOWS WHERE SHE MIGHT BE OR CAN RECALL ANYTHING ODD THAT MIGHT EXPLAIN HER DISAPPEARANCE. THEY LEARN AMBER WAS NOT AT WORK THAT DAY AND WAS LAST SEEN THE PREVIOUS EVENING. KAUA'I POLICE FAN OUT ACROSS THE ISLAND TRYING TO FIND HER.

BRYSON PONCE: Over the next days, the search efforts expanded with more people involved, more areas covered. It's like she just vanished, or she was abducted, but the odds and the chances of an abduction on our island of Kaua'i is very rare.

NARRATION:

THE ENTIRE ISLAND COMMUNITY IS ON THE LOOKOUT FOR ANY SIGN OF AMBER. THEN, EIGHT DAYS AFTER HER DISAPPEARANCE, ON SATURDAY, JULY 3rd, 2010, TERI CEPLO RECEIVES A CALL SHE WILL NEVER FORGET.

TERI CEPLO: I was in a movie theater. My phone was vibrating, and I saw that it was Amber's boss and he said, "Teri, a woman's body has been found. They are not announcing who it is, but I think you and I both know it's Amber." Her body was found in a very remote area called Kealia, up in the mountains. You need a four-wheel drive to get up there, and a pig hunter was hunting up there, and his dogs took off and he couldn't find them. He was calling them, and he looked down in a ravine and his two dogs were standing over something and they wouldn't move, they wouldn't come to him. So, he crawled down in this ravine and found Amber's remains.

NARRATION:

THE REMOTE LOCATION AND THE CONDITION OF AMBER'S BODY SUGGESTS TO INVESTIGATORS THAT HER DEATH WAS NOT AN ACCIDENT.

BRYSON PONCE: When Amber was found, her body was in advanced stages of decomposition. She had what appeared to be a wound to her head, because that's where the majority of decomposition was observed. Her torso and lower half was still intact. She had, like, a beige pair of corduroy pants, no shoes. I remember she had black socks, and a white top. Whoever left her there just put her there and she was just probably drug there and left there. We didn't find drag marks. But that area, there's a lot of rain and a lot of leaves from the trees that potentially could have covered up if there was any drag marks prior. It appeared that it was more of a body dump and that the crime scene probably happened somewhere else.

NARRATION:

INVESTIGATORS PHOTOGRAPH THE SCENE AND COMB THE AREA FOR ANY CLUE AS TO WHO MAY HAVE LEFT AMBER'S BODY THERE. THEY FIND TIRE TRACKS ON THE DIRT ROAD NEAR THE RAVINE, BUT LITTLE ELSE. AMBER'S BODY IS SENT TO THE MEDICAL EXAMINER TO DETERMINE THE CAUSE OF DEATH AND RECOVER ANY POTENTIAL DNA.

BRYSON PONCE: So, when we did a forensic autopsy, the pathologist basically found that Amber Jackson died of blunt force trauma to the head. She was hit on the side of her face and struck very hard to cause indentation in her facial area. It was a linear type object, maybe similar to, like, a pipe or something like a bat. We didn't find anything else except the injury to her head, no other sexual assault or anything like that. Amber bled out so much from her head area that any type of other DNA evidence was overpowered by Amber's DNA.

NARRATION:

AMBER JACKSON WAS VIOLENTLY MURDERED, BUT WHO KILLED HER AND WHY? KAUA'I POLICE HAVE ALMOST NO PHYSICAL EVIDENCE TO WORK WITH, AND NOTHING IN AMBER'S BACKGROUND SUGGESTS SHE HAD ANY ENEMIES. HER FRIENDS, HOWEVER, HAVE THEIR SUSPICIONS. A MAN NAMED GREG LIVED AS A TENANT ON AMBER'S PROPERTY AND WAS THE LAST PERSON TO REPORT SEEING HER ALIVE.

