

Coverup exposed in teen's boot camp death

By Larry Hales

Published May 11, 2006 9:12 PM

It took four months for the state of Florida to verify what the family of Martin Lee Anderson, 14, already knew—that the young African American had died as a result of brutal treatment at the hands of guards at a juvenile boot camp. The confirmation came by way of a second autopsy performed by Dr. Venard Adams, Tampa Bay's leading medical examiner, after Bay County Medical Examiner Charles Siebert had declared Anderson's death was due to "natural causes."

Anderson had arrived at the boot camp on Jan. 5 for a violation of probation stemming from a joy ride he took in his grandmother's car. He had been there just a few hours before collapsing from physical exertion. Youth at the militaristic camp are forced to do physical training, which includes running, push-ups and other calisthenics characteristic of military training.

The guards at the camp, which is run by the Bay County sheriff's department, began beating the boy when he complained of shortness of breath.

The beating was captured on video, though the tape was not released until Feb. 17. The videotaped beating shows the thin young man being pummeled by the stout guards. He is hit and kneed, all while a nurse stands nearby. Ammonia capsules are held to his nose at some point. It is clear that the young man goes limp. The guards' response is to continue the beating and to drag his body. The beating went on for at least 30-40 minutes.

Anderson died at a hospital just hours after arriving. He had been at the Bay County boot camp for less than 24 hours.

Salt was heaped on the open wounds of Gina Jones and Robert Anderson, the young man's mother and father, when medical examiner Siebert stated that he died of natural causes. Some would say that for Siebert to have a medical degree is tragic comedy, since he stated that Anderson died from sickle cell trait, which is generally a benign condition. This effort to cover up the truth failed.

In rare circumstances, people with sickle cell trait can die. Death can occur through physical exertion and high heat, but this is extremely rare. And even if it had been the case here, then at the very least severe criminal neglect and abuse would still have been the cause of death because, after the young man complained of shortness of breath, he was beaten and denied medical treatment.

Siebert virtually exonerated the guards and nurse of any culpability when he released his Feb. 16 autopsy report. "This is a valid, backed-by-science diagnosis," Siebert stated. He also said, "There was no trauma significant enough to contribute to or cause his death."

Siebert further said in his findings that the physical blows were not responsible and that the guards and nurse were "mistaken" in not getting Anderson medical treatment. He mentioned nothing faintly resembling admonishment of the guards or nurse for the death of this teenager.

Video sets off storm of action



Leading a march in Tallahassee, Fla., are (from left) Rev. Al Sharpton; Gina Jones, mother of Martin Lee Anderson; and the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

The videotape was released a day after the autopsy report. Anyone who saw the video could see the brutality and that Anderson went limp as a result of the beating.

The video and report set in motion a storm of action, from the parents as well as from Black communities in Florida and around the country. Bay County responded not out of compassion, but from the reaction that reverberated around the country.

Anderson's body was exhumed on March 10. The family had always demanded the truth and felt there was a cover-up. The family hired a private doctor to observe the second autopsy.

Dr. Michael Braden, the private doctor, said that Anderson did not die of natural causes.

Late in March it was revealed that Florida Department of Law Enforcement Commissioner Guy Tunnell had been exchanging e-mails with those he was supposed to be investigating. The emails were "chummy," revealing a back-scratching relationship that had up to that point seemed to cover up Anderson's killing.

Students in Florida put pressure on the state to take action. National Black leaders converged on Florida to demand justice. The state responded to the ever-growing din.

On May 5, the official second autopsy report was released. It showed that Anderson had been suffocated by the guards. The second autopsy revealed that the lethal amount of ammonia Anderson was made to inhale caused the young man's throat to seize. His mouth was covered, while guards held the ammonia capsules under his nose.

The guards at the camp are now under investigation and all boot camps in the state have been shut down. It is important to highlight that it took over a month before the truth began to be revealed.

These kinds of incidents at the hands of racist cops are commonplace in prisons and jails and on the streets. Cops and the prison-industrial complex are just weapons of the capitalist class. In fact, these representations of the state are not much different from the CIA prisons at Guantanamo or Abu Ghraib.

People of color are aware of the above facts because the police and prison system are used more often against oppressed communities, which have the most to gain by decisive action against state repression. As the family, the community and supporters demand justice for the killing of Martin Lee Anderson, the measures that led to his death must be further scrutinized and an analysis made as to why this beating and killing of a young man was not merely an exception.

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