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Jorden Simms accused 2 officers of sexual assault. Then she died in police custody

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Jorden Marie Simms spent last Christmas — her favorite holiday — behind bars. During a trip to the hospital the next day, she slipped out of several restraints and fell from a moving Graham County Sheriff's Office vehicle. The 28-year-old laid shoeless in the middle of a Safford road with a puddle of blood around her half-shaved, half bleach-blonde head.

Simms died Dec. 28, days after promising her mom she was going to improve her life. Authorities said she may have been suicidal. Her mother is skeptical, especially considering Simms had just accused a Safford Police Department officer and sheriff's detention officer of sexual assault.

"My gut won't allow me to buy it; I've had really good luck with my gut instinct," Deborah Sanchez said. "I'm 100% skeptical, I don't believe a word that they're saying."

Sanchez misses her daughter and often reminisces about when Simms was a happy, loving baby with "mellow cries." Now, most of her time is spent thinking about her youngest daughter's final days of life — most of which was spent in a Graham County jail cell.

"I know with everything in me, my daughter didn't jump. She had 30 days clean and worked so hard," Sanchez said.

"That's all they want to do, they want to make her look bad, but they have no idea what was going on and how far she had come," she said.

Suspected of shoplifting, arrested for warrant

Simms as a child was quiet and reserved but over the years became the jokester of the family. One time she filled her mom's can of soda with milk just to bring the house down.

"Jorden was our prankster, she was the one that was always sure to get laughs anytime the family was together," her aunt Crystal Barnett said. "She had a laugh that was amazing, I mean, you could not not laugh with her."

Simms — who was born in Safford and grew up in the immediate area — wasn't keen on school. She didn't aspire to be a doctor or travel to the moon but she relished in being a single mom to three — Sophia, 11, Tristan, 8, and Olivia, 6.

"She was a wonderful mom," Barnett said. "She made some bad decisions but she was always good to her kids."

Things began to take a downturn when Simms started using drugs, not long after being prescribed Oxycontin for lupus and rheumatoid arthritis about five years ago. She then lost custody of her children — who were adopted by her grandparents in 2018 — and faced repeated shoplifting charges last year.

"She dealt with a lot of her own demons; I think she was just looking to make herself happy and she looked in the wrong direction," Barnett said.

Simms on Dec. 21 was suspected of shoplifting, this time from a Walmart in Safford. No charges were ever filed in court for the alleged incident; however, Simms was ultimately arrested that afternoon for a warrant out of Yavapai County.

She'd been accused last November of car theft, drug possession and failure to appear in court, according to the warrant. Sanchez told The Republic the charges stemmed from Simms taking a car belonging to her adoptive father's girlfriend with an old bag of heroin in her possession.

Safford Police Department officer Jeremiah French, along with two others, detained Simms.

French's report says Simms claimed to be pregnant and in need of medical attention, and that paramedics transported her to Mt. Graham Regional Medical Center while he followed. Other reports do not mention pregnancy.

Simms accuses officer of sexual assault

Simms claimed French sexually assaulted her at the hospital, according to police records.

It's unclear when she first reported the alleged assault to authorities, though Sanchez said it was that same day. The earliest police records related to Simms' allegation was a Dec. 23

memo from a Safford police officer.

Simms reported being alone with French in the hospital room for about 15 to 30 minutes while awaiting test results. She claimed French began touching her arm and breast area on top of her clothes, according to the memo. Then, she said, he put "his hand inside her pants" and "inserted his finger inside her vagina," the memo stated.

The officer noted there was no body camera footage of the hospital visit, which he said he learned by talking to French before taking Simms' report. French's report does not provide details about the hospital visit other than to say Simms met with hospital staff and was found to not be pregnant.

Simms was ultimately released into French's custody and he took her to jail, where authorities say she tried to escape. Jail footage shows Simms run toward an open gate while French leans into a car with his back toward her. She was taken into custody again a short time later.

French said Simms at the time "continuously told me sorry and that she was just scared of going to Yavapai County."

However, according to the memo, Simms said she "was traumatized from previous sexual assaults from when she was younger" and "had a 'fight or flight moment' and ran for the gates." She said "she ran just to get away from French," the memo stated.

Late on Dec. 23, Simms was taken to Lori's Place, an advocacy center in Sierra Vista, for a sexual assault exam. The following day, French was placed on paid administrative leave pending an investigation, according to police records.

French did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Second claim that detention officer assaulted her

Upon returning to the jail from her exam early on Dec. 24, Simms claimed she was sodomized by a detention officer, later identified in police records as Kianna Bays.

It's unclear when Simms first reported the alleged sexual assault. She claimed to have told multiple jail employees before her allegation was officially documented in a Dec. 24 report from a sheriff's deputy.