TERI CEPLO: Greg was kind of a strange character. He was a loner. He was loud. He was obnoxious. He just seemed unfiltered. Conversations with Greg were never easy to follow. He was kind of all over the place. He was just an odd character, not somebody that our group of friends would normally associate with.

NARRATION:

AMBER HAD MET GREG A FEW YEARS EARLIER IN 2007. SHE WANTED TO GENERATE SOME RENTAL INCOME AND DECIDED TO BUILD A YURT, WHICH IS A SMALL HAWAIIAN DWELLING WITH A TENT-LIKE ROOF, BEHIND HER HOUSE. GREG HAD JUST MOVED TO KAUA'I AND WAS AN EXPERIENCED HANDYMAN, SO AMBER HIRED HIM TO HELP OUT. THE TWO GOT ALONG WELL AND WHEN THE YURT WAS COMPLETE IN 2008, AMBER SUGGESTED TO GREG THAT HE BE HER FIRST TENANT.

TERI CEPLO: What we noticed is, once he moved into the yurt, there was an infatuation that Amber had about Greg. Greg was, like, 12 years younger than her and he worked out, so he had a nice physique. Greg and Amber were spending a lot of time together, going to Home Depot, picking out materials, so obviously this attachment to Greg had happened while they were working closely together. She shared with me that she wanted a relationship with him, and that he made it very clear that he did not want to go there because it would ruin their friendship.

NARRATION:

AMBER RELUCTANTLY SETTLES FOR A FRIENDSHIP WITH GREG, BUT THEY REMAIN CLOSE AND OVER TIME, HE REVEALS DETAILS ABOUT HIS TROUBLED BACKGROUND, WHICH MAKE AMBER'S CLOSE FRIENDS CONCERNED AND UNCOMFORTABLE.

TERI CEPLO: One of the things that he let Amber know is that he spent six years in federal prison, and that it involved crystal meth, and we expressed our concern over that. She would share with us that Greg had a violently explosive temper. When we would express to her, "Aren't you afraid?" She would always say, "He would never hurt me." Exact words. Always. "He would never hurt me."

NARRATION:

AMBER HAS A KIND AND CARING NATURE AND LOOKS PAST THE RED FLAGS THAT WORRY HER FRIENDS. BUT JUST A FEW MONTHS AFTER HE STARTS RENTING THE YURT, GREG'S ISSUES START TO CREATE PROBLEMS FOR AMBER AS WELL.

TERI CEPLO: Because Amber and I and friends hiked every week, she started telling us that she felt very sorry for him, that Greg had an old back injury and that he was having back problems and couldn't work. So, all of a sudden Greg is not working, Amber is not getting the income, and he's there all the time. It's hindsight, but it was just... I feel like it was a con job by Greg.

NARRATION:

GREG CAN'T PAY HIS RENT, BUT INSTEAD OF EVICTING HIM, AMBER DECIDES TO HELP HIM SOLVE HIS PROBLEMS. SHE INVESTS IN GREG. HOWEVER, BY JULY 2009, AMBER IS ALSO STRUGGLING FINANCIALLY.

TERI CEPLO: She finally told Greg that she needed income and he was going to have to move out. She went to Marin County and the idea was that when she came back, he would be moving out and she would rent the place.

NARRATION:

BUT A FEW DAYS AFTER AMBER RETURNS FROM HER TRIP, SHE HAS ANOTHER CHANGE OF HEART.

TERI CEPLO: She decided she could not evict Greg because he would become homeless and she could never live with herself, so she decided not to evict him. After that, Amber started several little businesses trying to get Greg to generate some money. She had him build a fruit stand out on the road. He was making baked goods. At some point, Amber approached all of us and asked if we would get a medical marijuana card so Greg could grow pot on her property for income.

