

CHAPTER 9

CODE OF SILENCE IN THE HOUSE OF HORRORS

Early in 2022, Kai referred me to the Edna Mahan sexual abuse scandal in Union Township, New Jersey. Union Township is in Hunterdon County, not to be confused with Union County where Galfy lived and worked.* A formal inquiry and a small number of arrests took place a few years back. Up to that point, the “code of silence,” lack of any oversight, and any complaints from correctional officers or inmates potentially leading to even more abuse loomed large in the how and why of this situation festering for so long.

Guards, both male and female, took part in the brutality and one especially

* A county that multiple lawyer predators worked in going back over 30 years. Lawyer predators who received no more than a slap on the wrist consisting of probation, therapy, and 6-month bar suspension for sex crimes including sex crimes against children. Lawyer predators who, all but the few whose charges were federal, managed to keep their name out of the papers. The only paper trail is New Jersey’s Disciplinary Review Board reports. And even these use euphemisms like “child endangerment” along with the legal code unless you look this up and see “oh, that’s molestation, oh that’s child pornography” you might think they were busted for driving with a kid in the back of a pickup. Dangerous perhaps, but nowhere near the level of “endangerment” that robs a child of their innocence forever.

heartbreaking case involved guards tormenting a woman in the throes of a psychotic break. Even basic commodities like feminine hygiene products were used to coerce sex from inmates, some of whom would gain or lose weight or even disfigure themselves to be less attractive to the guards.¹ Last year, Governor Phil Murphy announced he would do his part to end the years of abuse at the Edna Mahan institution. But as of 2022, there is still no timeline or plan of action. This promise only materialized after a federal inquiry regarding dozens of cases of assault and abuse² of inmates and correctional officers alike. Abuse at the hands of both correctional officers and civilian staff was an “open secret” at Edna Mahan for years.

Inmate rape and abuse have been reported in Union County multiple times and in the case of Jesse Collins (again no local coverage), a man was raped by a guard and then told he was not able to sue for his permanent PTSD because the scars were psychological rather than physical.³ The only mention of this in papers is an article in the *New York Times* regarding the criminal and deplorable way that the state got out of the suit that Collins brought forward.

Kai also opened up on the “well-documented” code of silence among law enforcement and correctional officers⁴ that multiple inmates, correctional officers, and law enforcement in Union County have described:

You know about Jesse Collins. That Union County Jail inmate was forcibly raped by a guard from Joseph Galfy’s sex predator ring. I’ve released videos and reports showing that that sex predator ring includes judges, prosecutors, and politicians in Union County, NJ.

* Crossing the Thin Blue Line: Protecting Law Enforcement Officers Who Blow the Whistle by Ann C. Hodges published by the University of Richmond references the Lords of Discipline cop gang mentioned by New Jersey police whistleblowers Samuel Clark and Justin Hopson.⁴

But I've done more research, and found something horrifying...

They don't just destroy evidence of rape they kill their victims to get rid of the evidence.

They've been doing this for generations...

Raping and torturing vagrants; then either psychologically and physically torturing them until they kill themselves, or inciting other inmates to kill them, or just plain killing them: to get rid of the evidence.

Let's start with 'the code of silence.'

On December 23, 2016, Guilio Mesadieu was asleep in his cell when officer Wilson opened the door and began brutally beating him. Wilson grabbed his legs and yanked him out of his bunk, pulled his pants down, and brutally assaulted him.

I watched from across the hall as over a dozen UCJ officers pepper sprayed and beat and 'burk'-ed* William Pariseau to death in his cell, in a situation creepily similar to Mesadieu, in 2014.

In 2017, UCJ officers held me face down in a puddle of pepper spray and tried 'burk'-ing me to death, too.

In June 2014, Officer Johnson wrapped his handcuffs over his fist and beat Jamil Hearn so bad he fractured his skull.

* Prison slang for strangled.⁵

(See “Hearns v. Johnson” 2016 US Dist Lexis 120716)

UCJ guards beat Laquan Kearney so bad they ruptured his eardrum. (See “Kearney v. Union County Jail” 2014 US Dist Lexis 69229).

