

A Death in the Congressman's Office

Does Anybody in the Press Care About Lori Klausutis?

By Denis Wright and Chris George

(APJP)

Once upon a time, the phrase "investigative reporter" actually meant something. It usually involved hard work, possibly even mentation. Now, it seems, they just make stuff up. Especially on the Fox News Channel, where an uninitiated viewer could easily think she/he had tuned in Comedy Central. It's "Chandra-Chandra-Chandra" with the occasional "Condit is just like Clinton" thrown in. Given our media's 24/7 obsession with the Gary Condit "scandal", you might assume that there is a real dearth of hard news to pursue.

In reality, there is indeed a news story percolating out there. The story bears remarkable and ironic similarities to the Condit/Levy story. Both involve Congressmen, rumors of infidelity, and the fate of a younger female subordinate. The details are so similar as to remind one of two alternate universes. The difference between the two stories? First, in the Klausutis case

Northwest Florida Daily News Links:

7/22/2001: [Klausutis Death Not Suspicious](#)

7/23/2001: [Obituary for Lori Klausutis](#)

7/27/2001: [Aide's Cause of Death Still Not Released](#)

8/23/2001: [Northwest Florida Daily News calls for release of Klausutis records](#)

8/29/2001: [Klausutis head injury more severe than previously reported](#)

9/1/2001: [Controversial autopsy report by "where's the brain section" Berkland raises more questions than it answers](#)

Other Links:

[Original AP story](#) from July 21 AP via [beachbrowser.com](#) -- information on Michael Berkland's ME license suspension in 1999

as not in the Levy case, there is a real body, very dead. Second, the Klausutis case involves a Republican.

The story had a brief flutter in the Northwest Florida press, which ran a few very short stories on Lori's death. With the exception of the *Northwest Florida Daily News*, they were of the "Aw-what-a-shame/ nothing-to-see-here-move-along-now-folks" variety. But nationally, this mysterious death earned a mere one paragraph mention in *The Washington Post's* NATION IN BRIEF column:

"FORT WALTON BEACH, FL. - Lori Klausutis, a 28-year-old office worker for Rep. Joe Scarborough (R-FL), was found dead in the congressman's district office. Police said preliminary findings from the medical examiner's office showed no foul play or any outward indication of suicide."

Unbelievably, that was it. The story was simply dropped. A young female employee of one of Florida's Congressmen had died unexpectedly in the Congressman's office. There were no witnesses to her death and the cause

[The American Prospect](#) -- Scarborough press secretary Mick Serrano tells caller of contemplated lawsuit against *American Politics Journal* (make sure to use the "More" link -- it gets even more bizarre)

[Bergen Record](#) (reprinted at Bartcop.com): Word on the Klausutis story is filtering out -- skip down to the letter that begins 'News determined by who defines it'

[Florida DOH](#): Berkland's physician profile, complete with two lies about the revocation of his Missouri medical license and chiropractic privileges

[Healing Arts News](#) -- page 15: Berkland's propensity for reaching conclusions based on autopsy tests he never did

[Naples \(Fla.\) News](#) -- June 21 article on Klausutis death

[Online Journal](#) -- "Protests are out and we will decide what you can investigate"

[Moscow Times](#) -- Russia's hottest pro-free-market, pro-capitalism paper picks up the story from *APJ*

[Missouri v. Taylor](#) -- complaint mentions Michael Berkland's "material false testimony"

of death was not apparent. Klausutis' boss, Joe Scarborough had recently resigned from Congress prematurely and unexpectedly, amid rumors about his marital fidelity and soon after a divorce. He had also abruptly resigned as publisher of the Independent Florida Sun, claiming that resigning from Congress and as publisher was necessary to spend more time with his sons.

Such circumstances make one pause. Sick to death of the clear bias of the corporate owned media, and suspicious of the odd nature of this death, we began to dig for answers. The more information we discovered, the more unlikely, and the more newsworthy the story became.