NARRATION:

GREG BEGINS GROWING MARIJUANA AND SELLING IT TO LOCALS ON THE ISLAND. THEN SHORTLY AFTER CHRISTMAS IN 2009, HE FLIES WITH AMBER TO THE BIG ISLAND OF HAWAII TO CHECK ON HER LETTUCE FARM. WHEN THEY RETURN TO KAUA'I DAYS LATER, GREG'S FEELINGS ABOUT THEIR RELATIONSHIP SEEM TO HAVE SUDDENLY CHANGED.

TERI CEPLO: So, January 2010, she's telling me how he's pressuring her to have an intimate relationship. And I'm like, "Well, what do you think Amber, you know?" And she said, "Well, you know, I've always been attracted to him. And so, she did start an intimate relationship with him, and all of a sudden, we were seeing very little of Amber.

NARRATION:

TERI IS IMMEDIATELY SUSPICIOUS THAT GREG IS MANIPULATING AMBER — THAT HE SEES THE LETTUCE FARM AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPAND HIS MARIJUANA BUSINESS. WORRIED FOR THEIR FRIEND, TERI AND HER HUSBAND KEEP A CLOSE EYE ON THE RELATIONSHIP.

TERI CEPLO: So, my husband and I got a hold of her and said, “You know, it's fine you've got somebody in your life and we understand that, but we want to get to know Greg better. Since you guys are a couple, let's try doing some couple-y things,” which was a big mistake, because Greg was so obnoxious. And Amber, clearly — it was almost like a light bulb went off — started being annoyed by Greg. I can also tell you that, as soon as they became intimate, it was like the spell was broken. Everything turned after that.

NARRATION:

OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL MONTHS, AMBER AND GREG'S RELATIONSHIP DETERIORATES. THEY ARGUE CONSTANTLY AND BY JUNE, AMBER IS THINKING ABOUT MOVING BACK TO CALIFORNIA — WITHOUT GREG.

TERI CEPLO: I think that Amber felt like the only way she could break her tie with Greg, because she cared so deeply for him, is to leave Kaua'i and move back to California to create a distance. But she also let me know that she was in financial trouble, and she had to get rid of Greg and start climbing her way out. Two days before we found her missing, the two of us were hiking up The Sleeping Giant together, and she said to me, “I finally had it. I'm sick of all the junk around his yurt. I'm sick of him growing pot, and I told him so, that I've had it. We're not going to be friends. Nothing. We're done.” That was the last time I was with Amber.

NARRATION:

COULD GREG HAVE KILLED AMBER AS A VIOLENT REACTION TO HER DECISION TO END THEIR RELATIONSHIP? INVESTIGATORS FIND IT STRANGE THAT WITH ALL THE COMMOTION ON THE PROPERTY THE NIGHT AMBER WAS DISCOVERED MISSING, GREG NEVER CAME OUT OF THE YURT UNTIL OFFICERS BROUGHT HIM INTO THE MAIN HOUSE FOR QUESTIONING.

BRYSON PONCE: When the initial patrol officer responded, Greg was washing clothes. He was kind of sweating, pretty heavily, and he wasn't helping at all to look for Amber. So, it kind of struck the officer as kind of odd.

TERI CEPLO: Greg came down to Amber's house cool as a cucumber, no emotion, and described how Amber had told him that she was depressed, and that she was going to move back to the mainland. When the officer asked the last time he saw Amber, he said they had dinner the night before, that he offered to have sex with her, and she declined.

BRYSON PONCE: Greg mentioned that, the night when he last saw Amber, she was almost, like, having a break down, and, in this exchange of feelings, he got upset a little bit and then he says that he left and went home.

NARRATION:

AMBER'S FRIENDS FIND ANOTHER REASON FOR SUSPICION AFTER THE AUTOPSY. THE DESCRIPTION OF THE POTENTIAL MURDER WEAPON — A LONG, STICK LIKE OBJECT — BEARS AN EERIE RESEMBLANCE TO AN OBJECT THAT AMBER HAD NOTICED AT GREG'S YURT.

TERI CEPLO: Very early on in their relationship, Amber let me know that Greg had a weapon that he called The Protector, and she described it as some kind of club. I don't know if it was wood, or if it was metal. I never saw it, but she said that he kept it next to his bed to protect himself.

