

## **Public records revealed the truth about how my son was shot to death by police**

By Sheila Albers

“There was a Honda Odyssey minivan in the garage. As the door opened, the minivan backed up, toward the second officer who was standing directly behind it. The officer drew his sidearm. He shouted “STOP THE CAR” in a booming voice that was picked up by another officer’s in-car recording system a block away. The van accelerated toward the officer. The officer shot twice while moving away from the van.”

- Office of the Johnson County, Kansas District Attorney Media Fact Sheet, Feb. 20, 2018

Across the nation, local governments sometimes disseminate false narratives in cases of officer-involved shootings. Local officials can craft messages that favor police because the community rarely has access to the information that would contradict that message.

If the goal is to conduct an impartial and thorough investigation, public access to information is crucial.

On Jan. 20, 2018, the unthinkable became a reality. My oldest son John was home alone and posted distressing messages about suicide on social media. His friends were worried and called 911. Overland Park Kansas Police Officer Clayton Jenison responded to a welfare check at our home. Jenison unholstered his weapon as he watched the garage door slowly open. John pulled the minivan out in a straight line at 2.5 mph.

Jenison yelled stop and fired the first of 11 shots into the minivan, hitting my son six times. Jenison had his firearm drawn as the garage door opened and was standing to the side of the vehicle with each shot fired. He did yell “stop the car,” but not so loudly that another officer’s in-car recording system picked it up a block away. It was Jenison’s own audio pack that transmitted the sound, which was then audible through their in-car systems. The van never accelerated toward an officer.

All these details matter when determining whether an officer is justified in using lethal force. Justice comes down to who has access to the evidence, documents and unredacted video footage. It’s crucial to understand that we know what we know today because of a neighbor’s doorbell recording, not from information initially provided by the police or District Attorney.

That recording contradicted the narrative and was the catalyst to the public outcry for additional information. What we saw on that recording started my open records journey.

Several years after we lost John, there were still missing pieces of information. I asked for the crime lab reports from the Johnson County District Attorney, Steve Howe. Howe used the Kansas Open Records Statute to deny my request. Under Kansas law these records are considered criminal investigative records and are exempt from disclosure.

In a last-ditch effort to obtain this information, I put in a KORA request to the Johnson County Crime Lab. Within a week of my request, I received a phone call that I needed to bring \$25 cash to the Johnson County Crime Lab, and they would provide me all the information on a flash drive.

The evidence on the flash drive confirmed what we had thought all along. The officer was never in any imminent danger. Additionally, it exposed that the District Attorney had cleared the officer of any wrongdoing before the crime lab had even completed its work.

In January 2024, the Kansas Office of the Disciplinary Administrator dismissed a complaint against Howe for releasing a false narrative but found it did have merit and issued a letter of caution. Jennison resigned his position, and in 2019, the city settled a lawsuit with me without admitting guilt.

It took years of litigation, open record requests, and a federal Department of Justice Civil Rights Investigation to correct the narrative in my son's story. No family should have to endure this process just to get the facts surrounding the loss of life.

Sunshine Week and the work supported by the Brechner Freedom of Information Project and the National Freedom of Information Coalition is about more than open government and transparency. It is about ensuring the criminal justice system is serving the people it has been entrusted to help.

*Albers is a mother, educator, and mental health advocate who has dedicated her life to fighting for transparency and justice following the tragic loss of her son in a Kansas police shooting. With a focus on accountability, she has uncovered hidden truths and driven policy changes in local government and law enforcement. Albers can be reached at [sheila@albershcs.org](mailto:sheila@albershcs.org)*