Here are the facts. Lori Klausutis had a seemingly happy life. A devoted husband who listed on his online homepage "being married to Lori" as one of the honors he enjoyed, a new home in Niceville and a Catholic congregation where she was a cantor and in whose choir she sang, were some of the elements of the Good Life she enjoyed. Her husband, Dr. Timothy Klausutis, did research and development for the munitions group at nearby Eglin Air Force Base, where he presumably made a good livelihood. Although Lori hailed from the Atlanta, Georgia area where she had attended school, there were numerous family members in the area. According to her obituary in the *Fort Walton Daily News*, Lori had served as President and, later, Treasurer, for the Emerald Coast Young Republicans and as a aide to Congressman Scarborough, she was active during the Florida recounts. A former neighbor, Barbara Cromer, said "Every morning, I would see her run while I walked. We'd wave to each other as we passed. I loved Lori so much. She was wonderful. She was a kind, generous person, so sweet.

Then, on Friday, July 20th, the body of Lori Klausutis, 28, was found slumped next to a desk on the floor of Florida Republican Congressman Joe Scarborough's Fort Walton Beach office where Lori had served as a constituent services coordinator since May, 1999. Her body was found around 8:00 a.m. on Friday morning by a couple arriving for an appointment. She had been dead for some time. A second employee, who would have normally arrived for work at around the same time, was away on vacation. Police cordoned off the area for investigation, later announcing that there was no reason to suspect foul play, nor were there signs of suicide.

Scarborough's office released a statement several hours after the discovery:

"My staff and family are greatly saddened by the loss of Lori Klausutis. I know Lori will be missed by the thousands of citizens who regularly contact my office to seek assistance with a variety of problems. May God grant Lori's family the grace, comfort and hope that will get them through this difficult time."

The Congressman returned to Florida that same day, and his office was quick to point out that it was not unusual for him to fly home for the weekend.

There was a great deal of ambiguity over whether Lori had suffered past medical problems. Scarborough's press secretary, Miguel Serrano, made mention of health problems in Lori's past, but could not be more specific. In response, Fort Walton Beach Police Chief Steve Hogue is quoted as saying "That's part of our investigation, checking into her medical history." Associate Medical Examiner Dr. Michael Berkland said "She had a past medical history that was significant, but it remains to be seen whether that played a role in her death". Soon after a member of the immediate family rejected out of

hand that Lori had any significant medical problems. She was, in fact, quite an athlete, having recently run an 8K with a very respectable time and she belonged to the Northwest Florida Track Club.

The results of the mandated autopsy, however, were deemed "inconclusive" by Dr. Berkland, who ordered more specific toxicology tests. These results were expected by the middle of the following week, around the first or second day of August. Dr. Berkland commented at the time "This turns over several puzzle pieces in the case of her death and reveals more of the picture".

Welcome to the Wheel of Fortune.

Michael Berkland, it turns out, has a very interesting background himself. Recently relocated to Florida, it is a matter of public record that Dr. Berkland's medical license in the state of Missouri was revoked in 1998 as a result of Berkland reporting false information regarding brain tissue samples in a 1996 autopsy report. Berkland does not deny the charges.

It's also a matter of public record that he was suspended from his position as Medical Examiner in the State of Florida in July, 1999.

Quincy, he's not.

Repeated requests to Dr. Stephen Nelson, Chairman of the Medical Examiners Commission, Florida Department of Law Enforcement, have failed to verify that Dr. Berkland's suspension was lifted and that his licensure and disciplinary record are clear at the present time. Dr. Nelson was appointed Chairman of the Commission by Governor Jeb Bush.

As for Lori Klausutis, rumors began to swirl as time passed with no resolution to the case, rumors that included whispers of suicide, some emanating from inside the Beltway. Family members, angered at what they considered unfair and exploitive coverage wrote the editor of the *Northwest Florida Daily News*, Ralph Routon, saying "For those who knew Lori, the thought of suicide, as your published reports suggested, is absolutely unthinkable. Suicide was contrary to her faith and being. She did not suffer from seizures, nor did she have a history of medical problems." Meanwhile, the final report has been issued that Lori died as a result of a blow to the head because an undiagnosed heart condition caused her to collapse and fall, hitting her head on the desk.

The initial reports from the Medical Examiner's office denied any trauma to the body that would indicate cause of death. But Berkland acknowledged on Monday, August 6th, that Lori had sustained a "scratch and a bruise" on her head and that his original denials were to prevent undue speculation about the cause of death. "The last thing we wanted was 40 questions about a head injury", he said.

And so, what we have here is the death of a healthy young woman who died of a blow to the head and a lie from the Medical Director's office about this blow which was quite obvious to the naked eye. They then had to go search for some reason why she might have "fallen" and hit her head. And they have found an "undiagnosed cardiac arrhythmia". But a number of questions remain to be answered, and we have requested opinions from Dr. Nelson, the Chairman of the Medical Examiners Commission.