Simms said she was taken into a shower room to change her clothes soon after returning to jail, which footage shows was just before 3 a.m. The deputy took Simms' report that night.

There, Simms said a detention officer put an object into her rectum after she bent over and coughed, the report stated. She said she didn't know what the object was and couldn't recall the detention officer's name, according to body camera video from the deputy.

"She said, 'This is what it feels like to really be sexually assaulted,' " Simms said in the video. "And then she tells me that 'who's going to believe me because I already just cried wolf about what French did.' "

Attempts to reach Bays for comment were unsuccessful and an Arizona Republic reporter was blocked after contacting someone appearing to be Bays on Facebook.

Bays in a Jan. 1 memo wrote Simms removed her clothes and then squatted and coughed without being asked — a move officials can request during a body-cavity search. She then retrieved toilet paper for Simms before completely leaving the room soon after, Bays said.

Jail footage — none of which has audio — shows Bays follow Simms into the shower room at about 2:58 a.m. while nearly closing the door behind her. There is no footage of the women in the shower room together, which appears to have been for about two-and-a-half minutes.

"They're saying, 'well she was only in there two minutes' — it doesn't take two minutes to do something to somebody," Sanchez said. "And they're like, 'well, she didn't come out with nothing in her hands' — she had pockets."

Footage shows Bays reemerge about 3 a.m. with nothing in her hands and handcuffs hanging off her belt. After retrieving toilet paper for Simms — who's still in the shower room — Bays walks toward a detention officer several feet away and gives him an item from her left shirt pocket, footage shows. It's unclear what the item was, but surveillance footage appears to show a pen.

Bays was assigned to a different post the following night and "has not worked since that time," according to another report. Records show she resigned from the sheriff's office in February.

Simms on the afternoon of Dec. 26 was taken back to Lori's Place for a forensic interview and another sexual assault exam. During the interview — a video of which was included in police records — Simms talked about her allegations against French and Bays while deputies observed from nearby.

"I'm feeling disgusted, I'm feeling ignorant, I'm feeling violated ... stupid, I feel stupid," she said while crying.

She again stated she didn't know what object was used during the alleged sodomy, adding that when she tried to look the detention officer pushed her head into a bar on the wall in front of her.

Simms also said she was on suicide watch. When asked what that means, Simms said "that I wanted to die." She was asked if she ever felt like that before and Simms said "when I was little and I was molested."

"There wasn't anything in her behavior or anything that she said that gave me concern that something would happen," the employee who conducted the interview told authorities on Dec. 27.

Police records do not indicate why Simms was placed on a suicide watch. Bays in her memo said it required Simms to wear an "anti-self-harming suit," also called a smock. Footage shows Simms was given a green smock after her initial appearance on Dec. 22 and wore it most of the time thereafter.

At about 2 p.m. the following day, Simms in her cell appeared to try to choke herself for several minutes, first with the neckline of her smock and then both hands, footage showed.

Sanchez insists her daughter was not suicidal, pointing to Simms' month in recovery as an indicator she wanted to live. A toxicology report from the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office showed Simms' blood collected Dec. 26 tested negative for any drugs or alcohol.

Officials say Simms jumped from moving car

On her way to a hospital in Safford soon after her second exam, officials say Simms quietly got out of handcuffs, a belly chain, ankle restraints and a seat belt to jump from a sheriff's office vehicle.

It's unclear how Simms got out of her restraints, however, authorities often point out a bottle of travel-sized shower gel was found in the car next to her locked ankle restraints and shoes. Officials confirmed the "Diamond Resorts" bottle matched products stored in the bathroom of Lori's Place.

"They claimed that she broke out of leg shackles, waist handcuffs and a seatbelt all with shower gel," Sanchez said. Simms' ankle restraints were later found to not have been double-

locked. The child lock on the left rear passenger door, where Simms sat, was also disabled.

The vehicle was less than a mile from the hospital in Safford when the incident occurred. There, Simms was supposed to get a CAT scan due to pain in her lower back and pelvic area. It was initially recommended Simms be taken to a hospital in Sierra Vista but Safford, nearly two hours away, was ultimately chosen, according to police records.

Surveillance footage from Vining Funeral Home about 6:40 p.m. that evening shows a person fall into the road from a sheriff's office car heading north on 20th Avenue. The video was recorded at night and from a distance.

Deputy Rose M. Lacey was driving the car at the time while Sgt. T.J. Perez was in the passenger seat. Body camera footage from Perez, which had no timestamp, showed Simms laying in the middle of the road with blood around her head. Perez said the car was moving 35 mph and that Simms went under the wheels.

Lacey in a Jan. 2 report said she called paramedics immediately and that they arrived a short time later. While they waited, she and Perez did not give Simms CPR, according to her report.

