

Tot's Death Puts Family Under Siege

After dad is charged, county tries to take two other kids from mom

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A young Norcross father helplessly watched as his little girl went into cardiac arrest and lost consciousness.

He tried breathing life into her limp body, but it was too late.

Minutes later, emergency personnel rushed to the home. By then the 21-year-old father was almost too hysterical to tell what had happened.

Quintrellis Head had no way of knowing that his words would later be used against him when police charged him with killing his baby.

The mother, Akilah Denson, returned home that day, May 5, 2001, from a trip to the hair salon. Her daughter, Takitre, 2, was already in an ambulance on the way to Gwinnett Medical Center.

The mother knew Takitre was gone when she overheard a police officer mutter the words "crime scene."

What she didn't know was it was going to get even worse.

The battle for her husband's freedom would eventually involve a relentless Atlanta attorney with medical evidence from two other states vs. a hard-charging district attorney's office and a county medical examiner.

A fall on concrete steps

Takitre, dubbed "Beanie," survived a troubled premature birth in Alabama but grew into a bubbly, if clumsy, 2-year-old toddler. When she wasn't playing with her favorite toy truck, she was chasing her 3-year-old sister around the apartment.

But Takitre suffered from a heart disease called cardiomyopathy, but her family didn't realize the extent of her disease. Takitre wasn't taking heart medication.

When Takitre went into cardiac arrest May 5, 2001, her father's thoughts flashed back to an earlier injury.

Four days earlier, Takitre had taken a tumble on concrete steps while playing outside with her older sister. Her parents took her to a doctor to treat a cut to the top of her head, bruises on her face and a severely swollen lip, Head's attorney, Tee Okonkwo, said.

After his daughter was pronounced dead, Head spoke to investigators for about three hours, telling them about the fall.

Head also told police his little girl suffered an allergic reaction to the prescribed gum medication.

Forensic investigator Jim Dempsey initially examined the child, noting her injuries. In his report, Dempsey wrote: "There is no readily apparent cause of death." He forwarded the case to Gwinnett's chief medical examiner, Dr. Steven F. Dunton.

Dunton confirmed Takitre's trip to the doctor four days before her death. However, the medical examiner said the doctor made no note of a severe lump on the top of the child's head. In reviewing the doctor's examination, Dunton said it was his conclusion that Takitre suffered bruises to the face, chest and another cut inside her mouth after the fall that Head claimed caused her injuries.

Dunton's initial autopsy report listed the child's death as a homicide caused by a blunt force trauma to the head. But his decision, as it turns out, was made before he had reviewed Takitre's birth records.

Efforts to take girls

Quintrellis Head was at a family reunion in Detroit when he learned police had a murder warrant in hand. They had been searching for him for 10 days. He returned and turned himself in at Gwinnett County police headquarters in Lawrenceville on Aug. 8, 2001.

That same month, caseworkers from the Gwinnett Department of Family Services knocked on the Heads' apartment.

"They were at my door trying to take my two children," Akilah Denson, 23, said.

Her child had died, her husband was in jail and now she faces the first of several court battles to keep her other girls, Akitre, now 4, and Vakitre, now 2.

"They were trying to say I was unfit mentally to care for my children," Denson said.

She agreed to take a parenting class, drug tests and seek counseling – anything to keep her girls. Case workers visited the home twice a week to keep an eye on her.

Denson always believed in her husband's innocence, but she feared he'd never regain his freedom.

In order to keep her children, Denson reluctantly agreed with a Juvenile Court judge's condition not to have any contact with her husband. The girls were also barred from visits with their father.

Denson said it was difficult explaining the separation to the girls. They were told Daddy was on vacation or visiting friends.

Records Difficulty

The medical examiner decided the child's death was due to blunt force trauma before he knew she had a history of heart disease.

Dunton said officials at the Alabama hospitals that treated Takitre refused to honor an out-of-state subpoena for the child's medical records.

Head's attorney disagrees.

"They had the means to get it," Okonkwo said.

Takitre's mother had signed authorization in August 2001 to allow authorities to obtain medical records of all of her children, the attorney said.

"The Alabama hospital would not honor that," District Attorney Danny Porter said.

Okonkwo said no one ever told him or the mother that other releases were needed.

In June, Okonkwo sent prosecutors a report by a Florida medical examiner who said the child died of natural causes – not homicide.

Takitre's heart disease, coupled with sickle cell anemia, sent the child into cardiac arrest and caused her death, according to findings by Dr. Joshua Perper, a Florida medical examiner.

Okonkwo also sent more than 500 pages of Alabama medical records detailing the child's troubled birth and heart disease.

Finally, Dunton changed the cause of death from homicide to "undetermined."

Dunton met with prosecutors Jan. 10. Although he believed Takitre was abused, he couldn't help them prove murder.

But before the charges were dropped, Assistant District Attorney Jim Miskell asked Head to plead guilty to felony cruelty to children in the first-degree, Okonkwo said.

"Initially they thought they had this case wrapped up," Okonkwo said. Then "they were scrambling – trying to find a way to make the case stick."

Okonkwo wouldn't budge. A few hours later, deputies told Head, now 23, he was free to go, the charges had been dropped.

"I didn't believe it. I kept asking; 'Are you sure?'" Head said.

Last Monday night, his wife stood outside the jail in the cold waiting.

"That moment was a long time coming," she said.

They went to Head's brother's house in Atlanta for a huge family celebration, where he was reunited with his two little girls.

"Innocence means he didn't do it," Porter said. "Dropping the charges means we can't prove he did it. Prosecutions are only as good as the information provided."

Head's mother, Janise Odom, said she is angry with Porter and the medical examiner for not clearing her son's name.

“They put his face on every TV channel and hunted him down like a common criminal while we were on family vacation.

“I want to tell them to just tell the truth: ‘You made a mistake,’” she said. “They could have cost my child his life.”