In every single one of these incidents, the UCJ officers falsified reports and denied medical treatment. To quote the court in “Mesadieu v. Union County” 2019 US Dist Lexis 76287*,

“Defendants purported cover-up of the assault was done while operating with a ‘Code of Silence’ policy between all defendants. Pursuant to this ‘Code of Silence’ policy, UCJ officers would not report the misconduct of other UCJ officers. The Code of Silence has a long history of being practiced within the Union County Administration and the UCJ. This policy allows the officers of UCJ to falsify, spoliage records, and to cover up their misconduct; and to act without fear of reprimand, discipline, or termination.

That’s how UCJ Officer Gayeland Robinson was able to forcibly rape the dozens of inmates BEFORE Jesse Collins. That’s how UCJ officers Pablo E. Chavez, Sonny Heyder, Nick Calas, Christopher Calas, and Joey Garcia, under UCJ Sgt Chris Schmidt, were able to turn the Medical Isolation

* Mesadieu’s suit named then-Union County Prosecutor Theodore Romankow as well. Romankow was alleged to have “suppressed evidence of racial profiling.”⁶ A situation that multiple news stories from 2022 alone reveal is still a major issue in Union County law enforcement. Romankow and Attorney General Christopher Porrino were specifically called out for the fact that despite their supervisory roles they “permitted, encouraged, tolerated and knowingly acquiesced to an official pattern, practice or custom of police officers.” James Cosgrove, also named as one of the offenders in the suit would eventually be outed for his racist and misogynist language.

Unit into their own personal dungeon of brutal and sadistic abuse of inmates. Waking male and female inmates up to strip searches and brutal assaults; pepper spraying them then strapping them into restraint chairs for hours; beating them and leaving them in cold, empty cells with severe injuries and no medical attention... and they threaten nurses with brutal violence if they attempt to help the injured inmates crying out in agony from pools of their own blood.

It's only once every decade that a whistleblower brings this to light; but up until now, it's always quickly swept back under the rug.

Jesse Collins blew the whistle back in 1996, but it came out a decade later that literally **THE DAY AFTER** Gayeland Robinson was fired over a dozen of his fellow UCJ officers participated in the abuse, assault, and torture of scores of INS detainees at the Union County Jail. The one UCJ officer who spoke out against the sadistic abuse got fired... and he was so scared that he waited almost a decade to blow the whistle. (For details, check out "Espinosa v. County of Union" 2005 US Dist Lexis 36563).

But it's not just physical torture, rape, and brutality.

They psychologically torture inmates into killing themselves.

Just like they tried with me in 2013.

They usually do this as either retaliation for filing a lawsuit or because the inmate is homeless and therefore they think they can get away with it (they enjoy and laugh about causing

inmates to suffer and commit suicide).

In 2018, UCJ officer Melendez psychologically tortured a homeless man until he hung himself.

In 2014, the UCJ officers from the Medical Isolation Unit psychologically tortured a homeless inmate until he drank a half gallon of cleaning solution. That inmate was released (all he did was not pay fines, because he was poor), and he killed himself shortly after.*

In 2013, the UCJ officers psychologically tortured me until I attempted suicide.

In 2010, they psychologically tortured a homeless inmate until he killed himself. (For details, check out “Dawkins v. County of Union” 2010 US Dist Lexis 58368).

In 2008, they watched a homeless inmate die from a treatable medical condition while threatening nurses who wanted to help. (For details, check out “Pittman v. County of Union” 2006 US Dist Lexis 49721).

In 2006, they psychologically tortured a homeless guy until he hung himself. (For details, check out “Lazarsk v. County of Union” 2006 US Dist Lexis 55018).

As you can see, hardly 2 years go by without the UCJ officers torturing someone who’s struggled with homelessness... to

* I found multiple cases of people in Union County detention facilities dying by suicide, or at least being reported as suicide deaths despite fairly insignificant crimes.

death. Not a decade goes by without Union County being exposed for dozens of systemic rapes (Google “Edna Mahan Sex Abuse”; located in Union Township).

Union County Jail is literally “House of 1,000 Corpses” meets “Deliverance”...

In Real Life.

You may be wondering what is meant by “psychological torture.”

First, they take away all your clothes and mock your appearance. They have words like “fat” and “ugly” and “worthless” written in masking tape that’s visible from the cell.

There are no mirrors, so after a month you forget what you look like... and start to believe what’s being said.

Then, they sleep deprive you for weeks, knocking on your door whenever you begin to doze off.