NARRATION:

THE NIGHT AMBER WAS REPORTED MISSING, OFFICERS DIDN'T HAVE CAUSE TO SEARCH THE YURT AND NO MURDER WEAPON HAS EVER BEEN RECOVERED. WITHOUT HARD EVIDENCE, AUTHORITIES CAN ONLY SPECULATE ABOUT GREG'S POSSIBLE INVOLVEMENT.

BRYSON PONCE: We've spoken to Greg many times, and he's basically told us this is all he knows. Greg didn't want to take a polygraph. He wanted to consult with an attorney first, but never circled back to want to take a polygraph. He does remain a person of interest.

NARRATION:

BUT GREG WASN'T THE ONLY PERSON TO DRAW SUSPICION IN THE CASE. NEARLY A MONTH AFTER AMBER'S BODY WAS DISCOVERED, INVESTIGATORS RECEIVE A TIP FROM A WOMAN NAMED MICHELLE STEWART. SHE'S DECIDED TO CONTACT AUTHORITIES AFTER REALIZING THAT THE DATES OF BOTH AMBER'S DISAPPEARANCE AND THE DISCOVERY OF HER BODY, CORRESPOND CLOSELY TO A SERIES OF BIZARRE ENCOUNTERS SHE HAD WITH HER NEIGHBOR, RICK.

MICHELLE STUART: Rick lived across the street from us. My husband was paralyzed and in a wheelchair, and so he was home all the time, and Rick was retired, and he was also home all the time. So, they just became fast friends, so, we saw him nearly every day. Him and his wife, Karen, were actually very nice people. They seemed to do a lot of community work, and Rick was a really great tour guide of the island. But pretty quickly, it was very apparent that he drank a lot.

NARRATION:

MICHELLE HAD RECENTLY MOVED TO KAUA'I WITH HER HUSBAND AND SHE WORKED FROM HOME TO CARE FOR HIM. SHE WAS GRATEFUL TO MAKE FRIENDS WITH HER NEIGHBORS, AND RICK'S DRINKING SEEMED LIKE A MINOR CONCERN. BUT TOWARDS THE END OF JUNE, THERE WAS AN ODD INCIDENT THAT INVOLVED RICK.

MICHELLE STUART: His wife had called me and asked me if I could look out and see if Rick's truck was there, because she had been trying to get a hold of him. At the time, Karen, his wife, worked nights at the hospital, so she was gone all night. And we took a look outside and his truck was not there. She just kind of asked if we could just keep maybe trying to call or text him throughout the night, just let her know that he was okay, or to get a hold of her. And we did try, a few times, to call throughout the night, left him voicemails.

NARRATION:

RICK NEVER REPLIED TO MICHELLE. THEN EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, SHE NOTICED HIS CHEVY AVALANCHE WAS PARKED IN HIS DRIVEWAY, SO SHE WALKED ACROSS THE STREET TO ASK HIM WHERE HE WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE.

MICHELLE STUART: I went and talked to him and I said, "You know, your wife was trying to get ahold of you and make sure everything was okay." And he said, "Well, I had to hide out all night on, on Anahola Beach because I hit a parked boat last night and I was trying to hide," from whoever's boat this was that he had hit.

NARRATION:

MICHELLE WAS SKEPTICAL OF RICK'S WILD STORY. HIS DESCRIPTION OF EVENTS WAS NOTHING SHORT OF BIZARRE AND IT DIDN'T SEEM TO MATCH THE CONDITION OF HIS TRUCK.

MICHELLE STUART: When I walked around to the back of the truck, there was on one corner, from the top of the tailgate down to the bottom of the bumper, was rounded out. Like he had backed into something round, like either a tree or a telephone pole, which I thought was very strange. If you're driving and you hit something parked, you would likely have damage in the front. It just registered as odd to me that that's where the damage was.

