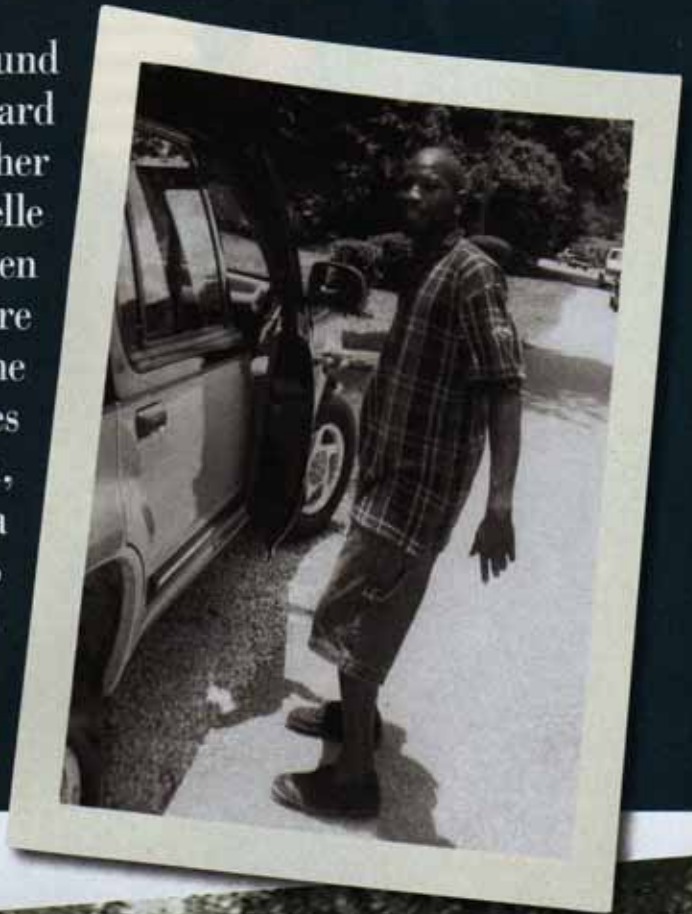


'SOMEBODY HUNG MY BABY'

The death of Ray Golden, found hanging from a tree in his grandmother's yard on May 28, was ruled a suicide. Ray's mother is among the many black residents of Belle Glade who believe he was lynched. Had he been dating a white police officer's daughter? Were there tire tracks underneath him? And how, if he climbed the tree to kill himself, did his clothes and shoes stay clean? Amid the suspicion, rumor, and fear of a dirt-poor Florida town, and as civil-rights groups jockey to control the case, NANCY JO SALES gets some disturbing answers



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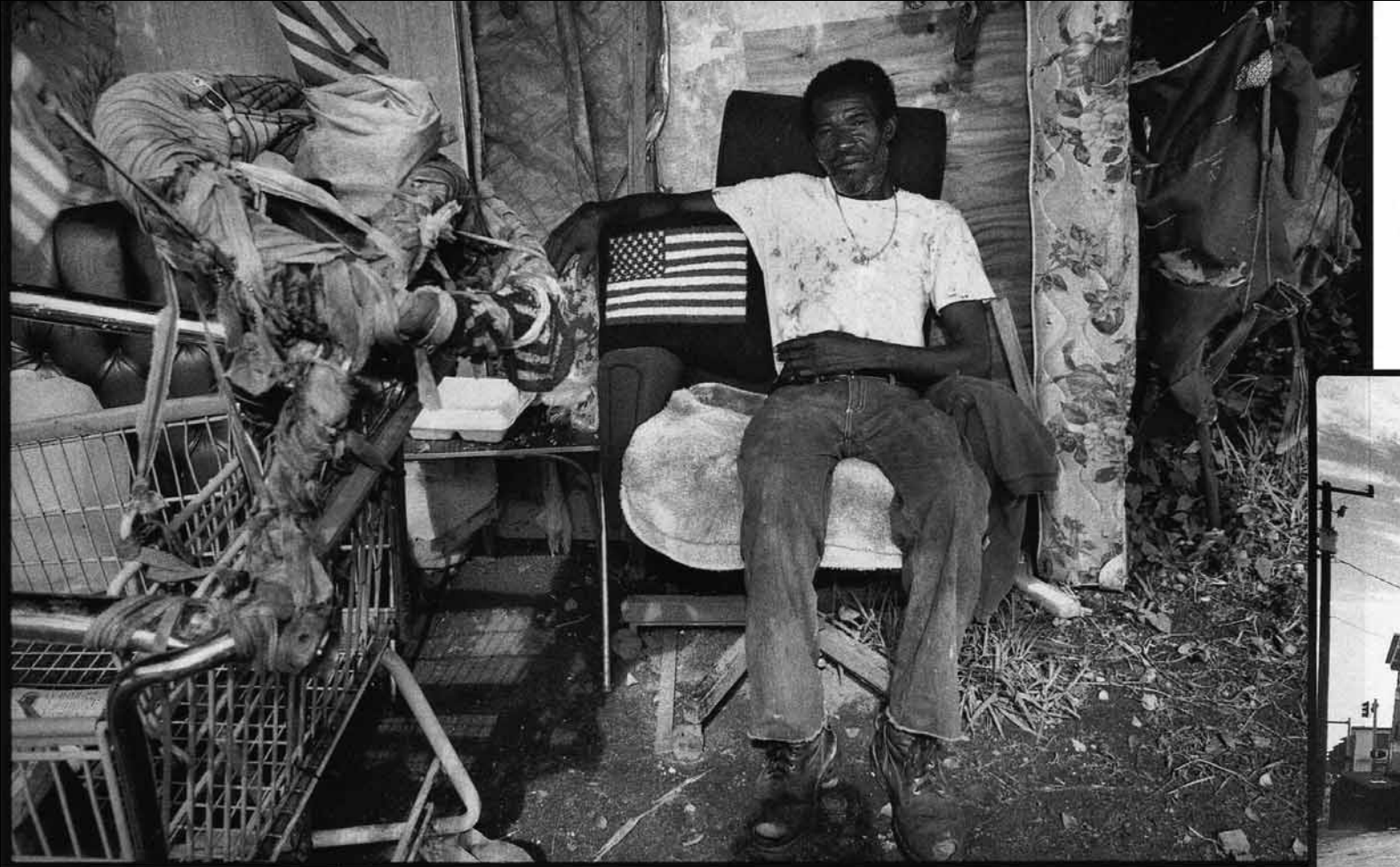
hen I get to the little white house on Southeast Third Street, there's a sign on the door saying, IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS, CALL THE NAACP. I knock anyway, and an old woman finally peers out and sees me standing in the Florida rain. "Well, O.K.," she says resignedly. "But I ain't saying anything."

It's cool and dark inside. The woman, Juanita Lumpkin, has gray cornrows and wears a plain denim dress. She moves back to her kitchen chair with difficulty; she just got a cast off, she says. She slipped in the bathtub and broke her leg the day after her grandson, Feraris "Ray" Golden, was found hanging from a schefflera tree in her yard, on May 28. A lot of people in this town, Belle Glade, still think he was lynched.

A week before I arrived, on July 29, Circuit Judge Harold Cohen concluded an inquest into the hanging—the county's first inquest in 18 years. After two days of testimony, Cohen ruled the death a suicide, as Belle Glade police had characterized it on the day Ray Golden was found, before his body had even made it back to the medical examiner's office.

For both police and the state attorney's office of Palm Beach





County, which initiated the inquest, a statement attributed to Juanita Lumpkin became central in a theme: that Golden was suicidal on the night of his death. "Nobody loves me. I'm going to kill myself," Sergeant Steve Sawyers quoted Juanita Lumpkin quoting her grandson saying. There was no sworn statement, no recording or videotape.

"I never said it," Juanita tells me now, as we sit watching the rain falling on the clothesline in her backyard. "I said he was a rapscaillon. I said we used to joke, me and him and all my children. I'd say, 'Boy, I'ma kill you,' and he'd say, 'Not if I kill myself first.'"

She speaks haltingly, her speech slurred as the result of three strokes. She's 68. She spent 30 years working in the surrounding fields, "in the celery and the beans," and then as a housekeeper for white families in the town, but, she says, "I liked working in the fields better."

She hasn't talked to reporters since the day her grandson died, she says, because "the newspapers twisted my words." Since Golden, 32, was found hanging, a barrage of media coverage has portrayed him as a man who seemed to not have much to live for, "a troubled, divorced, unemployed father of four" (A.P.) who had led a "life plagued by alcohol, violence, failed relationships and repeated run-ins with police" (*The Palm Beach Post*).

"I miss him," Juanita tells me. "I loved him. He made me laugh all the time. He used to rub my feet. He'd go to the store for me. When I had a stroke and I was in the hospital he stayed with me all day."

I ask her if she thinks he was murdered.

She nods sadly. "Yes."



"Why?"

"That, I don't know," she says.

Juanita was not called to testify at the inquest, nor was Golden's mother, Bernice Golden, even though it was Bernice who found him hanging in the yard that morning, at seven. Bernice has maintained since, and also told the media, that when she found her son, his hands appeared to be "behind his back"—a statement which never made it into the Belle Glade police report.

But it made it out into the street. Belle Glade—a poor, rural community of 15,000, 45 miles west of Palm Beach, past hundreds of thousands of acres of sugarcane—has been plagued

with racial tension since Golden's death, if not before. The town hardly needed more to lament. Belle Glade has one of the highest AIDS rates in the country; its air and water are polluted from agribusiness; farmworkers have long complained of brutal conditions and mistreatment by growers. In the 2000 Bush/Gore election, it was the scene of a voting-fraud scandal where, by some estimates, 20 percent of the black vote was not counted. (Blacks make up 51 percent of the population.)

"This is the saddest place in America," someone told me before I came. A sense of racial outrage goes back to the city's founding, when, in 1928, a dike built to keep back Lake Oke-

pened two months before—in which the "person [Golden] was supposed to be dating ... was quoted ... as not having been dating Mr. Golden."

What Sawyers didn't mention is that the young woman, Judi Stambaugh, daughter of Lieutenant Curtis Stambaugh of the Belle Glade Police Department, also told the paper, "I'm probably one of the few white people who do believe that"—he was murdered.