Then, they begin their brainwashing. They use hypnotic language and repetitively command the inmate to agree with statements about themselves and their families that are demeaning and degrading. If they catch an inmate masturbating, they stand outside the door and repeatedly say “babyfucker.” They watch inmates of either sex use the toilet and ridicule the inmates’ genitalia while threatening sexual assault. They threaten to let male inmates into female inmates’ cells if the female inmates don’t perform sexual acts for the guards.

I watched them hypnotize a homeless guy who was sleep deprived for two weeks, and they made him eat his own shit.

They got one guy to castrate himself with his fingernails under hypnosis.

And what sickens me is that some of these people were there for fucking TRAFFIC violations. But after the guards chanting “babyfucker” at them, I’m extremely concerned about what they did after they got out. And the guards want that kind of thing, they ENCOURAGE that kind of thing because they have a protection racket going with the public. “If you don’t have us, look what’ll be unleashed on your community.”

They do that to the nurses, too:

“Tell on us, and we’ll leave you alone with a bunch of rapists.”

They’re brutal and totally self-serving.

But that’s not all.

I told you how they incited another inmate to attack me after I filed a lawsuit, right?

As it turns out, the tactics they used on me are the same as they’ve used before.

Allen Farmer was brutally beaten by UCJ officers in retaliation for filing a medical request to document an assault on him by a UCJ officer. In 2011, he filed a civil rights lawsuit

about it, “Farmer v. Riordan” 2011 US Dist Lexis 18130. The UCJ officers, as part of their ‘Code of Silence,’ psychologically tortured him in retaliation: causing him to attempt suicide. Think of it like a rabbit chewing his own leg off to get out of a painful trap.

Farmer was taken to the hospital, where a doctor ordered that he be transferred to a psychiatric hospital, where he could be treated for the effects of psychological torture.

Sensing the evidence that would produce, the UCJ Administrators defied the Doctor’s orders; brought Farmer to a Max Unit in GP; then got him raped and tried to kill him using another inmate:

- 1.) They broke a padlock so another inmate could both get out of his cell; and use the padlock as a weapon;
- 2.) They removed all officers and witnesses from the unit; then
- 3.) They incited the inmate to brutally assault Farmer; while no one was around to hear him scream.

Check it out for yourself: “Farmer v. Lanigan” 2017 US Dist Lexis 66317

Brutal and sadistic rape and torture rings like the one that’s been running UCJ for decades(if not since it was built) only exist because of a failure to screen State Government Officials properly. Federal Law Enforcement Officials undergo GKT’s and GS-5 level (or higher) screenings, which

weed out virtually ALL sexual predators from Federal Law Enforcement positions. The only reason we don't have this in State Governments is because the technology to do these screenings didn't exist back when the State Administrative Codes were written.

Those brutal rape and torture rings have been "grandfathered in," and your tax dollar is paying for their terrorizing of homeless people and vulnerable populations, with brutal assaults and torture.

Whistleblower, Juan Espinosa worked at Union County jail from 1982 to 1984 and from 1988 to 2001. On June 18, 1995, Espinosa saw 25 to 30 UCJ correction officers "beat, harass and abuse INS detainees." When he reported the incident to his superior Lieutenant Salay, he replied that he "didn't care."⁷

According to a grand jury report from 1998, nearly one-fifth of the 370 on the police force were members of "The Family." Testimony from officers involved tales of "bizarre initiation and excommunication rituals." Physical abuse and false arrests, often inspired by racism were hallmarks of "The Family." The 2000 article from *The New York Times* pointed out that at the time the entire department had only four Hispanic officers and no Black officers among the 60 or so "superior officers."

Patrick Maloney, the Director of the Elizabeth police from 1995 to 1997 told *NYT*, "The Family was originally formed as a study group." What started purportedly as a way for officers to study together for promotion exams "soon became a specialized unit within the department that had its own insignia." Once again, shades of the Lords of Discipline police gang that New Jersey police whistleblower Samuel Clark has spent years working to expose.