NARRATION:

MICHELLE DOUBTED THAT RICK'S ACCOUNT OF THE NIGHT WAS ENTIRELY ACCURATE, BUT AT THE TIME SHE FOUND IT MORE CURIOUS THAN CONCERNING. THEN, ON JULY 3RD, RICK PAID HER AN UNEXPECTED LATE NIGHT VISIT.

MICHELLE STUART: I was home alone that evening, and I was sleeping, and it was probably, I mean, maybe like around midnight or so. Rick came inside my house, and he came and actually woke me up. We often kept our doors unlocked, and he would come over often at night. I could smell he had been drinking, and he was very casual when he was talking to me. And he said, "Can I ask you a favor?" And I said, "What's that?" And he said, "Will you burn my truck down for me?" It was confusing. I was trying to wake up and process what he was saying. And I said, "Well, no. Why would I burn your truck down?"

NARRATION:

RICK'S RAMBLING, INCOHERENT EXPLANATION WAS THAT MEMBERS OF A LOCAL GANG OWNED THE BOAT HE HAD HIT SEVERAL NIGHTS BEFORE, AND HE NEEDED TO BURN HIS TRUCK SO THE GANG COULDN'T TRACK HIM DOWN. ASSUMING THE STORY WAS A DRUNKEN DELUSION, MICHELLE SENT RICK HOME AND WENT BACK TO BED. BUT THE FOLLOWING MORNING, THERE WAS AN UNEXPECTED KNOCK AT MICHELLE'S DOOR.

MICHELLE STUART: Kaua'i Police Department came to my house to talk to me about a report that Rick had filed about his truck being stolen. They said that I had driven Rick, and we had been at the store and that the truck had been stolen from there. And it was so confusing, because I just... it was not true, and I don't know why he would make up something like that. I was not even with him during this occasion that he said the truck was stolen. So, I did tell the police, "No, that never happened."

NARRATION:

WHEN THE OFFICERS LEFT, MICHELLE CONFRONTED RICK ABOUT HIS LIES TO THE POLICE. HE ADMITTED TO HER THAT HIS CHEVY AVALANCHE HADN'T BEEN STOLEN AND TOOK HER TO THE REMOTE SPOT WHERE HE HAD HIDDEN IT.

MICHELLE STUART: There's a dirt road maybe a block, block and a half away from where we lived. And there was kind of like a little dumping area back there where people would dump, like, trash or mattresses or whatever, and he told me it was parked down that road. So, his wife Karen and I walked down that road, the truck was just sitting there out in the open, like an open field. And we called the police. I thought we should just let the cops come, since he had filed the report that it was stolen.

NARRATION:

THE REAR OF THE TRUCK HAD SIGNIFICANT FIRE DAMAGE AND AS OFFICERS PROCESSED THE SCENE, THEY DISCOVERED THE SOURCE WAS A LARGE PACK OF FIREWORKS IN THE BACK SEAT. MICHELLE IMMEDIATELY KNEW WHERE THEY CAME FROM.

MICHELLE STUART: We had purchased a big variety pack of fireworks to light off on Fourth of July, and the fireworks had been sitting out in the living room, kind of propped up against the wall, maybe by the front door area. And the morning of July 4th, when I got up and I went out to the living room, I noticed that the fireworks were actually gone. So, when Karen, his wife, and I had opened the back door to the Chevy Avalanche, there was my pack of fireworks sitting on the backseat which I thought that was extremely bizarre. Things just did not add up with what was going on.

NARRATION:

MICHELLE BELIEVES RICK STOLE THE FIREWORKS FROM HER LIVING ROOM AND USED THEM TO TRY TO TORCH HIS TRUCK. BUT EVEN IF RICK'S STORY ABOUT HITTING THE PARKED BOAT WAS TRUE, WHY WOULD HE GO TO SUCH EXTREME LENGTHS TO DESTROY HIS VEHICLE? AFTER HEARING DETAILS ABOUT THE AMBER JACKSON MURDER CASE, MICHELLE CAME UP WITH A POSSIBLE AND VERY DISTURBING EXPLANATION.