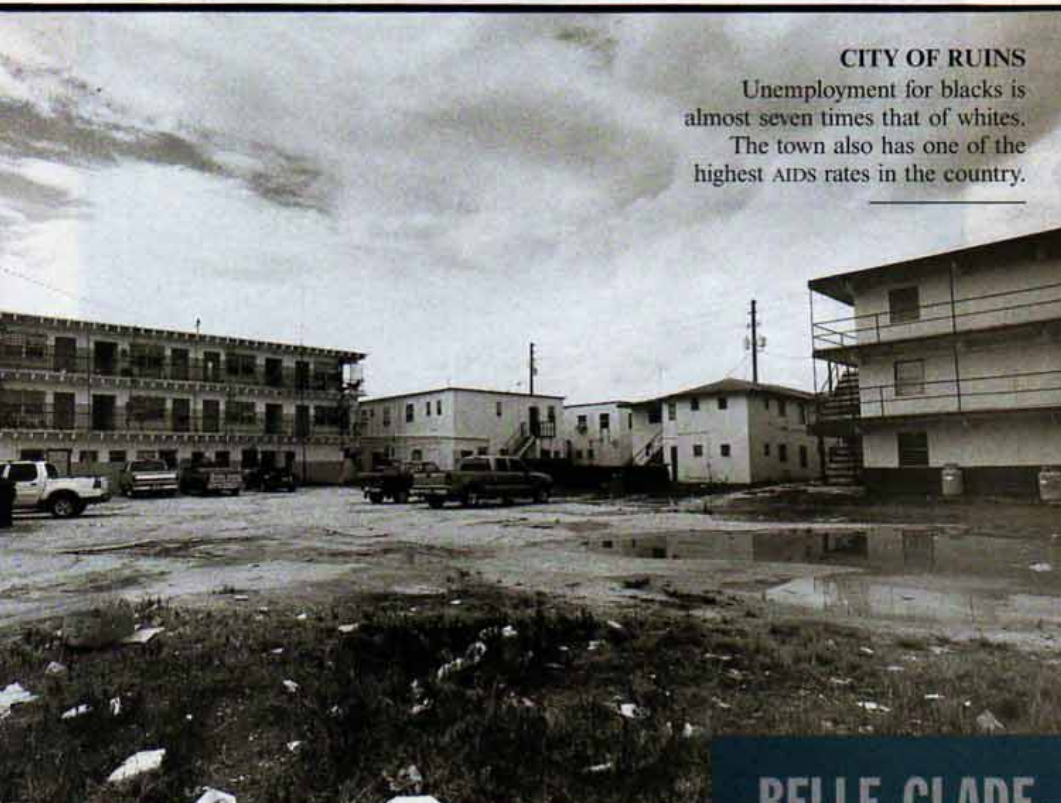
The Stambaughs live a few houses down from Juanita's on the other side of Southeast Third Street; and yet even Golden's family has said they don't think he was in a relationship with Judi.

"So what happened?" I ask Juanita.

"I don't know," she says, staring out at the rain, which is coming down harder now. "I'ma save my breath in case I have to run from here."

The lawn at the side of the house is wide and green with thick Saint Augustine grass. There are many trees, several of which would have been a better choice for someone looking to commit suicide by hanging. There's even a tree with a wooden ladder that leans permanently against it. There's a tree with thick, low limbs in front of the schefflera—a tree which, conceivably, could have provided cover for someone who wanted to kill himself, or someone else who wanted to murder.

The streetlights were out that night. There was a driving rain. According to



CITY OF RUINS

Unemployment for blacks is almost seven times that of whites. The town also has one of the highest AIDS rates in the country.

chobee burst during a hurricane, causing a giant flood that killed hundreds of blacks, who were buried in mass graves. The biggest employer in town, besides the farms, is a prison. The main road, North Main Street, is a bleak strip of fast-food restaurants. Many blacks live in rooming houses with communal kitchens and bathrooms, built decades ago for single occupants.

So it comes as no surprise that most blacks here refuse to see Ray Golden's hanging death as a suicide, whatever the case. But his mother's belief that his hands were "back," possibly tied, when she found him hanging hasn't been the only thing generating a perception of foul play; there was also the rumor that Golden had been dating the daughter of a white police officer—historically speaking, a motive for lynching. The police never checked into it.

When asked, at the inquest, by Judge Cohen why police hadn't investigated the rumor, Sergeant Steve Sawyers said, "Because the way it was placed to me, it was a rumor. And to my knowledge it had no validity."

Cohen: "O.K. Is there any way to run down those allegations, somehow investigate those allegations?"

Sawyers referred the judge to an article in *The Palm Beach Post*, published the previous weekend—the hanging had hap-

BELLE GLADE—A POOR, RURAL COMMUNITY OF 15,000—HAS BEEN PLAGUED WITH RACIAL TENSION SINCE GOLDEN'S DEATH, IF NOT BEFORE.

Golden's toxicology report, he had a blood-alcohol level of .334 percent—more than four times the legal limit for driving. He also had traces of cocaine in his system. So, "stanking drunk," as his mother will later put it to me, he allegedly walked through this long grass to the tree, as I am now doing.

My feet sink into the mucky ground, blackening the soles and tops of my shoes. But in police photos, Golden's boots look to be completely clean. "If no grass residue was found under the boot, how could he walk to the tree?" Judge Cohen asked of medical examiner Christopher Wilson. Wilson couldn't recall seeing any.

I look up at the tree; there's a blue-and-white ribbon tied around one limb; RAY, it says, in glitter. The limb's wet, crumbly bark and lichen come off on my hands. Wilson made no mention in his report of any residue from the tree being evident on Golden's hands or under his nails.

I try to climb the tree. The week after Golden was found,

police took measurements to satisfy themselves as to whether he could have actually done this—climbed this tree and wrapped himself around this limb while tying what was originally identified as a “navy-blue work shirt” in a little crook up high before jumping off. No chair or other support was found underneath, and there was no sign of a struggle anywhere.

“I can’t get up very far. I’m about the same size as Ray, who was five feet six inches, 131 pounds. But the limb is too thin—it’s like shimmying up a straw. I think it might not be impossible for someone wiry and stronger. But what does seem impossible is that Golden could have done this without soiling his clothes.”

In police photos, Golden’s clothes—a striped, short-sleeved shirt and light-blue jeans—also look to be completely clean. At the inquest, Sergeant Sawyer allowed that, when he himself climbed the tree, “I did stain my trousers and my shirt.”

“What you doing up there?” I hear someone ask.

I turn around. There in the yard is a fierce-looking woman in a leopard-print dress and a blond, pink-streaked wig with bangs. Her name is Carleen Downing, she’s a member of the local N.A.A.C.P., and she’s heard I’m here, and has come over from her job to try and run me off.

I get down, wiping my pants. “I just can’t understand how he did this,” I say, walking over.

Carleen fixes her big, steady eyes on me. It’s a

yard the morning Golden was found, one of a few people along with family members. Before leaving the yard that day, Carleen contacted Linda Johnson, president of the local N.A.A.C.P., setting in motion a chain of events leading to the inquest and the national attention Golden’s death has received.

From the moment she arrived, at around 10:30, Carleen became concerned with how police were handling the scene: “The area already looked contaminated.” She says she saw police stepping around the tree, not taking care to preserve any possible footprints or the tire tracks she says she saw herself, clearly visible in the mucky grass. “They came off the road into the yard and



“THERE’S SO MUCH FEAR AND INTIMIDATION GOING ON AROUND HERE,” CARLEEN TELLS ME. “EVER SINCE THAT BOY GOT LYNCHED THEY BEEN ON US,” A WOMAN SAYS.

straight up to the tree, stopping right under the limb,” she says.

These tracks did not appear to have been made by police cars or the medical-emergency vehicles which had parked in the road or in the yard more than 20 feet away from the tree. Police deny that any tire tracks existed. After talking to

look I’ll see often in the next weeks in Belle Glade: Can I trust you? Why have you come?

“O.K. then,” Carleen says after a moment. “You better come with me. There’s a lot going on around here nobody understands.”

A few days later, Carleen and I are driving in my rental car toward Southwest Sixth Street, where she’s going to introduce me to some people who knew Ray. Southwest Sixth Street is the city’s red-light district, without red lights. A place where unemployed people tend to sit and drink.

Unemployment for blacks runs high in Belle Glade—at more than 15 percent, almost seven times that of whites. The average annual income for blacks is less than \$8,740, about 40 percent of whites’.

“They keep saying he had no job, but there is no jobs,” Carleen is telling me.

She’s 49; she describes herself as an activist, was the local organizer of the Million Mom March, and is an advocate on education issues. She runs a substance-abuse prevention program for pre-teens at a private mental-health facility a block away from Juanita’s place, which is how she came to be there in the

Carleen, I spoke with five other people who were there at the scene and also say they saw the tracks (Michelle Golden, Shresee Lumpkin, George Houze, Terry Williams, and Dianne Giammarco).

“Were there tire marks anywhere?” Assistant State Attorney Elizabeth Johnson asked Officer Richard Mathis at the inquest. Mathis: “None that I observed at all.”

Carleen became still more alarmed when, she says, police did not collect evidence that seemed germane, such as the half-empty can of Natural Light beer and stubbed-out, half-smoked Black & Mild cigar that were sitting on the wooden table in the carport where Golden had last been seen by his family, at around 10 P.M. “Why did he leave his cigar and his beer?” she asks. “Did someone call him away?”

Police say these items were not relevant.

Carleen herself began talking to people at the scene, trying to gather information. It was then, she says, that a woman named Patricia Canty told her she’d just heard from a neighbor, who’d said that, the night before, she’d looked out her window and seen a black man being chased down the street by two men in a gray car.

"I said, 'Trisha, go get her, find her,'" Carleen says. "'We need to get her statement.'" She was already becoming an unofficial investigator in the case.

But Canty would provide no further information. At the inquest, Golden's ex-wife, Chanta Wheeler, said on the stand that before he died Golden had been dating a black woman named "Patricia." "I heard that the Belle Glade Police Department was chasing him," Chanta said, "but they never... Patricia said she was going to knock from door to door and find out what was going on, but I don't think nothing ever came out of it."

Canty, who works for the sheriff's department and is married, has described Golden only as a "friend" who would "occasionally do home repairs."

There's so much fear and intimidation going on around here," Carleen is telling me as we drive.

We arrive at Southwest Sixth Street to the scene of a police raid.

Men from the sheriff's department, wearing camouflage and carrying rifles, are jumping off the back of a truck and rushing into a little pool hall called Judy's Game Lounge.

People are gathering—women in tube tops and flip-flops, old men in knit pants, a small boy holding a broken toy airplane.

Carleen jumps out of my car to try to find out what's going on, and I am left to stand in the shadeless street with the people, watching.

"Ever since that boy got lynched they been on us," a woman says. "They was here last week—"

On July 25, three days before the Ray Golden inquest, the Belle Glade Police Department conducted a similar raid here.

"I hope Martin Luther King comes soon!" a woman says. WELCOME TO THE DIRTY SOUTH, says her T-shirt.

Earlier in the week, Martin Luther King III said in Memphis, at a convention marking the 35th anniversary of his father's murder there, that his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, would be down to Belle Glade to investigate.

On the recommendation of the S.C.L.C., the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights also agreed—that same week—to conduct its own investigation and then decide whether to advise the Justice Department to look into the case.

In front of the pool hall, an officer is now wresting a young man in handcuffs out the door and pushing him to the ground, shoving a knee in his back.

Another officer is carrying a woman into a waiting ambulance. She hyperventilated, I later learn, when an officer inside trained a gun on her and then handcuffed her, after which she fainted.

"Poor Darlene, she's a retarded lady," her husband, Daniel Allen, a small Haitian man, says to me. "She can't speak good."

He stands by, watching, as his wife, Darlene Morris, is searched for drugs; none are found on her.

I ask a police sergeant here, James Benedict, about the show of force. "We have nothing to hide," he says. "They're selling narcotics in there." I ask him what he thinks of the Ray Golden case; the question seems to anger him. "Have you heard one piece of evidence?" he says.