Christian Bollwage and James M. Cosgrove, Mayor, and director of police at the time acknowledged the group's existence but claimed their influence and danger were a matter of debate. "Hopefully, this group is not with us anymore," Cosgrove (the Chief of Police who would be forced to step down due to racist and sexist language) told *NYT*. The article, however, referenced "a dozen current or recently retired officers" and church and neighborhood leaders who disagreed.⁸

Reverend Michael Granzen, minister at Second Presbyterian Church in Elizabeth and the author of *Breaking the Plate Glass Window*, published in May 2022, explained how he knew that racism and misconduct were not a relic of a bygone era in Elizabeth, noting beatings and false arrests. Retired lieutenant Daniel Wood said that Elizabeth PD "had no interest in investigating the Family or its activities."

In Reverend Granzen's book, he relates how the day "Blue Shadows" was released you "couldn't find a single *New York Times* anywhere. They had all disappeared." In addition to this, all the cars parked in front of the church had been ticketed, a warning from the corrupt police regarding speaking out it seemed. Far worse, retaliation against churchgoers included beatings, harassment, and worse. It was after the article's publication however that Granzen reports that some members of the Family were forced into retirement, others demoted or reassigned, and the federal prosecutor and FBI "began to return our calls."⁹

"The police in Elizabeth like in many other urban cities were bent on shake downs, intimidation, corruption, and abuse. The 'Family' clique inside Elizabeth Police Department didn't like me and my name was on a 'hit list.' My work on exposing police brutality around New Jersey got me many death threats and attempts at intimidation..." Salaam Ismael is quoted in Rev. Granzen's book.¹⁰

Elizabeth police officer Lt. Bill Dugan called the church to see if the police could play basketball two afternoons a week in their new gym. “At first, I was suspicious, but then I realized he was one of the good police officers. We wanted to work with them.” Sister Jacinta at the church, one of the first to expose The Family “saw the best and worst of the Elizabeth Police Department.”¹¹

Lt. Edward Szpond was sent to the property room after an investigation that led to him being singled out as one of the leaders of the white supremacist gang operating within the Elizabeth Police Department. Not unlike the RICO-worthy Essex Police Department run by Union County official Joe Cryan’s father John, law enforcement itself was lawless in the area. Operating in the open as a criminal enterprise.

“Blue Shadows” may have been the first major reporting on the cultish law enforcement gang, but years earlier in 1994, a dozen officers protested the shadowy group claiming it was abusing its influence and intimidating officers who weren’t part of the clique. This mirrors the case of Samuel Clark* and the Lords of Discipline gang within the Newark Police Department.¹²

Sgt. John Guslavage and Thomas were both police officers on the Elizabeth force who attempted to take on the Family. October 1998, a Black Elizabeth police officer Leon Thomas, allegedly shot himself in the head under “suspicious circumstances.”

Thomas had been arrested the day before by Elizabeth PD at a drug

* Samuel Clark is the author of *Total Misconduct: a factual account of police and political corruption*. The book is in part an exposé of the Lords of Discipline police gang. In the book, Clark gives his frank opinion on Internal Affairs: “The overt purpose of Internal Affairs is the prevention of police misconduct. The covert purpose of Internal Affairs is the prevention of police whistleblowers.”

store. He had been working as a security guard. While leaving shift, he was arrested for supposedly stealing items that they said he placed under his car. Now first off, it stands to reason that hiding stolen items under your car is not the best way to hide them. Not to mention anyone else could just “steal it back.” Plus, it’s pretty easy to set someone up by placing items under their vehicle and then claiming that they put them there.¹³

But being framed is not even the worse that can happen. One scenario mentioned by whistleblower Samuel Clark: the department might get a particularly dangerous call and backup just might be late. This, along with constant harassment for minor or non-existent infractions are ways of having “troublemakers” on the force neutralized in a plausibly deniable manner. This may be why Galfy’s home of Clark, New Jersey has such a history of whistleblower cops recording material to back up their claims.¹⁴ Historically, racism and hush money go hand in hand in Union County.

Thomas left behind a nine-page letter illustrating numerous instances of police planting drugs on suspects. His mother and sister say he kept a journal of racist practices by Elizabeth PD that he wanted to eventually give to prosecutors. Sadly, Union County prosecutor Thomas Manahan claimed that the office checked into the claims but that the investigation was closed due to insufficient evidence to warrant prosecution. An occurrence reminiscent of the *Generatorgate* and *Musicfest* scandals under Romankow that Tina Renna reported.