MICHELLE STUART: When I started looking at the timeline and like, what day she was last seen and when her body was found, and I'm thinking, "Wow." That's the night that Rick was gone all night, that nobody could get ahold of him was June 23rd, the last time she was seen. And, I believe her body was found July 3rd, and that was the evening that Rick had come to me and asked me to burn his truck down. I started thinking about all of those things and wondering if he had something to do with it. It seemed more than coincidence to me.

NARRATION:

MICHELLE ALSO RECALLS THAT ON JULY 4th, THE DAY AFTER AMBER'S BODY WAS LOCATED, RICK'S WIFE FOUND SOMETHING IN THE BACK OF HIS BURNED-OUT TRUCK THAT MAY OR MAY NOT HAVE BEEN RELATED TO AMBER'S MURDER.

MICHELLE STUART: When Karen and I were at the truck, she made a very peculiar statement when she opened the back door. She said, "Oh, those aren't my shoes." And I thought at the time it was kind of strange. I looked down and there was a pair of women's shoes behind the passenger seat on the floor.

NARRATION:

COULD THE SHOES IN THE BACK OF RICK'S TRUCK HAVE BELONGED TO AMBER JACKSON? THERE ARE ENOUGH PUZZING COINCIDENCES TO MAKE MICHELLE BELIEVE IT'S POSSIBLE. THE NIGHT AMBER WENT MISSING RICK WAS UNREACHABLE AND HIS TRUCK WASN'T IN HIS DRIVEWAY, AND RICK'S 4-WHEEL-DRIVE TRUCK COULD HAVE ACCESSED THE REMOTE LOCATION WHERE AMBER'S BODY WAS FOUND. BUT DID RICK HAVE ANY CONNECTION TO AMBER JACKSON?

MICHELLE STUART: My husband was disabled and he had a medical marijuana card, so he was looking for somebody to grow medical marijuana for him. And he asked Rick if he knew anybody that could help him with his grow, and Rick introduced my husband to Greg.

NARRATION:

WHEN MICHELLE BRINGS HER STORY TO KAUA'I POLICE, THEY'RE ALSO INTRIGUED BY THE MANY COINCIDENCES AND RICK'S ODD BEHAVIOR AND THEY BRING HIM IN FOR QUESTIONING.

BRYSON PONCE: It was a strange interview. He was kind of all over the place, very elusive in his answers. He said that he was on a drinking binge and his memory of what happened that time when he was in a drinking binge was very foggy, so he didn't recall much of anything. Towards the end, when I asked if he would take a polygraph, he said that he would have to talk to his attorney first, and I've never heard back from him after that.

NARRATION:

WHEN INVESTIGATORS ASK RICK IF HE HAS ANY CONNECTION TO GREG, HE CLAIMS NOT TO KNOW HIM, BUT GREG CONFIRMS THAT HE DOES KNOW RICK AND ACCUSES HIM OF LYING. HOWEVER, IN ORDER TO FILE CHARGES, INVESTIGATORS NEED MORE THAN HEARSAY AND SUSPICIONS — THEY NEED HARD EVIDENCE. IF AMBER HAD BEEN IN RICK'S TRUCK, IT WOULD CONTAIN FORENSIC EVIDENCE. BUT UNFORTUNATELY, THE OFFICERS INVESTIGATING THE BURNED-OUT TRUCK HAD NO REASON TO CONNECT IT TO AMBER'S DISAPPEARANCE AND IT WAS RELEASED AND SOLD FOR SCRAP.