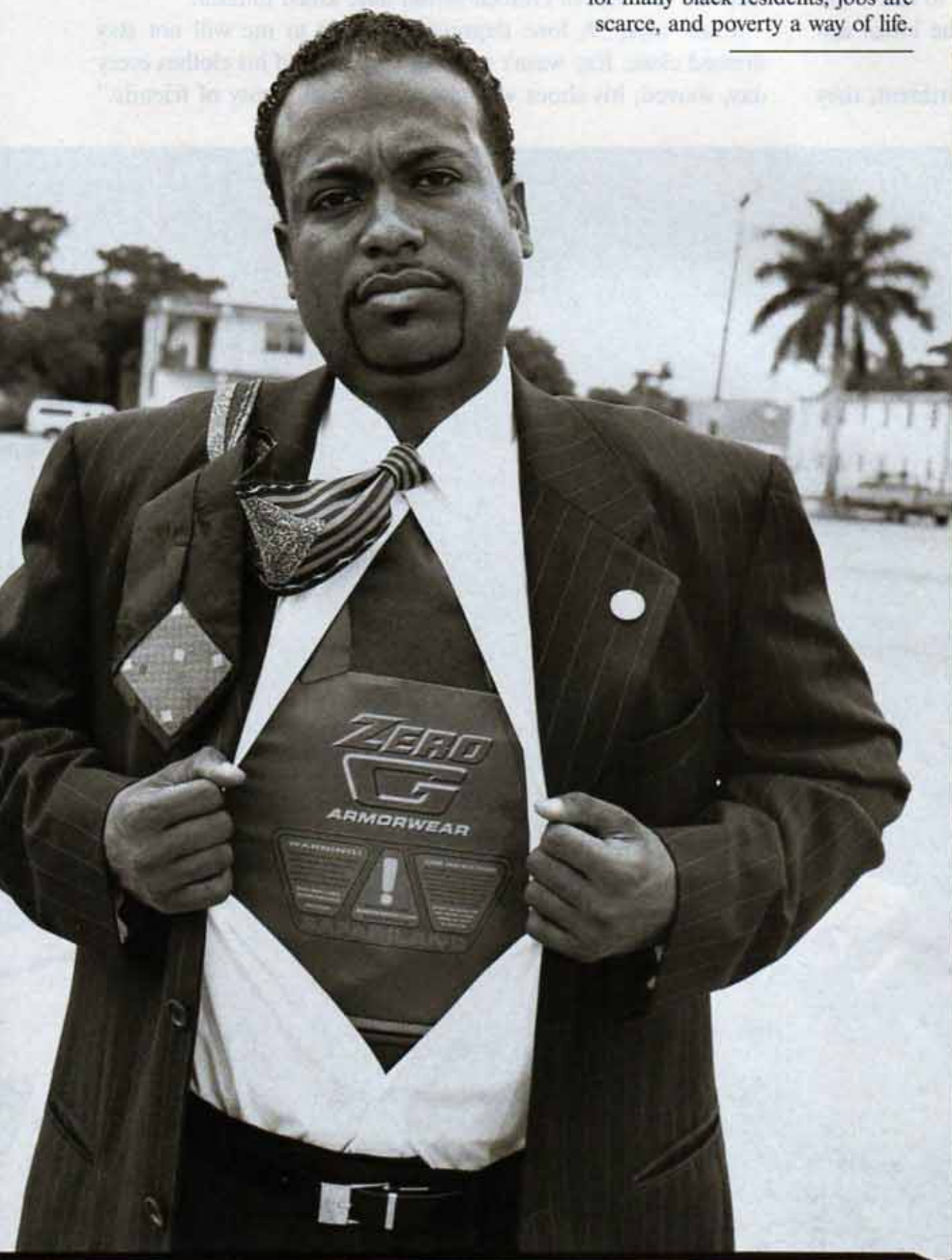
"What about Ray Golden and the white girl?" someone asks after the officer has walked away.

People out here seem very familiar with Judi Stambaugh. "She was in the streets like everyone else," says a girl. "She liked this environment."

Judi's father, Lieutenant Curtis Stambaugh, will later tell me, "She's got some friends whom

MAN OF STEEL

Representative James "Hank" Harper, photographed in Belle Glade, wears a bulletproof vest in response to threats made against him. *Opposite*, for many black residents, jobs are scarce, and poverty a way of life.



she hangs out with on the street. That's where she knows Golden from, because he hung out there on Avenue E," nearby. But people say they haven't seen Judi lately.

Her hair in cornrows, dressed in big shirts and baggy jeans, Judi—also known as Becky, for Judi Rebecca—was accepted among the people on Southwest Sixth Street, even though she is white. "She was straight," says a girl, meaning she was all right.

She talked tough. "Your ass has had it," Judi allegedly told the girl she was accused of stalking in the summer of 2001, according to court papers. The state dropped the charges in April 2002. The case was handled by Judge Harold Cohen, the same judge who presided over the Golden inquest.

"This shit got to stop!" says a young man on the street, throwing a punch in the air in the direction of the police.

Carleen rushes over to him. "Be cool, be cool!" she says. "Don't give them cause to make no arrest!"

At the sight of her, people start running over, telling her, "The police made a false arrest on me—" "They put a gun on my 14-year-old's head—" As fast as she can, Carleen is scribbling down the number of a local N.A.A.C.P. contact on small bits of paper and handing them out.

When the police cars finally roll away, she turns to me. "You see how this thing could turn ugly?" she says. She looks disgusted. "They had to make their presence known."

I get the offense report from the sheriff's department; they

made one arrest, for possession of "a piece of suspected crack cocaine, approximately two grams," worth about \$20.

Bobby's Market is next.

It's a convenience store in the bottom of a grimy white building up Southwest Sixth Street; men are sitting, drinking, on the curb outside.

"The guys come out of the cornfield, after a hard, hot day, they sit here and take you a cold beer," says a man named Richard Clark.

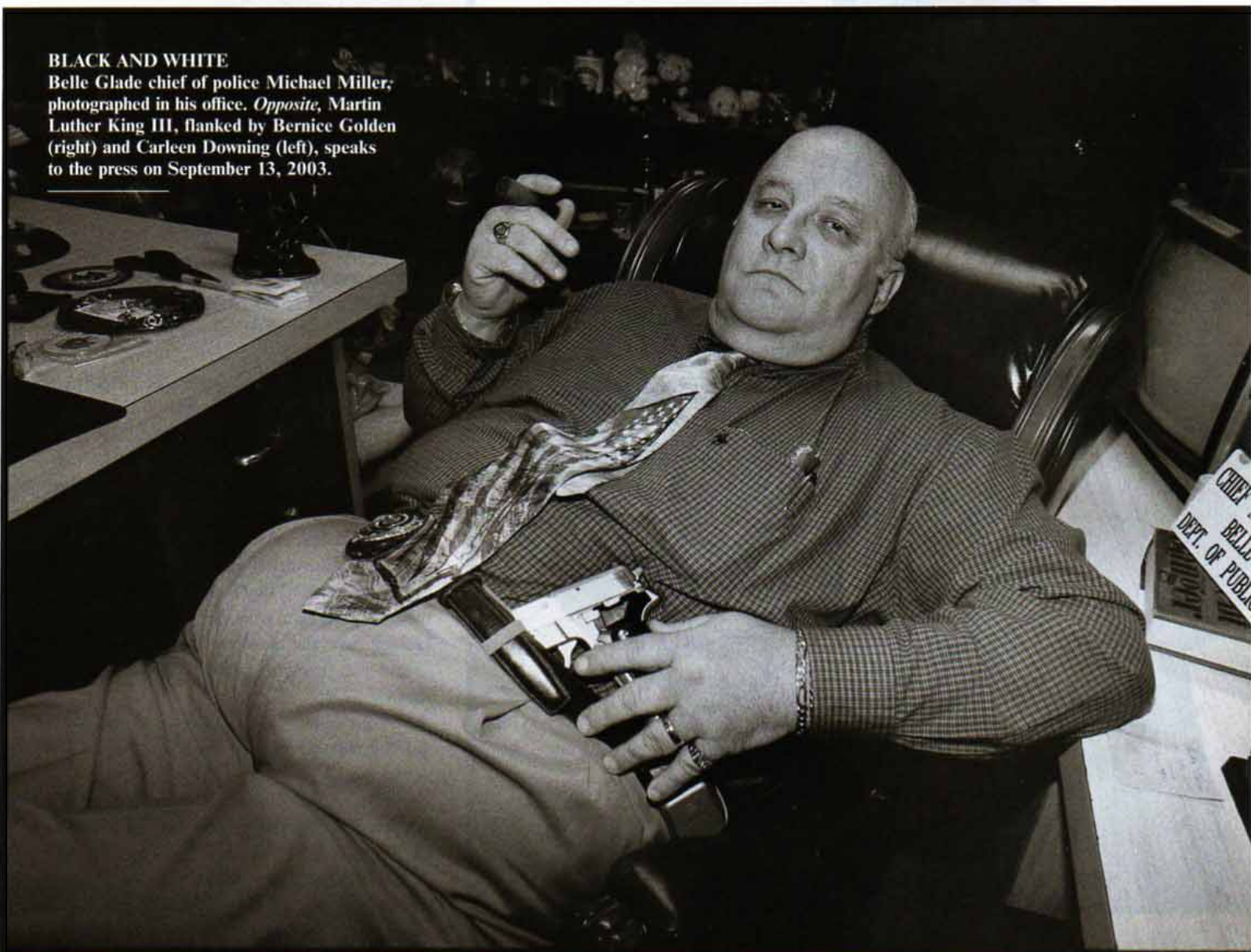
Clark says he knew Ray Golden for 22 years; they grew up in the housing community a few blocks away. He says the last time he saw Golden was out here at Bobby's, the afternoon of May 27. "He was talking about sports. He stayed up on his sports. He loved fishing, hunting. He wasn't no depressed," he says.

At the inquest, the state made much of Golden's alleged depression, calling in two expert witnesses to testify. "I think [he] was a very sick man," said McKinley Cheshire, a psychiatrist; he had never interviewed Golden's family, relying instead on numerous police and medical examiner's reports. In reports in which Golden's family members were interviewed, they said that they did not believe Golden would have killed himself.

Clark says, "A lone depressing person to me will not stay dressed clean. Ray wasn't no bum—he changed his clothes every day, shaved; his shoes was clean. Ray had plenty of friends."

BLACK AND WHITE

Belle Glade chief of police Michael Miller, photographed in his office. *Opposite*, Martin Luther King III, flanked by Bernice Golden (right) and Carleen Downing (left), speaks to the press on September 13, 2003.



Clark says there was a white girl in town—he doesn't know her name—who seemed to have a crush on Golden. "She come over here sometimes, come up here and holler at him on the corner." That's all he knows, he says.

We go upstairs to talk to Pork'N'Bean.

Pork'N'Bean is a Belle Glade landmark, like Bobby's itself; he lives on top of it. He's tall and thin with long gray dreads and giant aviator glasses.

"Ray said he had a white girl, 'but the dad don't like me,'" says Pork'N'Bean, sitting on a chair outside his one-

"They gonna have to kill me. I ain't gonna kill myself for nothing." He said, "You right about that."

A couple of days later, Carleen and I have lunch with Dianne Giammarco at the Black Gold Steakhouse, considered Belle Glade's finest restaurant. Giammarco—husky-voiced, blonde, in a print blouse and jeans—works with Carleen and is a therapist. She too was there on the day Ray Golden was found. "I had lost a child myself," to a motorcycle accident, she says, and so she went over

to the yard, hoping she could be of help consoling the family.