Thomas shared his fears with his family and some other Black police officers, Tracy Finch, and Michael Brown Sr., who at the time were “unconvinced.” Lateef Banks said before his death he told them of notebooks full of detailed information regarding false arrests, violence, and planted drugs involving Black and Hispanic people in Elizabeth. Thomas’s sister Tawana said the Elizabeth PD took the notebooks after his death and only one page was left: a 1996 arrest, brutal beating, and drugs planted to justify

the arrest after the fact.

Tawana Thomas, Leon's sister had this to say: "The notebooks had logs detailing police wrongdoing and discriminatory treatment by the Family since the day of Leon's hiring." Certain police officers' names happened to come up again and again when racist and corrupt misconduct was mentioned. "There are a number of Elizabeth police officers who usually work in teams who account for an excessive amount of very suspect drug busts," James Kervick, public defender's office in Elizabeth during the 90s explained.¹⁵ A pattern of inconsistencies in police reports backs up the claims of his clients disputing certain officers' accounts of drug arrests in Elizabeth. Certain elements in Thomas's case are reminiscent of the apparent murder presented as suicide in Sean Suiter's case.¹⁶

Guslavage, corroborated the Family's protected status, racist behavior, and involvement in distributing drugs in the community. Eventually, evidence surfaced revealing certain narcotics officers, all members of "the Family" being present during the deal. Federal prosecutors turned over the information to local prosecutors who referred it to the Elizabeth police. Fox and the henhouse.

"What amazes me is that they have gotten away with this for so many years," retired police officer, Lt. Daniel Wood lamented. Hassen Abdellah, a Black lawyer in Union County also shared his experience. "I hear frequent reports that the police use excessive force [...] use the derogatory N-word while on duty and plant drugs on suspects. This has produced widespread feelings of fear and apprehension."

Police planted drugs on Richard Mixson, in Rahway, New Jersey in Union County while he was working nights as a janitor for Merck. Mixson was acquitted at the trial and later sued the police.¹⁷

It was a sick-out in 1994 that resulted in Lt. Szpond being banished “to the basement” in the property room coupled with an assault case involving officer William F. Burdge attacking a 67-year-old woman and her brother that brought local attention to The Family again. Sadly, there was little in the way of reporting on the situation outside of the *New York Times* article. Szpond was known to regularly use racist slurs, spoke glowingly of how Hitler would have awarded him the Iron Cross, and even referred to police cruisers as his “panzer columns.”

Guslavage received a \$600,000 payout in 2006 when he went on the record about what happened when he “violated their code of silence.” Guslavage reported a suspected drug abusing cop to Union County Prosecutor’s Office in 1999 and suffered “years of retaliation” as a result. Edward Kologi, the City of Elizabeth attorney called the ruling “totally erroneous.” This is a pattern in these cases, even when Union County is forced to pay whistleblowers, sexually harassed corrections officers, or others, they refuse to take responsibility or admit guilt even when enough evidence exists for hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars to be paid out in settlements.¹⁸

Guslavage, a 36-year veteran of the Elizabeth police department reported to the court how he was “belittled and driven into depression, suffering a nervous breakdown that led to 18 months of medical leave.” The jurors in the civil suit agreed with Guslavage that he had been targeted, harassed, and punished by his superiors. The second incident occurred in 1999, once again related to dirty cops operating under the cover of the police department. Guslavage informed the US Attorney’s Office of two dirty narcotic cops associated with the Family.

While technically, Guslavage was protected by the Conscientious Employee Protection Act (CEPA), as fellow New Jersey police whistleblower Samuel Clark has pointed out, there are limits to that protection. Running out the clock and other tricks are employed by the department to wear down

potential whistleblowers.

Guslavage sued Elizabeth police Chief Gene Mirabella, Deputy Chief Mary Rabadeau, Chief John Simon, acting Police Director Michael J. Orak, and Lieutenant Patrick Shannon. In 2001, Guslavage would file a second CEPA complaint against the City of Elizabeth, the EPD, Police Director Cosgrove, Chief Simon, and Captain Mark Kurdyla involving other incidents of retaliation related to his whistle-blowing that occurred in 1999.