The questions are:

- Were Lori's medical records thoroughly examined for any evidence of the pre-existing heart condition? It would seem

that someone must have examined her heart if she ran 8Ks.

- Did Dr. Berkland personally examine the site of death in undisturbed condition in order to support his later conclusion that the physical evidence was compatible with his later conclusions?

Presumably the heart valve condition alluded to is Mitral Valve Prolapse. This may be associated with arrhythmias, but rarely with VTach (ventricular tachycardia) or VFib (ventricular fibrillation), the only arrhythmias which would stop the flow of blood to the brain.

Generally, with syncope of whatever cause the "guarding reflex", wherein one raises a hand to protect the head, is preserved.

There are several problems with the head injury. Generally, for a closed head injury to cause bleeding inside the skull, there is a much more severe injury on the outside of the skull. Do the autopsy notes, indeed, describe such a severe injury on the outside of the skull? In fact, the only closed head injury which usually may cause bleeding inside the skull involves a fracture of the temporal bone, with rupture of the underlying artery. The most important discrepancy that should be answered is how intracranial bleeding could continue if the cardiac arrhythmia had caused a cessation of blood flow to the brain!

- Were the toxicology studies entirely negative? Was there evidence of any legal or illegal substance in the blood stream which could have caused her to lose consciousness?

- Was she pregnant? If so, were fetal blood specimens obtained to determine paternity?

These are the questions being asked by some in the medical community of Dr. Stephen Nelson and Dr. Michael Berkland, and they continue to go unanswered.

Why is there a complete media blackout on this story? Why the complete preoccupation with the similar but largely speculative Condit/Levy story? What does this say about the state of our press? What does corporate ownership of the press do to what gets to be news? How much of what we think we know as fact is actually based on selective and distorted reporting? How does that "fair and balanced" cable network explain the complete hypocrisy and contempt for truth in their handling of these two similar tales? Will we ever know the truth of how Lori Klausutis died?

Three Pivotal Questions by the Editors

September 1, 2001 (APJP) -- Over at *The American Prospect's* message board thread concerning this very article, Phoenix Woman has asked a trolling Scarborough "defender" three pivotal questions. We'd love to know the answers ourselves:

1) If Lori's death was just a simple accident, then why did Rep. Scarborough and his spokesman Miguel Serrano feel the need to go to two different local TV stations within **three hours** of her body's being found and invent a nonexistent history of chronic medical conditions for

her -- in other words, why did they feel the need to lie about Lori's health?

2) Would you trust without question the word of a Medical Examiner who lost his ME license in **two separate states** (Missouri and Florida) because he LIED about his autopsy work (for instance, saying he had autopsied some brains when he hadn't)?

3) Why should whoever wrote Ms. Klausutis's obituary feel it was appropriate to mention nearly everything about her life -- **EXCEPT** where she'd been working since 1999?

A recent check of the Young Republican's web site found no mention of Lori or her contributions, nor any tribute to her memory nor comments about her passing. In fact, you will find no mention of her at all. If you go to *The Pensacola News Journal's* online pages, one of the few papers that actually covered the story, and search the site for "Klausutis" you will come up empty, even though the same search will pull up numerous stories matching "Scarborough". It seems as though someone wants to erase all traces of Lori Klausutis from the record and bury the story with her.

It's an increasingly puzzling case. We are reminded of the famous Kitty Genovese case, in New York, in 1964, where a young woman pleaded for her life over the period of 30 minutes, while neighbors ignored her cries. The assailant returned three times to stab her. With Lori Klausutis, it seems possible that a corrupt North Florida establishment is determined to keep the lid on the case, even if that means silencing the news. And our esteemed news media, from the supposed mainstream liberal press stalwarts to the near delusional on air shouters of the channel that just reports so that you can decide, willingly turn the other way and ignore Lori Klausutis. But they continue to chatter endlessly in speculation over Chandra Levy. In so doing, they ignore the cries of truth, they deny their viewers access to the truth and they utterly, once and for all, betray our faith and trust in the media.

This report was made possible by devoted citizens who are determined to bring Lori's story to the light of day. Their contributions in research and insight are more appreciated than we can say. Thank you from both of us to each and every one of you.