She says she was also bothered by the police handling of the scene. "There was crime-scene tape up for a really short time," she says; but then, just before the police left, they pulled it. "There are certain things you're going to do at a crime scene," Belle Glade police chief Michael Miller later tells me. "And once those things are complete you've done it. It's not going to change."

Giammarco says she also saw tire tracks leading up to the tree and thinks, "It really makes sense from the height where he was hanging that they stood him on a hood of a car and drove away." She



room apartment. "I ain't never saw the girl and I don't know who the daddy was."

Ray Golden was, it seems, quite popular with women. At the inquest the state mentioned several different women Golden had allegedly known, in a seeming attempt to paint him as not only an unemployed alcoholic but also a womanizer.

"Listen, he had a lot of friends," says Pork'N'Bean, "but who his girlfriend was, he told me he had a white girl. All the rest of them, he called them 'chicks,' but the white girl, he said that was his girlfriend. He said the daddy didn't like him. I said, 'You better leave her alone, why'—Jesus, hell, shit, that's why he got hung probably."

I ask why he thinks Golden was killed. "The man ain't hang or kill himself," Pork'N'Bean scoffs. "The man was talking about his son, about how his son did so good in school." Golden had four children—Denise, 12, Feraris, 11, Fekaris, 10, and another Feraris, 8. He had their names tattooed on his chest.

"He always talk about how much he loved his grandma," says Pork'N'Bean. "He'd always say, 'I gotta go check on Grandma. Somebody take me home.'"

"We was talking one time about that boy shot himself 'cause he thought he had AIDS, and I said,

"I AIN'T NEVER STOPPING," BERNICE GOLDEN SAYS, ARMS FOLDED, LOOKING OFF INTO THE FIELDS, "UNTIL THEY TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED TO MY BABY."

says she heard a woman at the scene she thought was "a relative of the family say that a neighbor had seen a gray car with two or three occupants drive away that night—that's when the dog was barking."

At about four A.M. on the night Golden died, family members say, their mutt, Sal, who was chained in the yard, was barking, waking them, but they never went outside to see why, because Sal barked a lot—but never at Ray. Golden fed him.

Roughly eight weeks after Golden's death, Giammarco says, she was in consultation with a client when the client—whom she cannot name—asked her to help her make a call to the Belle Glade police. The woman said she had information relating to the death of Ray Golden and it was "weighing heavy on her heart," but "she was fearful."

And so, anonymously, the woman called Sergeant Steve Sawyers at the Belle Glade Police Department and told him her story (details of which I learned later from law-enforcement reports; Giammarco kept it confidential). She said she'd been standing outside a convenience store in the neighboring town of South Bay—a town where, unbeknownst to her, Golden had worked CONTINUED ON PAGE 360



Jessica Lynch

Bogaards, "Her memory is intact and her recall of events during the ambush and after informs the narrative. This is a book that will finally give us a first-person account of what happened."

West Virginia has a population of a little under two million people. Seventy-five percent of state residents graduate from high school, but only 15 percent go on to earn bachelor's degrees. Dotted with small towns, it's a land of 4-H and pie-baking contests, and as you enter Lynch territory, flags, ribbons, and homemade signs of support surround you. Nestled between two hills, Jessica's childhood home offers breathtaking views in front and back.

An enormous yellow bow made from sheet metal adorns the huge tree at the edge of the Lynches' property and has become a

tourist stop for those curious enough to brave the rural one-lane road. Their dog, Cody, a "Heinz 57" mutt, lounges on the porch or under one of the two pickup trucks in the gravel driveway. Out front, an American flag, a state flag, and a P.O.W. flag fly from a pole.

The interior of the house, thanks to more than \$50,000 in donations from friends and family, has been remodeled and is now wheelchair-accessible. The rooms are full of angel figurines, seasonal decorations, and family photos. One wall is lined with the three Lynch children's high-school-graduation portraits.

The walls of Jessica's bedroom are hung with pictures and souvenirs from her time in the military. There's a special photograph and prayer commemorating her fallen comrade Lori Piestewa. On her bedpost sit her Special Ops Barbie and Ken dolls. The color scheme of her room matches a beautiful maroon blanket that Jessica received from the actress Jennifer Love Hewitt, who visited

her twice at the hospital in Washington, D.C. Having been through war, captivity, and a media maelstrom, Jessica Lynch is trying to figure out who she is and what she wants out of life, not unlike most other 20-year-olds in America. She's warm and friendly and, together with her family, has handled the attention and controversy she has attracted with dignity and grace. Though she's still grieving the loss of her comrades, it's clear that she is focused on the future. She has a long life ahead of her.

On Jessica's bedside table, there's a photo of her fiancé, army sergeant Ruben Contreras Jr., who was also part of Jessica's battalion during the war and who is currently stationed at Fort Bliss, in Texas. Contreras's term expires in August 2004, and he and Jessica are planning to get married shortly thereafter in his hometown of Colorado Springs, Colorado. If there's one thing Jessica's sure of, it's this: she *will* walk down that aisle. □

Belle Glade Tragedy

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 335 AS A subcontracted maintenance man for Noah Development earlier this year—and there, she overheard a man she knew to be a drug dealer talking about how he had murdered a man by hanging him. "I aced that sucker," the man said, or, by some accounts, "nigga."

The woman knew only the man's street name—"Skeeter"—where he lived, and that he drove a gray car. (This woman was not acquainted with Patricia Canty.) She offered to take police to the car. But after hearing the information, Giammarco says, Sergeant Sawyers told her he could do nothing with it if the woman did not identify herself.

"I told her I would need to know who was providing this information," Sawyers later tells me.

"I asked him if she could have protection or could she remain anonymous," Giammarco says. "He said there was no protection here. He said she needed to come forward because it was the right thing to do, but they could offer her nothing unless she was threatened."

This was July 29, the second day of the inquest. Later that day Sawyers testified, never mentioning anything about the call—"I wasn't asked about it," he says—even when Judge Cohen asked for anyone with any additional information to come forward. "At that point I had only received an anonymous phone call," Sawyers says.

Unsatisfied with his response, however, Giammarco and her client made another call, on that same day, to Crime Stoppers, which her client had seen advertised on TV

as a place where anonymous tips could be reported.

At the Belle Glade police station, Lieutenant Robert Wheelihan was alerted to the call and filed a report on it, which led to a subsequent investigation, which ultimately "led nowhere," says police chief Michael Miller.

"So, you see, it could have been a black person that did it," Carleen later tells me. "The family never said it was a lynching. They just want the police to do a proper investigation."

Bernice Golden, Ray's mother, lives in a little ramshackle trailer by State Road 715. Beyond the highway, sugarcane stretches to the horizon.

Bernice looks like a child when she comes to the door. She's 49, a tiny woman dressed in shorts, with sticklike legs. She has small eyes below a permanently furrowed brow. She looks shattered.

In the weeks since she said her son's hands were "back," "behind him," when she found him hanging, and national attention of a lurid kind has come to Belle Glade, her family has been receiving threats. A relative who works in the fields says that one evening, when he went back to the company van that drives him to and from work, he discovered the hood of a Klan uniform, dyed dark blue—strangely, the same color as the fabric Ray was said to be found hanging by—on the hood of the van.

Bernice sits on her couch in the dark, watching television, silent. A movie, *Imitation of Life*, is on—a classic, with Lana Turner as a woman whose relationship with her black housekeeper turns tragic when the house-

keeper's daughter tries to "pass as white."

"I'm about to strangle that girl," Bernice finally says of the daughter.

It has been easy for people to dismiss her claims, her insistence that her son was murdered. She is poor, black, high-school-educated, unemployed. But, she tells me, "I'm a strong black woman."

"From the first day," she says, "they said it was suicide. Before they even investigated, they left it at that. So I kept on. When I talked to reporters, I said my baby didn't killed himself. I said somebody killed my baby and hung my baby.

"And then everybody start talking about it, and everybody started thinking, Naw, he ain't kill himself. Saying on the radio, on TV. Now everybody saying, How he kill himself? He was so drunk, and everybody sober can't get up there, so how is that possible?" She adds resolutely: "That's why they reopened it."

White people in Belle Glade will tell me that Bernice "is in it for the money," and that "she wants a settlement from the police." But police departments are notoriously hard to sue, and large judgments are rare.

"I was born poor and I expect I'll die poor," she tells me. "They keep telling me I need to stop. But how can I when my baby didn't kill himself?"

In August, Bernice traveled to Memphis under the auspices of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to attend its convention commemorating the death of Martin Luther King Jr. Bernice had never been to Memphis before. She had never been anywhere, much, never been on a plane (and refused to go on one then; she went by car).

In Memphis, she was treated like a woman! That cop, he crazy.” introduced to such people as Danny Glover and Chris Tucker. She was not impressed.

“Chris Tucker, I dodged him,” she says. “Dick Gregory—he talks too much. He even wore out Martin Luther King.”

She herself seems tired of the machinations of the civil-rights groups wrangling with one another for access to her. At a meeting at Juanita’s house between members of the N.A.A.C.P. and the S.C.L.C. in August, she fell asleep.

The movie is over. Mahalia Jackson sings. “You want to see my baby’s picture?” she asks me.

She goes into her bedroom and brings out pictures of Ray. He was a small, dark-skinned man, a jaunty dresser, always smiling. People say he was the class clown of Glades Central High School, class of 1989.

“My baby was funny,” Bernice says. “He called me once, said, ‘Hey, Bern’—he called me Bern—said, ‘How you doing,’ and I said, ‘I’m tired.’ And he said, ‘Why you tired? You ain’t got no job!’” Bernice laughs.

After high school, Golden attended a trade school in Miami and got a degree in air-conditioning repair. He held various jobs: as a maintenance man, a security guard. He drove trucks on the surrounding farms. In the month he died, he worked the last harvest season, hauling vegetables at Dubois Farms.

“Look at this one,” Bernice says, handing me a photo of Ray, lying in the coffin at his funeral. He’s wearing a suit and still, eerily, smiling. “You see that knot on his head?” his mother asks. “And that one right there, on his cheek?”

I’m not sure. She’s pointing to what may be bumps directly in the middle of Golden’s forehead and on his upper left cheek, but it’s like a Rorschach test.

The report from the medical examiner made no mention of any abrasions other than those caused by the fabric twisted around his neck.

On the day before Ray died, Bernice says, she saw him at Juanita’s house at around four o’clock. He was coming back from town on foot; he didn’t have a car.

When he came into the house, she says, he was upset. “‘You know what, Bern,’ he said, ‘that man told me stay out his f-in’ yard.’” He was talking, Bernice says, about Lieutenant Curtis Stambaugh.

“He wasn’t really in his yard,” says Bernice. “He was standing in the road talking to Becky. Ray said, ‘She called me to ask me something about somebody,’ some black guy, ‘cause she liked black men.’”

But “just like Becky said” to *The Palm Beach Post*, “it wasn’t nothing between [her and] my son. They was just laughing, talking, having fun, hanging around. Ray said, ‘I

don’t want that woman! That cop, he crazy.’”

After Ray calmed down, he reminded his mother about the job interview he had the next day in West Palm Beach. He asked her for money for the bus and if she could bring him some meat loaf for lunch while traveling. “I’ll bring it in the morning,” she said.