It was in his third CEPA complaint from 2002 related to his demotion and attempted disciplinary actions for breaking the “code of silence.” Guslavage claimed in his suit that he spoke to Chief Mirabella about a call from Michael Zidonek, an assistant prosecutor in the Union County Prosecutor’s Office regarding Ruotolo assigning him to the US Attorney’s Office to assist in the Cervantes investigation. Zidonek confirmed making the call, Mirabella claims not to remember this and says that transferring him from Narcotics Division after he reported dirty cops was “because plaintiff was detail-oriented and a good administrator” and he was “not getting along very well with the other officers in the Narcotics Division.”

Well yeah, I’d say that if you’re the clean narco cop pointing out that other cops are getting drunk at the bar of a coke dealer and then happen to show up during his arrest, that could cause some friction. It’s worth mentioning that the same department that attempted to discipline Lt. Szpond by sending him to the property room claimed that Guslavage’s move to the basement was just because he was such a great, “detail-oriented” police officer. For fans of *The Wire*, Lt. Daniels being exiled to the property room as punishment for attempting to do good police work may come to mind.

Another interesting situation in the Guslavage case perhaps owed to the “unoriginality of corruption” is that of false testimony provided by an “expert medical witness.” That’s right, shades of Dr. Junaid Shaikh and

Robert Pandina rear their head here. Dr. Meyer, the expert witness called by the state, had claimed on the stand he was “not being paid at all.” It was later revealed that he was paid \$2,410.65 in total.

The Family and their “code of silence” brings to mind recent stories related to LASD gangs¹⁹ which are themselves, nothing new. The Department of Justice determined at one point²⁰ that the LAPD was eligible for RICO treatment,²¹ due to widespread misconduct and corruption in the force.

As for whether things have changed in Union County? It appears unlikely. As of August 2022, a lawsuit alleges a “boys club”²¹ that protected cops accused of having sex on duty, drunk driving, and more. So long as they were white and in with the good ol’ boy network.²² Similar to what I learned from New Jersey police whistleblower Samuel Clark, the suit alleges that not being a part of the club or at least being silent about what they do can have very negative repercussions. The in-crowd “will not hesitate to come after one’s livelihood with full force.”

In addition to a “history of discrimination” which in Union County alone would result in material for a full-length book, the complicity of the Chief of Police is noted: “Debbie condones having sex on duty in police vehicles, engaging in prostitution, drunk driving, crashing/ damaging County vehicles, deleting information on County run databases, harboring missing juveniles, losing firearms and assault rifles while failing to report the loss of same, and perjury.”²³ As I’ve heard in other cases from New Jersey, especially from correctional officers and law enforcement personnel who happen to be women and/or people of color, if you’re not “personally liked by” or have “pledged your loyalty” to the Chief and the inner circle who are running wild and dare speak up you will be hounded and harassed.

Like Elizabeth’s The Family or The Lords of Discipline in Newark, these lawless law enforcement gangs tend to have an intense racist element. This

is pointed out by Homero Almanzar in his lawsuit²⁴ and evidenced in the treatment of whistleblower, Blake Clay, in 2013. Clay, a Black police officer, reported Union County Police Chief Debbie and other officers for racially profiling drivers. Shortly after, he received a picture of a drowning slave in his workplace mailbox. This in addition to constant administrative offenses being filed, is consistent with Mr. Clark's personal experience.

Also in 2022, a report of "major discipline" of New Jersey cops resulted in a handful of names from Union County, one of which was fired after being caught interfering with a witness. As for whether the bigger issue to the authorities over him was the illegal activity unbecoming an officer of the law or the audacity of managing to get caught, it's hard to say. One Elizabeth cop, Officer Lamar Boone, received a few days' suspension for "improper handling" of a domestic violence case. Other suspensions came for drunk driving and then refusing to submit to a breathalyzer test, violating body-worn camera policy.²⁵

The Elizabeth Public Information Officer declined to comment to *Tap Into Westfield* reporters who covered the story. Clark Police and the Union County Prosecutor's and Sheriff's Office were among the 17 Union County law enforcement agencies that did not report any "major discipline." Considering what is reported in lawsuits and coverage such as the *NYT* exposé and Dr. Granzen's book, this is just as likely a sign that the perpetrators are protected, as that there are no issues in said departments.

It's not even just inmates, correctional officers, and police officers who have complained about the dangerous and deplorable conditions in the Union County carceral system.