BRYSON PONCE: It was auctioned off online and somebody from Hawaii Island bought the vehicle. So, we went down to the barge just before it was gonna get shipped off, recovered the vehicle. The vehicle was burned so badly, and by the time we got it, it had been cleaned thoroughly with different type of cleaners. We did send whatever we could, such as the seats and other parts of the vehicle, to a private lab for forensic testing and analysis. However, we wasn't able to get anything so far to further the investigation. Although, we did find tracks on the day that Amber Jackson's body was found. We looked at the tire tracks and we had some help trying to see if it would match the Chevy Avalanche. It was very similar to the type of tire tracks that the Chevy Avalanche had. However, it couldn't have been 100% certain or determined that it was the same tire tracks that was on the Chevy Avalanche.

NARRATION:

WAS RICK INVOLVED IN AMBER JACKSON'S MURDER? DID HE CONSPIRE WITH GREG TO KILL HER? AFTER RICK'S TRUCK FAILS TO PROVIDE ANY HARD EVIDENCE TO PURSUE CHARGES, AMBER'S CASE GRINDS TO A HALT. GREG CONTINUES TO LIVE IN AMBER'S YURT UNTIL THE PROPERTY IS SOLD AND HE'S FINALLY EVICTED. RICK LEAVES HAWAII AND MOVES WITH HIS WIFE TO ALASKA. BOTH MEN ARE STILL CONSIDERED PERSONS OF INTEREST AND AMBER JACKSON'S MURDER REMAINS AN OPEN AND ACTIVE CASE.

BRYSON PONCE: It's been tough, because there's so much there, but there's not enough to progress the case as we would like it to be able to bring justice for Amber and her friends and family. One thing about the Amber Jackson homicide case that, you know, really stands out is the persistence of her family and friends. Every year, her close friends schedule a meeting with the Kaua'i police department to brainstorm and update and, you know, just making sure that her case stays relevant, and it isn't a cold case that sits on the shelf collecting dust. I'm very hopeful and optimistic that it can be solved. It's going to take someone coming forward with information or something that they remembers that maybe they might have not said before. It's a solvable case.

NARRATION:

WHILE AUTHORITIES ON KAUA'I CONTINUE TO SEEK JUSTICE FOR AMBER'S MURDER, HER FRIENDS STILL STRUGGLE WITH THE PAIN OF HER LOSS. THEIR TROPICAL HOME CAN'T TRULY FEEL LIKE PARADISE, KNOWING THEIR BELOVED HĀNAI SISTER ISN'T THERE TO SHARE IT.

TERI CEPLO: I feel her presence all the time. I think of her all the time. I think of funny things all the time that we could be sharing, and funny scenarios. She was just so clever. You know, the bond was deep with me and all her friends. We all just loved her so much.

NARRATION:

A GROUP FORMED BY AMBER'S FAMILY AND FRIENDS IS OFFERING A \$20,000 REWARD FOR INFORMATION THAT LEADS TO THE ARREST AND CONVICTION OF HER KILLER. IF YOU KNOW ANYTHING THAT COULD SHED LIGHT ON THE MURDER OF AMBER JACKSON, PLEASE CONTACT THE KAUA'I POLICE DEPARTMENT AT (808)- 241-1681, OR LEAVE A TIP AT UNSOLVED.COM.

NEXT, ON UNSOLVED MYSTERIES:

MARY DODSON: That evening, we were sitting on the back deck. We heard the awful sirens, and I got the awful feeling in my stomach, and I told David, I said, "Something's not right." My worst fear in my life was something happening to one of my children. I've lived that fear.

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

It is executive produced by Terry Dunn Meurer and Chris Corcoran.

Produced by Christine Lenig, Courtney Ennis, Keith Shea and Bill Schultz.

The Story Producer for this episode was Ann Toler and it was edited by Ryan Dann.

From Cadence 13, editing, mixing and mastering by Chris Basil and Andy Jaskiewicz.

Production support by Sean Cherry, Ian Mandt, and Ava Feneberger.

Artwork and design is by Curt Courtenay.

Publicity by Moira Curran, Josefina Francis, and Hillary Schupf.

The original theme music was composed by Gary Malkin and Michael Boyd.

Thanks for listening to Episode 76 of Unsolved Mysteries.