Later that night, around nine, he called her at home to remind her of what he needed the next day. She says he was excited about his interview, for a job as a maintenance man at a rental community. “He said, ‘I got my clothes out.’ I said, ‘What you mean you got your clothes out?’” Bernice laughs. “He said, ‘I love you,’ and I said, ‘I love you too.’”

The next morning, at seven, Bernice arrived at Juanita’s house. Her longtime boyfriend, Henry Drummer, 68, was driving. Ray was hanging in the yard.

“I started running and screaming, ‘Ray G.! Ray G.!’” Bernice says.

Drummer immediately got on his cell phone and dialed 911.

“It seems like somebody’s hung themselves on a tree,” he told the dispatcher—a statement which police later used in support of their claim that Golden’s family originally identified Golden’s death as a suicide. In his confusion, Drummer also gave the wrong address.

“I seen my baby with his hands behind his back,” Bernice tells me. “They was back, like that.” She positions her hands behind her, out of view. I ask her if she saw what was holding them there. She shakes her head.

Bernice ran inside to tell her mother what had happened and to keep Destiny, Ray’s three-year-old cousin, from coming into the yard. Three police cars arrived a minute later—within seconds of each other—with Drummer, still on his cell phone, standing on the front stairs of the house, around the corner and out of view of the schefflera tree.

One of the few news organizations at the scene of Ray Golden’s hanging was *The Palm Beach Post*. On May 29, the *Post* reported “the police videotape shows Golden’s body hanging from the tree, arms dangling at his sides, a dark blue or black shirt wrapped around his neck and tied around the limb.”

When I called Rochelle Brenner, a *Post* reporter, to ask whether she had actually seen the “dark blue or black shirt” herself, she referred me to her managing editor, John Bartosek, who explained, “It was a statement attributed to police. They issued a statement that he was hung from a shirt. As for the videotape, we were also going on what the police said.”

The police did, in fact, call the fabric a shirt (or simply fabric), regardless of its color, in their initial reports. In one of the first

reports from the scene, the forensic investigator, Sam Altschul, wrote: “Sawyers stated it appeared to him that Feraris Golden climbed the tree, used a shirt . . . tied around the neck and around the limb and jumped.” Other reports from that day and the day after, by Officers Tim Crandall, Richard Mathis, and Sawyers, also identified the fabric as a shirt.

By June 12, however, the police story had changed, with this explanation, from Officer Mathis: “At the time, the cloth in question appeared to have been possibly the bottom portion of a shirt, however, after examining the cloth received from the medical examiner, it was discovered that the material was actually a bed sheet.”

Since shirts and bedsheets are significantly different in size, even bunched up—and work shirts have collars, buttons, and cuffs, while sheets do not—it’s hard to see how police could have made this error.

“When I cut him down I wasn’t even paying attention to it,” Sergeant Sawyers told me. “I asked Officer Mathis what he thought it was. He said, ‘Steve, I think it’s a work shirt.’ I said, ‘O.K., we’ll go with that for now.’”

Curiously, the forensic investigator, Altschul, also reported that “Sawyers and Mathis started to remove the fabric and retain it until Young”—Joe Young, of J.V. Removal Service, which handled the removal of Golden’s body—“suggested the pathologist might want to see it; they left it intact.”

“It wasn’t much bulky like a sheet,” Henry Drummer told me. “I thought it might have been a dark-blue shirt.” Bernice also says the fabric was navy blue.

“I know I’m not crazy; he was hanging from something dark blue,” said Terry Williams, a woman who came to the scene.

Shirt or sheet; blue, or possibly green—it all became an issue on the first day of the inquest, July 28, when the “ligature,” or noose, from which Ray Golden was hung, was presented in the courtroom, and Shreese Lumpkin, 22, Ray Golden’s aunt, broke into hysterical tears on realizing that Officer Richard Mathis was actually holding up two pieces of a green bedsheet she had owned. (The fabric had been sliced in two when Sergeant Sawyers cut Golden down from the tree.)

In an inquest which seemed to function, for many who attended, less like an inquiry into whether Golden may have been killed than a trial in which he was accused of his own murder—“We have what is comparable to a criminal trial and the defendant was the deceased,” said Dan Paige, a lawyer representing the N.A.A.C.P.—this was the state’s smoking-gun moment.

Thomas Montgomery, a lawyer also representing the N.A.A.C.P., interrupted the proceedings to address the court, explain-

Belle Glade Tragedy

ing the reason for Shresee's outburst: "And she realized," he said, "that the sheet was probably taken from inside the house by the decedent, who would have been the only person who would have had access to the sheet, because there's no evidence that the house was burglarized."

Aside from the apparent factual problems in this statement—couldn't a friend or even a family member have taken the sheet from the house?—it's puzzling why Montgomery, a lawyer for the N.A.A.C.P., would offer so strongly worded an assessment to the court, unprompted by Shresee Lumpkin.

Montgomery never returned calls from me. When I saw him in August at a meeting between the N.A.A.C.P. and S.C.L.C. at a church in Riviera Beach, he told me, "I still don't talk to reporters."

Another lawyer in Belle Glade who is familiar with the case said, "I don't know what was going through his mind. But I know I have to go to court out here every day with this judge"—Harold Cohen—"Doug Fulton, these police officers, and I have to do things to help these poor people who are not involved in this [Ray Golden] case. If I have a guy who has a \$10,000 bond he has to get reduced, it's strictly within their jurisdiction. My ability to help these people is directly related to my relationship with the people in power here."

In a phone call, Doug Fulton told me that it had also been Montgomery who declined to allow the Golden family to be called to testify at the inquest, owing, he said, to their distress.

"But as the state's attorney," I asked, "couldn't you subpoena anybody you want?"

"You can't subpoena someone that is adversarial to the court proceeding for the most part," Fulton said.

(I should mention here that, in the late 60s, Fulton worked briefly for my father, a West Palm Beach attorney, but this gave me no special privileges; Fulton spoke to me for 10 minutes.)

Bernice told me she wanted to testify at the inquest—badly. "Everybody, everybody wanted to get up there," she said, but "they wouldn't let nobody go up there, nobody." I asked her why Montgomery didn't call her to the stand. "He said he wasn't representing the family," she said. "He said he was representing the N.A.A.C.P." (Later, in August, Bernice took Montgomery on as her lawyer.)

"I want to know what happened to the shirt," she said, "and how they got the sheet off the clothesline and got it into the courtroom."

Bernice says she believes that the original

fabric from which Golden was hung may have somehow been removed and replaced—switched—before the inquest. There's a clothesline in the backyard of Juanita's house, and, Bernice says, there had been clothes on the line the evening of Ray's death. Shresee Lumpkin had done the washing the day before, but when it started to rain, she felt there was no point in bringing it in until the next day, after it had a chance to dry.

Shresee's father, John Lumpkin, "was getting on her," Bernice said, "to get up out there, said, 'Take those clothes in.' She said, 'It done rained, Daddy, it done rained.' That's what I was busting my brains out about, 'cause everybody"—meaning police—"was out there [in the backyard] and the sheet was on the line, so I feel they could have easily got that sheet and stuck it somewhere."

"Anything is possible," Chief Miller later told me. "But it just didn't happen. It's ridiculous."

There were also police in the house that day, on May 28, searching Golden's room, which is directly next to the family's linen closet. "I was looking for suicide notes. I didn't think to look at the linen to see if any sheets were missing," Sergeant Sawyers said.

Prior to the inquest, police never took the ligature to any Golden family members for identification. "It was identified at the inquest," said Miller.

"What I also want to know," said Bernice, "is what happened to the clothes?"

Ray's clothes.

The whereabouts of the clothes became the subject of phone conversations I had all one day in September, after a source in the Belle Glade court told me, "The clothes are missing. That's a 99 percent fact."

"I want my baby's clothes," I remembered Bernice telling me. "I asked that detective, Sawyers, when my baby's clothes was coming back, and he said, 'You'll get 'em back. The case is still under investigation.'"

The clothes were not presented in the courtroom at the inquest—only photos of them. When I called Chief Miller, he told me that "everything we had," in the way of evidence, "we took to the court."

I then spoke with Steve Nichols, director of communications for the Palm Beach Circuit Court in Belle Glade, who said that the court did not have the clothes. "We have his cap, a blue cap," Nichols said—another strange thing about this case, that Golden was found with a hat on his head. "We have his bracelet, his watch, and we have the sheet. We do not have his clothes. They were not submitted in evidence. They would be with the state's attorney's office."

Doug Fulton then told me on the phone, "We never had physically anything in our possession. I don't like to get into a mess of

marking evidence and getting everything confused." Fulton said he had instructed the evidence officer on the case, Richard Mathis, to "put everything into evidence."

Mike Edmonson, the spokesman for the state's attorney, maintained that there is a bag in the county clerk's office which may have the clothes in it, but he's not certain.

"Melanie Grimes [of the county clerk's office] hasn't physically looked in the bag," said Edmonson. "It has a red tape on it and she doesn't want to open it."

"Judge Cohen would have to be involved in that," said Fulton.

"If the clothes were still there," the court source said, "and somebody wanted to reopen the investigation, they would be subject to scientific testing" to determine whether Golden had actually come into contact with the tree, or possibly, someone who murdered him.

On August 28, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights delivered a letter to the Department of Justice requesting that it "investigate and ascertain the veracity of allegations that an African American, Mr. Feraris ('Ray') Golden, was murdered, perhaps by local law enforcement officials."

The letter cited the Belle Glade police's apparent failure to investigate Golden's death properly, the reported "knots" on his head, the allegations of tire tracks, Golden's alleged relationship with a white woman, and the marriage of Golden's ex-wife to a white deputy sheriff, among other things. It sounded like *Peyton Place* meets *Mississippi Burning*.

"It's clear to me local law enforcement is not objective," Bobby Doctor, director of the commission's Southern Regional Office, told me on the phone. "There are too many inconsistencies not to merit further review."

Doctor, an old civil-rights hand (he worked with King), lives in Atlanta. "I had a mysterious thing take place here," he said. "Somebody on a motorcycle went onto my lawn and did a series of wheelies three weeks ago, after this whole thing made national news."

I asked if he thought it was related.

"I don't know," he said. "But be careful. People are always winding up in those canals down there."

Chief Michael Miller is quite beloved by most of the white residents of Belle Glade. He's been their police chief for 19 years and was on the force for 13 years before that. I was at a Belle Glade City Commission meeting on August 18 when Chief was presented with a plaque of appreciation by local police and firemen. The meeting was scheduled for seven P.M., but by six, white residents had filled most of the seats

in the city hall, while most black residents stood, to their outrage, at the back. There were old black women and men also standing. At the front, several rows of white police officers sat, more than 20 of them, all dressed in uniform, some wearing patrol-officer jackboots. The applause (from whites) was thunderous when Chief got up to receive his plaque; there was stomping, shouts, and whistles.

"I'm just a simple country police officer," Chief likes to say.

He's a large, affable man—he calls me "ma'am"—with flat dark eyes. He rarely wears a uniform; he always carries an unlit Flor de Oliva cigar. Once, in the midst of an interview, we started talking about music, and he told me he likes George Strait—"hard country"—and that Britney Spears makes him "feel like a child-molester."