Angela Hoag, a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) brought a civil suit after corrections officer Richard Sheppard "threatened her and physically and verbally abused her." The suit failed, but only "because the State

was not vicariously liable for Sheppard's conduct; and second because plaintiff failed to meet the TCA pain and suffering verbal threshold. NJSA 59:9-2d." That and the fact that they determined she was not a state employee.²⁶

The response from Sheppard after she spoke with prison administration about him is shocking, but sadly not surprising once you've read enough of these Union County cases: Sheppard asked if she had "been talking to anybody," and threatened her, warning: "You better not be talking or else." Continual sexual harassment and threats of physical and sexual violence weren't deemed enough of an issue to do something in Union County.

Throughout all this time, Sheppard continued to receive positive performance evaluations. Despite his repeated use of the n-word, antisemitic and sexually demeaning language according to his assistant supervisor who said he and others had been "getting away with it" for years. A doctor on staff also backed up Hoag regarding the threatening and inappropriate behavior of Sheppard. Thanks to the precedent set in the Jesse Collins inmate rape case, permanent PTSD was not considered sufficient "pain and suffering" since there were no physical marks visible.* Convenient.

It wasn't even the first time he'd threatened violence. As far back as 1990 he had threatened to "fuck up" a coworker. Not uncommon in these cases, a racist component was heaped on to add insult to injury. The threats, abuse, and sexual and racial harassment continued for months.²⁷

And again, remember her suit failed, not because there wasn't this huge issue that should be taken care of, but because of technicalities. For instance: "because she was an employee of CMS, an independent contractor, and not an employee of the State." A search of Google news and newspapers.com

* In the modern history of torture since the Cold War leading up to the era of "enhanced interrogation" many ingeniously evil ways of inflicting pain and suffering without ever leaving a mark have been developed.

returns 0 results related to this story.

Another way that cover-ups are facilitated in the carceral system in Union County is by skirting the Open Public Records Act (OPRA) and attempting to claim exemption by misfiling reports (or not filing them at all). The Union County OPRA compliance manager was taken to court by Conrad Benedetto after Union County attempted to stymie a probe into “suspicious deaths” including apparent suicides or drug overdoses by claiming that they could not release information due to privacy concerns. The County tried to use health privacy laws to prevent being compelled to turn over records. They further tried to advance the notion that the only records of suicides and drug overdoses would be health records as if there are no logs of such incidents kept by the correctional facility itself.²⁷

In October 2018, Sgt. Augustin Alvarez received a 28 day suspension when he and others on duty were found to be negligent in their duties allowing an inmate to die by suicide. Sgt. Augustin Alvarez, Lt. William Gargiles, C.O.’s Jakari Lee, Wesley Peters, Antonio Melendez, and John G. Esmerado, Esq. Special Duty Attorney General/Acting Assistant Prosecutor, and Union County Prosecutor’s Office were all named in the Final Administration Action of the Civil Service Commission ruling on the situation. Eight out of ten scheduled checks that day were not done, despite the logbook being filled out to the contrary.

The Commission noted “the irony of the fact that errors in the logbook continued even on the afternoon of the event, with the 4:00 p.m. security check not being initialed by the officer performing it.” Lee, Peters, and Melendez were all found to be guilty of violations that resulted in an inmate being found hanging in his cell. According to Lt. Gonzalez, the shift commander, there were cameras available for supervision throughout the day so that supervisors could “check in” on their officers. Though Gonzalez admitted these are “real time” only and can’t be rewound or reviewed after

the fact. Gonzalez saw Alvarez tour the unit, speak to Melendez for “a minute or two” and sign the logbook.

The fact that the logbook was signed off on despite minutes later an inmate’s body being found hanged is just one of multiple infractions for which the buck kept being passed. Melendez had written “all secure” in the logbook after Officer Peters claimed that there were no issues. Lt. Gonzalez charged Alvarez with “neglect of duty” due to his “failure to observe” and “failure to advise the shift commander.”

Det. Dennis Donovan, Sergeant, Special Prosecutor’s Unit, Union County Prosecutor’s Office was asked to step in as they were “swamped” in the internal affairs department for the prosecutor’s office already. In coordinating with the prosecutor’s office the goal was “to do whatever they could to get him back to duty.” Alvarez showed up around 12:41 p.m. and signed the logbook at 12:53 after being told all was clear. At 1:03 p.m. during the next scheduled check (both noon and 12:30 security checks were marked as complete despite never having been performed) Alvarez found the inmate hanging. Emergency personnel arrived at 1:05 and he was removed by 1:27 by the EMS.

