

weekend

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A MOTHER'S SEARCH





For more than a year, Mason resident Nancy Cotter has been looking for answers concerning her daughter Rylan Cotter's death. The windows of her home still contain faint traces of Rylan's name. "On the night of the visitation, we had a bonfire. I stood here smoking cigarettes and writing her name a thousand times (on the fogged windows)," she said. It helped Nancy Cotter process her daughter's death, she said, because she didn't know what to do.

Cotter's quest to learn more about her daughter's death continues 1 year later

By Jacob Carpenter
THE STATE NEWS

Dozens of pages with hastily scribbled notes are crammed into a leather-covered binder on a table in Nancy Cotter's house. Inside are records of every phone call, every inquiry, every plea she has made to answer the question that has devastated her for more than a year: How did her daughter, Rylan, die on Jan. 7, 2008?

Police said Cotter's daughter, an MSU junior majoring in international relations, jumped from an electrical tower and killed herself in a small Indiana town. Her mother, however, disagrees.

She said shoddy police work and a coroner's incorrect suicide ruling have marred the investigation.

For months, Cotter has fought to clear her daughter's name with little success. From neighboring police agencies to state governors' offices, Cotter has spent countless hours looking for somebody to take up her cause. But the question remains whether there is enough evidence to prove police wrong in their ongoing investigation of Rylan Cotter's death.

Searching for a reason

In the early afternoon of Jan. 9, 2008, a maintenance worker at Brassie Golf Course in Chesterton, Ind., found

the body of Rylan Cotter.

She was 28 feet from the base of an electrical tower, lying with her arms outstretched, keys in one hand, a lighter in the other and a small cut on her left wrist wrapped in toilet paper.

Rylan left East Lansing by herself at about 2 a.m. Jan. 7, 2008, and checked in to a Benton Harbor hotel at 3:30 a.m. She checked out alone eight hours later and drove to Chesterton.

While in Chesterton, a town of about 10,000 residents located 20 miles from the Indiana-Michigan border near Lake Michigan, Rylan stopped at a travel bureau to look at a map of local trails, according to witness reports.

She also went to an unidentified local business to buy a box cutter and the allergy medicine Benadryl, police said. She was not seen with anyone at either stop.

In the early evening, Rylan was seen by a man walking his dog on a trail near Brassie Golf Course, located about two and a half miles from the nearest major road. Cotter parked her car near the Prairie-Duneland

From East Lansing to Indiana (right)

The day of her death, Rylan Cotter left East Lansing, stayed at a Benton Harbor hotel and was seen in Chesterton, Ind.



YI QING SHAO / ISN

Trail, got out to walk and returned to her car in a short time. She sat in her unstarted car and the man walked away. He would be the last known person to see her alive.

To date, nobody knows why Rylan would leave East Lansing in the early morning hours and drive to Chesterton, where she did not have any known contacts.

Searching for evidence

Chesterton police arrived on the scene of Brassie Golf Course at about 1:15 p.m. two days later. Rylan was found about 500 feet south from the Prairie-Duneland Trail and

a half mile from her car.

The subsequent investigation was performed by the Chesterton Police Department, led by Lt. Dave Cincoski. With few answers and questions about how the investigation was conducted, Cincoski has come under fire from Rylan's mother and her supporters. Nancy Cotter and others have questioned whether golfers were allowed to continue rounds while detectives investigated the initial scene on Jan. 9.

The course's general manager, Duane Borcharding, said six members were on the semi-private course that

Chesterton, Ind. (left)

1 Rylan Cotter's car was found in a parking lot a half mile from where her body was found in Chesterton.

2 She was seen walking along a path near the electrical tower police said she jumped from.

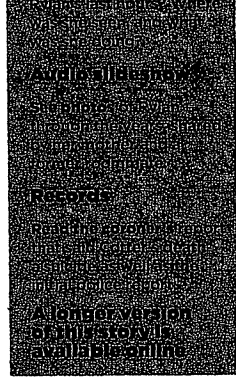
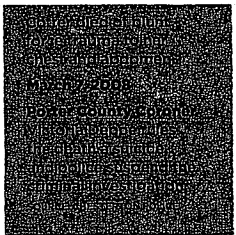
3 Her body was found by the maintenance staff of the Brassie Golf Club near the tower.

4 One mystery is why Cotter wouldn't have jumped from a closer tower if she intended to jump.

day and "there were probably a couple on the course" during the investigation who were advised to stay away from the area where Rylan's body was found.

Cincoski said he couldn't verify whether golfers were on the course during the investigation but said there were no golfers near the scene. Officers also did not close off the trail where Rylan was last seen, Cincoski said, adding "there was no need to cordon off the bike trail."

Kenneth Ouellette, a retired police detective and licensed private investigator who has worked on death inves-



tigations, said police generally "want to cordon off a pretty good area" when investigating a death.

That area is dependent on the investigation scene circumstances, said Ouellette, who is not familiar with the Cotter investigation.

Cotter also said police didn't accept enough assistance from other police departments to supplement the investigation.

Cincoski said Chesterton police received "personnel, property, equipment and assistance" in the investigation from Indiana State Police, See COTTER on page 2A

PHOTO GALLERY

SEE A SLICE OF 'AMERICANA'

This week's feature photo gallery examines Americana throughout MSU and surrounding areas. To view, go to statenews.com/multimedia.