He owns a lot of guns. "I have 'em pretty much everywhere," he says, but he rarely carries one. "I'm a nonviolent person."

He likes to play chess. There's a chessboard on his desk in his office, which is cluttered with statues of eagles, pigs, American flags, a life-size clay German shepherd, and a picture of John Wayne.

"I am not a stereotype," Chief says.

He seems angry the day I go and talk to him about the letter from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

"I thought their accusations were irresponsible and inflammatory and not based on facts or evidence," he says. "I think they were prompted by local politicians and activists who have a political agenda, and they're exploiting this tragic incident to facilitate their political agenda."

"That agenda," he later explains, "involves municipal elections, our City Commission, our city manager, and the office of chief of police and director of public safety"—his job. "I think they should be ashamed of themselves," he says.

What he's referring to, in part, is the Medici-esque battle for power which has been going on in Belle Glade in the last year and serves as the twisted backdrop to the death of Ray Golden. To fully grasp the situation demands the powers of someone good at chess.

In March 2002, control of the town government went for the second time in its history to blacks, when three blacks won seats

on the five-seat City Commission. Two white commissioners—Donald Garrett, a produce broker, and Sherrie Dulany, a schoolteacher—are now fighting hard, it seems, to free up a seat, possibly opening up a swing vote. Allegations of sexual harassment, illegal parking, misuse of the office of city commissioner, and even "sexual misconduct with a child" have been lobbed at the black elected officials. None of the charges has resulted in any lawsuits or criminal proceedings.



LAW AND ORDER

Top four photos: at the inquest on July 28 and 29, 2003, clockwise from top left, Sergeant Steve Sawyers, Deputy Sheriff Francis Wheeler, Judge Harold Cohen, and Officer Richard Mathis. Above, N.A.A.C.P. leaders, from left, T. H. Poole, Linda Johnson, and Whitfield Jenkins speaking to reporters.

On the night of Monday, May 27, there was a particularly heated City Commission meeting about whether to fire Tony Smith, the town's first black city manager and subject of the sexual-harassment allegations. The atmosphere surrounding these issues was

already so tense that the local N.A.A.C.P. had called for the formation of a public committee to deal with race relations.

The next morning, Ray Golden was found hanging.

Chief Miller shows me the video. Shot by a camera installed in a police car, it shows a fast, rainy drive north up Southeast Third Street. There are already two other police cars parked in the road in front of Juanita's place. The car with the video pulls hard to the right and into the yard, stopping some 20 feet from the tree.

Ray is hanging there, slowly swaying; it's hard to look. He's inhumanly stiff. His long arms come down, his hands at his sides, not bound in any way.

There's a piece of dark-blue or black cloth around his face; it does not look green. It comes down below his neck, barely farther than where a necklace would be. It's not a lot of cloth. It does not look like a sheet. His clothes look clean.

Sergeant Steven Sawyers comes from the side; four other officers follow. It all happens very fast: One of them grabs Golden's legs while Sawyers, a chunky man about six feet tall, slips getting himself up into the crook of the tree. Supporting himself with the limb, he calls out to someone (the video is silent), and another officer brings him a large folding knife. Sawyers takes the knife and reaches up to cut Golden down, and Golden falls like a tin soldier into the arms of the officers holding his body, and he is placed on the ground.

The officers look grim.

"On the day that the unfortunate incident occurred," Chief Miller tells me, "Miss Linda Johnson, [Glades-area branch president] of the N.A.A.C.P., contacted me at the fire department and said, 'Chief, there's been a hanging and his hands were bound and his feet were tied and he was gagged.' And I said, 'Linda, that's not the information I have.'"

Johnson denies this, and tells me Chief responded, "Oh, you talking about that suicide?"

"I don't recall [my] exact comment," says Chief. "I said it was reported to us as a suicide."

That afternoon, on May 28, Chief says, he met at the police station with members of the N.A.A.C.P. and the Golden family to

Belle Glade Tragedy

show them the police video so they could see that Golden's arms were clearly hanging at his sides. He says he asked for the family's cooperation in investigating the death.

"But Linda Johnson told me that she had instructed the family not to speak to me or any member of the police department without representation. I mean to be very honest with you: I feel the reason why the family did not talk to us, and did not cooperate, was because Linda Johnson told them not to," Chief says.

Johnson denies this, too, but says she did suggest the family get representation.

Bernice Golden tells me the reason she didn't talk to the police was that they had demanded she come down to the police station alone. "They wanted everybody just like that, everybody one by one," she says. In a police voice: "Ms. Golden, I need you to come down to the station." I said, "Look, can Henry come?" "No." I said, "Well, if he ain't coming, I ain't coming, either, oh, no." One by one, they might kill us one by one for all we know—ain't no telling." I ask Chief if the police insisted on individual interviews.

"No, ma'am," he says.

I ask him about the tire tracks people saw leading up to the tree. Chief says there were no tire tracks. He shows me the police photos of the scene. They're overexposed and not close-up to the ground, and I actually can make out something that looks like lines on the ground, but, again, I can't be sure—another Rorschach test.

Chief dismisses all the other issues I raise—the noose was a green sheet, he maintains, and any appearance otherwise is merely a "misinterpretation"; the police stepped freely around the tree because they had to cut Golden down; despite resistance, he says they made every effort to interview family members. He paraphrases, finally, the conclusion of Judge Harold Cohen that "no fantasy or stretching the facts" can say that anything but "depression killed Mr. Golden. He did not die because he was black."

"I think the coroner's inquest brings it to a conclusion at this point," he says matter-of-factly. "We'll certainly be willing to look at any additional information, because all we're after is the truth."

He then shares with me, later, a new piece of information he says he's recently received: another relative of Golden's had come forward to say he believed that Golden had killed himself. "Now, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement actually took that statement," Chief says pointedly.

The F.D.L.E.—the state agency that provides assistance for local law enforcement—has been in town, investigating concerns about the case presented by Representa-

tative James "Hank" Harper. "Frankly," Chief says, "I think Mr. Harper's exploiting the family for political purposes. The truth is the first casualty of politics, and Mr. Harper's a true politician."

Chief hands me a report of the statement Belle Glade police have taken from Dwayne Rumph, a cousin of Ray's and, like Golden, a handyman.

"Rumph [said] he knew Golden had killed himself," says the report, filed by a Sergeant Jeffers Walker. "Rumph added that Golden said that if he was going to kill himself it would be from one of the trees at his grandmother's house."

But what Chief doesn't say, at least not at first—nor does it appear in *The Palm Beach Post* in a later article—is this: on August 14, Dwayne Rumph's car was broken down on State Road 80, 15 miles outside Belle Glade. Looking for help, Rumph called a friend of his, Oliver Hand, who is also a friend of Chief Miller's. "[Hand's] had a couple of problems—not criminal problems," Chief says, "that he's called me about and I've been able to solve for him over the years."

Alerted by Hand as to Rumph's whereabouts, Chief sent Sergeant Walker to find him. Walker approached Rumph alone, on the road, and persuaded him to go down to the Belle Glade Police Department. There, Rumph was also introduced to an agent from the F.D.L.E., after which he gave a formal statement.

"Do you think he might have felt intimidated at all by the fact that he'd been approached by cops, and his car was broken down?" I ask Chief.

"I don't know," Chief says mildly. "Sergeant Jeffers Walker happens to be African-American."

Representative James "Hank" Harper, a Democrat from District 84, Palm Beach County, is a tall, stylish man, aged 32; he wears a bulletproof vest when he travels to Belle Glade, and he never goes in the same car.

On August 6, the same day an article appeared in *The Palm Beach Post* regarding Harper's call for the ouster of Chief Michael Miller, Harper received this e-mail from someone claiming to be representing the Klan: "If the naacp and martin king 3 comes to town, I will issue a fire summons to the Realm of Florida and we will meet this anti Christ, communist in the streets with a peacefull protest!! ... Everyone person in Florida, black or White, knows Belle Glade is a nasty dope infested rat hole of a ghetto." This was signed "Tommy, Grand Dragon, ORION Knights, Realm of Florida."

Harper's push for the firing of the Chief and his calling in of the F.D.L.E. on the Ray Golden investigation have not been popular

moves in his district. He's had to scale back his consulting firm, which did lobbying for the city of West Palm Beach and Palm Beach County. He says a lobbyist for the sugar industry called him recently, asking, "Why did I feel I needed to get involved with this issue, when there are three black elected officials on that [Belle Glade city] council and it's a local issue?"

Now, suddenly, Harper, who in the past has run unopposed, has a challenger for his seat in the 2004 Democratic primary—Palm Beach commissioner Priscilla Taylor, whose supporters include a number of Belle Glade farmers, Chief Michael Miller, and City Commissioner Donald Garrett.

But, Harper says, "I can't stop. It would be unreasonable for me to ignore the conditions of the [Belle Glade] community, the fear of the people, and the oppression that they're under. And I'm young enough to lose everything fighting. . . . I want my legacy to be: He fought for people."

He tells me about the statements he's received from people in Belle Glade, how they have been "cursed at and slapped around. They have these Taser guns out there that they've used to intimidate. They've pointed them at kids, and residents have just been beaten." He hands me an inch-thick stack of these statements, each one testifying to verbal or physical abuse at the hands of Belle Glade police.

Chief Miller calls these "unsupported, unsubstantiated allegations. . . . Some of them are anecdotal. Some of them I guess are rumors," he says. "My position in it all," Harper says, "is I'm not a detective. I don't do any police work, don't have a criminal-justice background. But I know there's a problem. And, whether it's allegations or perceptions, a problem exists."

Harper says he feels the police handling of the Ray Golden case was another symptom of this problem, which is why, in August, he called in the F.D.L.E. But, he says, "[they were] hesitant about re-investigating the investigation, for fear of having to publicly admit that there is a problem with the investigation. And my response to that was: That's your job. How can you work for justice if you can't do that? But there is a law-enforcement code of silence."

"Now the Chief is moving around to the ministers," he says, "calling in favors." Historically, Southern black churches have been strongholds of support in racially charged cases like Ray Golden's death, but, strangely, the N.A.A.C.P. and S.C.L.C. both have had trouble getting a single church in Belle Glade to host meetings on the issue, even prayer vigils.

Chief Miller denies that he has used any influence with area churches.

"I feel like I am about to explode with

Belle Glade Tragedy

the Denny's parking lot—a big man who looked like a former football player, with a blond crew cut; he wore glasses, long shorts, and a blue button-down.

He sat down with me for an hour and drank a single cup of hot tea. He told me he was from Pennsylvania and a Marine; he had signed up in the 11th grade. He said he was 43, and had been with the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office for 20 years.

"There's no smoking gun here," he said. "The man said he was gonna kill himself and the man killed himself. There's no Belle Glade Police Department killed him, the Ku Klux Klan killed him, I killed him, a Belle Glade police lieutenant killed him, my wife and I conspired to kill him. That's all the stories that are going out in the street that I had to deal with. There's no conspiracy.

"You have a man that was depressed who took his own life," Wheeler said. "I don't know why people are trying to make this a racial issue. If I were a black man married to Chanta, I wouldn't be having this conversation with you. A black man hung himself. No one else put that sheet around his neck but him, and if you look at the evidence, you can clearly see that."

At the inquest, Wheeler served as a key witness for the state. He was a white deputy sheriff: theoretically, he couldn't be racist because he was married to a black woman, and he had known Golden personally.