"I could hear gurgling sounds coming from her," she wrote. "Due to her sustained injuries and the amount of blood present we did not begin CPR. I did not want to cause any more trauma or injury to her."

Simms at the scene appeared to be breathing but was not responsive. She was taken to the hospital in Safford and then later flown to Banner University Medical Center in Tucson, where her mom took her off life support two days later with the assurance Simms' organs could be donated.

Sanchez said Simms was declared brain dead and had broken bones and bruises. She claimed her injuries were not consistent with what authorities say happened, leading her to believe something more nefarious occurred.

"I believe that she was beat up and I go off of this from what I seen on my daughter's body when I arrived at the hospital ... I believe she was pushed out that vehicle, I honest to God do," she said. "I feel like they did like a body dump, trying to make sure Jorden — she ratted out a cop and they were going to make sure she kept quiet about it."

Simms' cause of death was determined by the medical examiner's office to be "blunt impacts to head, trunk and extremities." Her manner of death was deemed undetermined. According

to the autopsy report, Simms had 45 injuries, including fractures to her skull, clavicle and ribs, and brain injuries.

After getting input from a former forensic pathologist — who assured the family Simms autopsy could be trusted — Simms was cremated several weeks after she died, Barnett said.

'Even the answers have questions'

When Simms told her mom she was sexually assaulted, Sanchez initially responded with anger, yelling and demanding proof.

Sanchez told The Republic she reacted that way because she didn't want to believe it was true. It was too painful, she explained.

"It robs you of your mind, body and soul, it takes everything; I did not want to believe that happened to my kid," she said while crying over the phone. "That was my little girl ... it hurt so bad to think about her going through that and I couldn't do anything."

"I wanted her to lie but at the same time I knew," Sanchez continued, adding that she wholeheartedly believes Simms was telling the truth about the alleged sexual assaults.

However, the truth may never be known.

The rape kit test results for Simms were inconclusive despite male DNA being present, according to a scientific examination report from the Arizona Department of Public Safety.

A low-level amount of male DNA was detected on three anal swabs collected from Simms' body, according to the report. The amount, however, was unlikely to produce a useable profile, the report states.

Additionally, there appeared to be no signs of forced penetration during Simms' sexual-assault exam related to the alleged sodomy, the examiner told authorities during a Dec. 27 interview. Simms' autopsy report also didn't note any signs of sexual trauma either.

"I didn't see any injury that was consistent with forcing an object into her rectum, there was no tears noticeable to me," the examiner said. She did notice possible new bruises on Simms' legs and a horizontal mark on her forehead, she said.

Police records related to Simms' first sexual assault exam were not provided to The Republic.

"We don't have any answers on paper, other than a few leaks here and there," Barnett said. "The autopsy came back inconclusive, the rape test came back with male DNA but not enough to profile; so even the answers have questions and it's sickening."

DPS has completed its investigation related to Simms but was finalizing its report, according to department spokesperson Bart Graves.

Mother wants answers, justice

Sanchez said she avoids driving on 20th Avenue because it only reminds her of her daughter's death.

She even finds it difficult to go to Walmart, which, to Sanchez, marked the beginning of the end of her daughter's life.

"It's just like living in pure hell; honestly, I'm not the person that I used to be and I just don't see myself ever getting back there," she said. "With her gone, it has just been a tremendous change and I stay very busy trying to make sure that I get her justice because I do know, with everything in me, my daughter was telling the truth."

Simms' family on June 28 commemorated the six-month anniversary of her death by holding a candlelight vigil in Globe, where a "Justice 4 Jorden" mural was also unveiled. Sanchez says she's still seeking answers, including finding someone to retest Simms' rape kit.

And in her first steps toward justice, she said, her attorneys David J. Catanese and Benjamin Taylor in March served a $5 million notice of claim to Graham County stating they are liable for Simms' death. Taylor told The Republic they are awaiting a response from Graham County and, if they don't receive one, may file a wrongful death lawsuit.

"I can't let them get away with murder, that's how I feel," said Sanchez.

Graham County Undersheriff Carl “Jeff” McCormies told The Republic he could not discuss the case due to potential litigation related to the notice of claim. Safford police Captain Brian Avila also declined to comment for the story citing "litigation."

Sanchez doesn't know what the future holds. On one hand, she wants to move from a community she said she no longer feels welcome in. On the other, she wants to do more to honor her daughter — perhaps get custody of Simms' three children or create a safe space for people in recovery.

"Our plans are to purchase a home and call it 'Jorden's House' and have it for people wanting to recover," Sanchez said. "We want to be that homey place that Jorden always envisioned and we want to be the ones that help these people get back to where they need to be."

"Jorden's already changed so many lives and so many have already gone to rehab and have been living a few months clean and sober because of Jorden," she continued.

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