The Civil Service Commission’s findings regarding Alvarez included incompetence, conduct unbecoming a public employee, neglect of duty, and “other sufficient cause”²⁸

The body of CONRAD J. BENEDETTO v. MARLENA RUSSO decided in June of 2018 reveals that even the judge “expressed disbelief that the County Correctional Facility did not maintain records related to inmates who died in jail.” As with the years of numerous mysterious and suspicious

* NJAC 4a:2-2.3(a)(12) does not define ‘other sufficient cause’, but this phrase is generally interpreted to mean violations of rules, regulations, policies, and procedures such as Post Orders.

deaths out of Ft. Bragg that have begun to finally make news, failing to report suspicious deaths is one way of keeping the “code of silence” intact.

The so-called “code of silence” is even mentioned in a 2004 report from the State of New Jersey Commission of Investigation: *The Changing Face of Organized Crime*²⁹ In the section on law enforcement training:

“They should receive constant reminders that their oath is more important than adherence to any unwritten code of silence. The system should ensure that after alerting authorities about corruption and other problems, the whistleblowers come out of the process appreciated, possessed of good career opportunities, and financially and psychologically whole. We should make heroes out of our patriots and not promote the myth that New Jersey folk heroes can be found in the ranks of television’s ‘Sopranos’ or from rogue cops as portrayed in the media. ”

Benedetto is mentioned in an article from January 2021 related to Federal authorities’ “reasonable cause to believe” that New Jersey’s Cumberland County Jail “failed to take measures to prevent inmate suicides and provide adequate mental health care.” Their actions “likely contributed to the death of several inmates” according to an official report. The facility had been the focus of a series from *NJ Advance Media* that covered multiple suicides between 2015 and 2018. The DOJ investigative report also found the facility did “not provide adequate treatment because of inadequate staffing, inadequate staff coordination, and inadequate programs that place prisoners at risk of serious harm – including deteriorating mental health and, at worst, suicide.”

Inmates told investigators what happened to anyone who would report suicidal ideations: “They’ll torture you. It’s a punishment – it’s not helpful. They treat you like an animal. It’s not help. It’s torture.” Suicidal inmates were “essentially stripped naked” the report reveals, then kept in a tiny cell

with a rubber sleeping mat and nothing else. Even toilet paper must be specifically requested from a correctional officer who “tears the paper off the roll and hands it to the inmate.” This is the kind of treatment that could eventually break anyone, much less someone dealing with severe mental anguish or suicidal thoughts. Prisoners are kept in these conditions “until they simply stop saying they are suicidal.”

Sadly, there is little accountability for those responsible. In the Cumberland County case, Benedetto was involved in, two of three officers who were accused of complicity and cover-up related to the rush of inmate suicides got an offer to have their charges dismissed, record cleared, and no jail time in exchange for agreeing to a pretrial intervention program.³⁰

As mentioned in the Benedetto lawsuit against Union County’s OPRA compliance manager, officers have been charged criminally with falsifying and tampering with public records to cover up suicides (or “suspicious” deaths in general) in 2017. Benedetto also represented Eddie Waters in a federal civil rights lawsuit filed in Camden in 2019. Benedetto made a statement in the Waters case:

“The allegations that a number of correctional officers ganged up and beat a defenseless inmate are bad enough. But it is unconscionable that after they allegedly beat Mr. Waters, they then allegedly refused to provide him with any medical treatment for the serious injuries he claims he received at the hands of those same officers.”³¹

It’s almost no wonder why these situations persist. The idea of secret societies, codes of silence, and rampant abuse from authorities have deep and unsettling implications. It would certainly be easier to consider it no more than wild conspiracy theories and call it a day. The sheer number of claims and the amount of supporting evidence available, however, make it clear that Union County and several other county correctional facilities and

police departments in New Jersey do indeed operate essentially above the law protected by a code of silence that, if challenged, can result in harassment and disciplinary action against police and correctional officers or far, far worse for inmates like Kai who are unwilling to keep silent about what they've seen and experienced.