"Every time I spoke to Ray and saw Ray, he was always under the influence of alcohol," Wheeler told the courtroom.

"Has your wife ever heard any threats of suicide that you know of?" Assistant State Attorney Doug Fulton asked.

"You're going to have to ask her, I stayed out of that," Wheeler said.

"As best you could, right?" said Fulton.

"Yes, sir, I did," said Wheeler.

This sympathetic exchange seemed to trouble some members of the audience, who then sent up questions for Judge Cohen to ask of Wheeler. "Are you a jealous husband?" Judge Cohen read. "Did you and Ray ever get into altercations, arguments?"

"We had got into—" Wheeler stopped himself. "I wouldn't say we got into an altercation. I'm not a jealous husband."

"What makes your statement so true?" Cohen read on. "Is it because you're a deputy sheriff? Are you aware of statements that you made that were different from the statements you're making?"

"I don't think so," said Wheeler.

The Belle Glade police report where Wheeler used strong language regarding Golden was not brought into the inquest.

"Jealous of *what*?" Wheeler asked me at Denny's, referring to Cohen's question. "[Ray]

never worked, he was an alcoholic, he was on drugs, didn't have a house, didn't have an apartment, didn't have a car, so what am I jealous of?"

I later learned that Wheeler had some financial problems of his own. In the late 90s he filed for bankruptcy under Chapter 13, in which the debtor negotiates an amount to pay a trustee on a monthly basis over a three-to-five year period. Wheeler said, "My Chapter 13 is over with. I make good money." Chanta Wheeler told me, "When we got married he told me he was trying to get his credit right so he wanted me to carry everything financially in the house."

He told me that day that he and Chanta were married in December of 2002. She is a corrections officer with the South Bay Correctional Facility. There aren't many interracial couples in the area, and so I asked him if they'd ever had problems with that. "It's hard for my wife," Wheeler answered. "She's had some problems with some comments." But he said he has never been bothered by them. "A person's a person no matter what color they are. People need to quit making a racial issue over nothing. I don't care what people think."

Ray Golden was in his life, he said, only because his wife had two children with Ray. (She has two others, aged seven and two, by two other men.) "He's not somebody I'd pal up with," said Wheeler. I asked if he was close to Ray's kids. "Ahm, yeah, as close as I could be," he said.

Ray and Chanta had still spoken frequently on the phone about the kids but, Wheeler said, that was never an issue for him, either. "I tried to stay out of that," he said. He said he and Ray had disagreed about how to discipline Ray and Chanta's kids, and, from time to time, when the kids "got out of hand," Ray would "have a strong talk with them," but he never knew Ray to hit them. Wheeler said, "I don't see anything wrong with taking a belt to a kid—that's why the kids today are so screwed up now, there's no discipline in the family organization."

He said the bond between Ray and Chanta "was broken years ago when the abuse occurred. I wouldn't say they had a strong bond or had a bond." He was referring here to Golden's being arrested between 1993 and 1995 for allegedly battering Chanta. The cases were either dismissed or did not result in jail time.

Wheeler said he did have a problem, however, with Golden's inability to pay child support. "He didn't provide for [his kids] financially at all," he said. "He'd work a job long enough to when they found out he was working and started taking out the child support, he'd quit."

It was Wheeler who told the Belle Glade

police that, when Golden died, he was \$50,000 behind in child support. The figure was never substantiated. In early 2003, Golden did receive a large settlement from an insurance company after injuring his thumb while on a construction job, all of which was taken by the state to be distributed among the three mothers of his four children.

"I sat in that house, the grandmother's house, and had a conversation with him [about it]," said Wheeler. "He was basically trying to con [Chanta] out of \$3,000. He was getting all this money, but he wasn't getting any of it. She eventually understood. He wanted to keep \$3,000 for himself."

Golden's failure to pay child support had, in fact, been the subject of the dispute Wheeler had with him, mentioned at the inquest. But something that had preceded it was not discussed. It happened in April of 2003. Golden was working at a Belle Glade rental community, Palm Glades (now Glades Glen), as a maintenance man, a job for which he may have had to drive a golf cart. Wheeler appeared in Palm Glades one day, checking on a call he claims he received involving an accident with a golf cart. "Ray felt like Wheeler was picking on him," a Golden family member told me. "Ray used to come home and talk about he's tired about this mess with Wheeler."

"Someone called in there complaining someone hit their car with a golf cart," Wheeler said, "and I was checking the golf carts for paint transfer, and unfortunately he happened to have one of the golf carts and I stopped and I asked him and I looked at the golf cart and I guess he felt a little uncomfortable . . . and he raised those concerns with Chanta, and I told Chanta I'm a deputy sheriff, I'm gonna continue to do my job. If I get called to go in there, I'm gonna go in there."

(The manager of Glades Glen later said he was unaware of any call ever being made to the sheriff's department involving an accident with a golf cart.)

When Ray called Chanta to speak with her about Wheeler's questioning him at work, Wheeler said, he got on the phone and told him, "'You need to clean up your act, you need to stand up and be a father to these kids.' . . . That was the only problem that him and I ever had, basically," he said.

"Why would I want to kill him?" Wheeler asked me, although I had not asked him this. "I've got 20 years in the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office. I've got a good job. What motive would I have? I don't have any motive.

"If my wife still loved him, she'd be with him. We wouldn't be starting a family. She'd still be with him." He told me Chanta was pregnant.

I asked if there were any problems in their marriage, as some people in Belle Glade

had been telling me. Wheeler answered, "I'm just tired of being, I don't want to say the fall guy, but all the accusations that are being thrown out there—I do come home and probably take it out on her, and I got no reason to take it out on her, 'cause she can't stop the rumors."

One day in August, I got in my car and tried to go find Chanta Wheeler in Pahokee. I wasn't sure of the exact address. I wound up driving down a dirt road, into a dead end in the middle of a field of sugarcane. And it seemed like the perfect metaphor for how it felt, reporting the Golden case, being trapped there inside the cane.

I spoke to Chanta when I got back to New York; she finally answered her phone, which for weeks had been ringing, ringing. She sounded exhausted. I introduced myself as the person who had spoken to her husband.

"Oh, he done left," she said.

"What do you mean, he left?"

"He left me," Chanta said.

She said that Wheeler had been gone since before I had spoken to him.

I later called Wheeler to ask him about this. "Yeah, and did she also tell you I filed for divorce?" he asked.

Chanta said that he had not filed; or if he had, she had not heard about it. (Wheeler has not yet filed for divorce.)

She said that, a few days before Ray Golden's funeral, her husband had moved out of the house they shared in Pahokee. "I don't know why he left," she said.

She said he had stayed in contact with her over the past months, urging her to help Belle Glade police in their investigation of Golden's death. "You act like you work for the Belle Glade Police Department," she said she told him.

In June, Chanta said, Wheeler called and asked her to meet him at the Belle Glade police station. She thought he was there, working, and just wanted to talk.

But when she got there, she said, he took her inside to where Sergeant Steve Sawyers was waiting to interview her about Golden's failings. "[Sawyers] said, 'Well, your husband told me that [Golden] beat you,' and I said, 'Well, we had fights and he went to counseling'; and he said, 'Well, did he have a drinking problem?'; and I said, 'Yes, he drank a lot'; and he said, 'Did he have a drug problem?'; and I said I didn't see him do drugs and that Ray told me he tried cocaine but that was maybe five, six months ago back."

I later called Sawyers to ask if this interview had taken place and he said, "[Wheeler] asked her to come down to the station for me, yes." Sawyers confirmed that Wheeler had stayed at the station while Chanta had spoken to him.

But Wheeler, Chanta said, still did not return to live at their house.

Then, in late July, she said, her husband was now urging her to cooperate with the state attorney's office. She claimed he called her and told her to come meet him at the sheriff's department, where people from the state attorney's office were now waiting to interview her. "I told him let them subpoena me, but then . . . my job told me that I needed to go." (Wheeler denies that he called and that he asked her to meet him there.)

At the sheriff's department, Chanta said, two people from the state attorney's office asked her the same sorts of questions the police had—about Golden's drinking, his alleged drug use, and abuse of her—which Golden's family members say they knew nothing about, but Chanta did, and she had also, she said, told Wheeler about it.

I called Mike Edmonson, the spokesman for the state attorney's office. He confirmed that Assistant State Attorneys Doug Fulton and Elizabeth Johnson had interviewed Chanta at the sheriff's department prior to the inquest; Edmonson said he didn't know whether Wheeler had brought her there.

After the interview at the sheriff's department that day, Chanta said, Wheeler met her in the parking lot, and his attitude toward her had changed, suddenly.

"He came home with me that day that I went in for questioning," she said. "And I was really early [in my pregnancy], about two months. He said, 'Yeah, let's work it out,' and told me he's sorry for being a bad husband and he was gonna do better and he was hoping after the inquest was over, everything goes back to normal."

This was two days before the inquest.

When Assistant State Attorney Elizabeth Johnson asked Chanta about the state of her marriage, on the stand—"And your relationship is . . . ?"—Chanta paused, then answered cryptically, "Pretty much."

There were surprised murmurs throughout the courtroom. As if to clarify the point that the couple had a solid relationship, Johnson continued, "Well, let me just ask you, are you expecting?"

Chanta answered, "Yes, ma'am."

Chanta told me on the phone the day we spoke that she had lost her baby, just two days before. "I don't even know if he knows yet," she said, meaning Wheeler. "I don't know if it was due to stress."

She had been four months pregnant; it was now September, which meant she would have become pregnant right around the time Golden was found dead. She said there was no way the baby could have been Ray's, but she didn't know if her husband thought so; he had never said that.

"No, heavens no," Wheeler told me when I interviewed him. "I know for a fact he wasn't still involved with my wife."

A week after the inquest, Chanta said, Wheeler left her again, and has not been back since.

In the months since, she said, she has thought about the inquest, and how "I just got up there and said all those things 'cause I thought he was home."

Besides her husband, Chanta Wheeler was the state's most effective witness against, essentially, Ray Golden.

She answered questions about Golden's drinking, his failure to pay child support, his experimentation with cocaine. And yet, she seemed at times to be trying to defend him. Regarding the child support, she said Golden had told her it was "O.K." with him that the money from his paycheck was going to the kids.

"It's O.K.?" Johnson asked.

"Yes," Chanta said.

"He had a good relationship with [his boys]," Chanta said. "He would go on track trips with my oldest son, come by quite often and take them out when he could." The weekend before he died, in fact, Golden was in West Palm Beach, videotaping Feraris Jr., at a track meet.

"Most the time when he came by the house, he was happy when I saw him," Chanta told the court. "He was very happy about going places and doing things with the boys."

It was ultimately CONTINUED ON PAGE 370

VANITY FAIR

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(Signed) Charles H. Townsend, Executive Vice President/Chief Operating Officer

Belle Glade Tragedy

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 367 Chanta, however, who provided the state with the most powerful motive Golden would have had for killing himself. Chanta said that Golden's grandmother told her that the night before he was found hanging, "they had a big argument in the house."

"We did not fight," Juanita told me. "Ray kissed me that night."

Chanta told the court that Shreese told her that "there was an argument in the house and that they were telling her—or him—you know, that they were the problem with the grandmother getting so sick and that Ray said that before he kills his grandmother, that he'll kill himself."