SPANISH ENCOUNTERS IN VALENCIA

Former vegetarian eats Spanish meat
Spanish study abroad student Lauren Talley writes about the meats she's eaten across the Atlantic.

Three-day forecast



Saturday
Cloudy
High: 15°
Low: 3°



Sunday
Cloudy
High: 16°
Low: 6°



Monday
Cloudy
High: 18°
Low: 9°

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Continued

COTTER

Too many factors dispute coroner's ruling of suicide, Nancy Cotter says.

FROM PAGE ONE

Michigan State Police, neighboring Porter police, the FBI, Benton Township police, Mason police and MSU police. When contacted about their role in the investigation, Indiana State Police, Michigan State Police, Porter police, the FBI and Benton Township police said they did not assist in the investigation in any way.

Searching for help

With few answers, Cotter said she has requested to look at evidence police recovered in their investigation but has been turned away. Cincoski said police will not release evidentiary information until the case is closed, per department protocol.

Ouellette said families and friends can sometimes be helpful in reviewing evidence, but there have to be parameters. "You've got to be very, very careful about what you tell families during the investigation," Ouellette said.

Cotter also said she would have wanted — and still wants — additional police agencies to assist Chesterton police.

"I don't think they're hiding anything," Cotter said. "I just think they wanted to put to rest any fears in the town and wanted to be the heroes to solve the case."

While Cincoski said he doesn't see a reason why another police agency couldn't take a fresh look at the case, he said there is no need. "I don't see any reason to, nor has there been any physical evidence to substantiate any different findings," Cincoski said.

Searching for answers

Two months after Rylan's body was found, Chesterton police and an Indiana coroner ruled that she climbed the electrical tower

and jumped to her death. Porter County Coroner Victoria Deppe, who performed Rylan's autopsy, found multiple bone fractures and organ lacerations that contributed to her death.

In her coroner's report, Deppe listed the cause of death as "blunt force trauma to chest/abdomen" with the contributing cause of a "jump." The manner of death was listed as "suicide."

Deppe determined Rylan committed suicide based on the injuries she sustained, physical evidence at the scene and interviews with Rylan's friends. Rylan had never made suicidal comments or attempted suicide before, but Deppe said there were "soft signs" such as slight changes in behavior.

Rylan had skipped several classes, was spending more time alone and had been doubting her ability to make an impact in a war-torn Dardur, where she dreamed of helping, her mother said. Cotter said the change in behavior could be attributed to Rylan coping with the illness of a close family member.

While police and Deppe agree on the suicide ruling, Nancy Cotter does not. She points to several factors that indicate her daughter might not have jumped from the tower. Residents who live near the tower where Rylan Cotter was found have said it is unlikely that she would have been able to climb the tower.

A Chesterton woman 6 inches taller than Rylan said she tried climbing the tower and was unable to reach pegs about 10 feet off the ground that are required to scale the tower.

The woman, who is familiar with the investigation, asked for anonymity because it is illegal to climb an electrical tower and for her safety.

According to the power company that uses the towers, they are designed so that people can't climb them.

Cincoski and Deppe said "physical evidence at the scene" explained the ruling that Rylan jumped from the tower.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NANCY COTTER
Before her senior year at Mason High School, Rylan Cotter, center, left the golf team to become part of the drama department. Cotter was a scratch golfer with a chance at a scholarship, but she wanted to spend her final year of high school in Mason's drama department.

Both declined to elaborate on the type of evidence because the case is still open and all information required to be released by Indiana law has been disseminated.

Searching for change

With the conviction that her daughter did not jump from the tower and the fact that nobody, to the knowledge of police, saw Rylan jump, Nancy Cotter said a coroner can't rightly call her daughter's death a suicide.

Cotter has been supported in her call for a change to the manner of death by John Evans, a former coroner and current county commissioner where Rylan's body was found. Evans and Cotter argue that Deppe cannot definitively call the death a suicide because mitigating circumstances could indicate Rylan didn't jump.

"When you look at the death, I think there are many indicators that the suicide verdict is accurate," Evans said. "But there are many indicators that don't say that, so how can you weigh them both and put the stigma of a suicide on a family when you don't know for certain?"

Deppe said she is "100 percent certain" in her finding after her review of the case.

Cotter has requested a coroner's inquest, a process in which evidence related to the autopsy is reviewed by a jury and a decision is made about the manner of death, but has not been granted one.

"It's not something you see routinely in the state of Indiana and there is no other evidence that has been presented here," Deppe said.

Searching for closure

After more than a year since Rylan's death, her mother and friends have balanced coping with her absence with pressing police for answers.

Many believe Rylan was the victim of foul play or another manner of crime.

They can't picture a situation in which their smart, free-spirited friend would jump to her death without first confiding in her mother.

"She was so close with her mother, that if she was that unhappy, if she wanted to end her life, she would have left something for her mom," said Jessica Hummel, Rylan's roommate the year she died.

Cotter said she will fight endlessly to honor her daughter by searching for what she believes is the truth.

"Before I go to my grave," Cotter said, "I'm going to clear my daughter's name."

Advertisement for Blue Plate Cream featuring a hot roast beef, hot turkey, and hot meatloaf.