Shreese had never described such an argument to police. "[Chanta and I] do not have that kind of relationship for me to call her up. That's a bunch of garbage," she told me.

"[My mother's] been sick for years," said Bernice. "There wasn't no argument."

Chanta also told the court that, on the day of Ray's death, Bernice said she had never seen his hands "behind his back." Bernice, meanwhile, says she never spoke to Chanta except to acknowledge her briefly.

"I couldn't talk to my mama," on that day, "how I'm gonna say that to Chanta?" said Bernice. The two had been estranged since Ray ran away, at 19, to marry Chanta when she was 15 and pregnant with Feraris. They were childhood sweethearts.

On the phone with me, Chanta maintained that these conversations with Golden's family members had taken place. "I went over there," to Bernice, "and she said [Ray's hands] weren't tied, they were to his sides. Later on she said they were," she said.

"I don't know why. Maybe to get someone to look into it further."

On September 13, Martin Luther King III came to Belle Glade. He had been warning, promising, to do so for weeks. On the morning he was to arrive and go "see the tree," Bernice moved slowly, indifferently, around Juanita's house, trying to fix herself up. She put on her best dress.

Family members were coming and going. Juanita sat in her kitchen chair, a comb stuck in her hair. "They best not take any pictures of me," she said. There were already satellite news trucks from several local stations parked in the road, and newspaper reporters camped everywhere.

Bernice and Juanita didn't know how the newspeople knew to come that day; King's people from the S.C.L.C. had told them he was just coming to visit them.

Meanwhile, it had been announced that day, on the front page of *The Palm Beach Post*, that the S.C.L.C. would be holding a

press conference that afternoon under the tree. The S.C.L.C. had not informed the Golden or Lumpkin family of this.

"Well, Sevell, he likes the cameras," Bernice said.

"Sevell" was Sevell Brown, president of the S.C.L.C.'s Florida chapter. He was the one who had met Bernice, the day the inquest concluded, with a lawyer, Kemi Reed, who later escorted Bernice to Memphis for the S.C.L.C. convention there.

Sitting in Juanita's kitchen, waiting for King to come (he was late), Bernice called Linda Johnson of the N.A.A.C.P., complaining about the press caravan outside her mother's house. Johnson expressed surprise herself, but in the end Bernice agreed to have her picture taken with King under the tree.

In the months I was reporting this story, I observed a battle for control over the Golden case, its direction and its photo opportunities, being waged by leaders of the N.A.A.C.P. and the S.C.L.C. The rivalry between the two civil-rights organizations is historic. Since the 60s, the slower-to-action, more methodical N.A.A.C.P., founded in 1909, has been frequently enraged by the more press-friendly S.C.L.C., co-founded in 1957 by the charismatic Martin Luther King Jr.

This rivalry had been playing itself out in the Golden case. Over two months of my calling the N.A.A.C.P.'s national office, in Baltimore, Kweisi Mfume, its president, never called to give me a comment; he has not commented anywhere about this case.

At the same time, it was Sevell Brown of the S.C.L.C. who was the first among civil-rights leaders to call Golden's death a "lynching," on the very day the inquest concluded. At the S.C.L.C.'s Memphis convention, Martin Luther King III declared, "Black folk don't hang themselves."

It would seem that King had been in need of something to come along and jump-start his career. In June of 2001 his father's organization suspended him as S.C.L.C. president for "inappropriate, obstinate behavior," failing to set a clear agenda, absences, and failure to raise enough contributor dollars; they then reinstated him a week later, after which King provided them with a three-year plan of action for the organization. He was into its second year when Ray Golden was found hanging.

Since then, the S.C.L.C. has come into the news much more frequently; it had been an organization on the sidelines, with a Web site devoted to issues such as teen smoking—important, but hardly a cause with the resonance of a lynching. (Since the Ray Golden case, the S.C.L.C. has refurbished its Web site, with many new features still "coming soon.") With the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington, in August, and now with the Golden case—which King refer-

enced in his speech at the commemoration of the original march—the S.C.L.C. is once again becoming a player in civil-rights politics.

"One of the things we have is the beginning of a movement," Bernard LaFayette, board member of the S.C.L.C. and one of King's closest advisers, told *The Palm Beach Post* in September; LaFayette marched with King Jr. in Selma. "I know [a movement] when I see one," he told the paper excitedly.

The night before coming to Bernice's to "see the tree," the S.C.L.C. held a "V.I.P. reception" at the oceanfront Canopy Palms Resort on Singer Island.

At around two P.M., a motorcade pulled up outside Juanita's house. The reporters and satellite crews made ready. King—looking remarkably like his father, but softer, somehow, and less mightily focused—burst joyously through the door with an entourage including Brown, LaFayette, and local preachers and politicians.

Juanita was now clutching a faded *Jet* magazine she had saved from 1968, a memorial to Martin Luther King Jr.; she wanted to show it to his son.

Cameras clicked. In Juanita's living room, Bernice hugged the son of King tight, dwarfed by his size, venturing a small smile, as if she thought, or hoped, he might really be able to do something about all this.

Does anyone have any information at all?"

The S.C.L.C. leaders sat at a table, a few hours later, in the Glades Covenant Community Church in South Bay, housed in a small, aluminum-sided building. The meeting was open only to the S.C.L.C., the N.A.A.C.P., and members of the South Bay congregation. The S.C.L.C. was looking for answers.

"Anyone at all?" said LaFayette.

They were hoping someone in the community could provide information about Ray Golden's death. But only about 100 people were there, many of them friends and family of Linda Johnson, as this was her church.

A few people raised their hands, hesitantly.

King, LaFayette, and Brown took these people into a back room to listen to what they had to say about Ray Golden's death.

"They don't know nothing," Carleen said to me, shaking her head. As usual, she looked sharp and elegant. "Ain't nobody here knows nothing," she said, frowning.

But later, to the reporters, King was upbeat—although less strong in his wording of the S.C.L.C.'s position on the death of Ray Golden.

"Even if there was a suicide," he said, outside the church, "there's a sickness in the community. Something is wrong in a community to create a climate where a young man would take his life."

Three days later, the Klan announced that, if the S.C.L.C. and King came back to

March, they would also be there. King's office has said that King has also been personally threatened.

On September 17, the F.D.L.E. made public its report on the "specific concerns" in the Golden case presented to them by Representative Hank Harper. "This Preliminary Inquiry has not uncovered any credible evidence that Feraris Golden did not die by suicide," it said.

The client of Dianne Giammarco's who made the Crime Stoppers call was "acknowledged [to have been] diagnosed with Schizophrenic Affective Disorder and can be delusional."

"[Patricia] Canty states that she has no knowledge regarding the death of Mr. Golden other than a 'spiritual vision' she had experienced after his death which included two individuals responsible for hanging Mr. Golden."

"A separate interview of . . . Linda Johnson revealed that Ms. Golden was more uncertain at the initial stages of discovery as to the hands being bound or not."

"In his sworn taped statement, [Dwayne] Rumph, a cousin of the deceased, stated that Feraris Golden had frequently spoke of committing suicide . . . and at one time even stated he would hang himself from a tree in his grandmother's yard."

The report acknowledged that "the original [Belle Glade Police Department] investigation was not re-investigated by FDLE," nor was the coroner's inquest.

Two days after the F.D.L.E. report was issued, *The Palm Beach Post* ran an editorial—SUSPICION IN BELLE GLADE NOW CAUSED BY ITS CRITICS—criticizing the S.C.L.C. and voicing support for Chief Michael Miller. A week after that, Miller and Linda Johnson had a meeting to try and patch up their differences.

Carleen called me. "I'm thinking about resigning from the N.A.A.C.P.," she said.

Back in New York, I went to see Dr. Lawrence Kobilinsky, associate provost of John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Kobilinsky is a forensic scientist. He's consulted on hundreds of cases; most notably, he's the one who told *The Washington Post* he thought the police had made mistakes in the Chandra Levy case.

I gave him the police, autopsy, and medical examiner's reports in the Ray Golden case. We spoke for about two hours.

"The best way I would describe this is 'suspicious,' that would be my first word," said Kobilinsky, "because the fact that he's off the ground and hanging with some sort of makeshift ligature, either a shirt or a sheet or whatever, that right away tells me it needs further investigation.

"You can probably commit suicide by climbing up a tree, by putting something around your neck, somehow getting yourself tied, and jumping off," he said, "but it doesn't make much sense to me. [A .334 blood-alcohol level], that's very high. You would really be impaired."

Kobilinsky drew my attention to the question of petechiae. "When somebody is strangled or asphyxiated," he said, "there are petechiae—hemorrhages in the eye. It comes from blood pressure when you stop the flow of blood. If the person was dead first and then hung, you wouldn't see the petechiae come. It would happen [in a hanging], but you're not going to see it if the person was dead first." Golden's autopsy showed no evidence of petechiae.

"This was not declared a crime," Kobilinsky said. "If you want to point to any mistake, that's the primary mistake right from the beginning. It's like the JonBenét thing, where the police didn't treat it as a crime scene.

"Protocol should be to consider it for the moment as a crime scene until you hear otherwise, until you are told, 'No, this is absolutely a suicide,'" by the medical examiner. "Then it becomes a different situation altogether. But law enforcement, when they come into a situation like this, should treat it as a possible homicide." (The Belle Glade police maintain that this was the protocol they followed.)

"But it's not unusual," Kobilinsky said, "to have a situation like this where there's ambiguity and it's not clear, and that's why you have to resort to these psychological profiles.

"This is a very tricky situation. If it were treated as a crime scene and everything were documented and collected, it's possible even then that the medical examiner

would not be able to say with certainty one way or the other. But the fact that they didn't treat it that way really has compromised the ultimate decision about whether it was suicide or not."

After speaking with Kobilinsky, I called Christopher Wilson, the medical examiner in the Golden case; he was now working in Largo, Florida. "Read any standard forensic text," he said. "It's usual not to find petechiae in hangings." *The Journal of Forensic Sciences* reports that "conjunctival and facial petechiae . . . are considered hallmarks of asphyxial deaths. Consensus in the literature suggests that . . . petechiae are corroborative evidence of asphyxia."

I asked Wilson whether he could say with 100 percent certainty that Ray Golden died by suicide, or whether it was possible that he was dead before someone hung him.

"Hypothetically he could have been passed out and aliens could have hung him from the tree," Wilson said. "What I'm trying to tell you, nobody knows 100 percent in any cause of death unless you actually physically were at the scene."

The F.B.I. and Justice Department are currently looking into the case.

On the day I left the town, I went to see Bernice.

There was a light drizzle, shooting drops of rain. Bernice was standing outside her trailer. A car was pulling away.

"Some people coming to see me about their son," she said, waving a gnat away. "They said he's in jail, something about the police did something to him. I don't know." She shrugged.

I asked her why they'd come to see her. She thought a moment and said, "I don't know. I guess they thought I could tell them what to do about it.

"People be coming up to me everywhere," she said, "talking to me about stuff like that." She seemed surprised by it herself.

"I tell 'em, I don't see why they didn't do something about it before now. Something happens to your child, you can't just stay quiet. No. Can't just sit there and take it like that. Even if they try and kill you.

"I ain't never stopping," she said, arms folded, looking off into the fields, "until they tell me what happened to my baby." □

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