

# Diane: You knew her and you didn't

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"She was a person who did anything for anybody," says Phoebe Dingle, Diane's cousin. "She was always there."

Adds high school boyfriend Carl Tatum: "She was a girl who was always cheering, no matter what."

On Sept. 16, less than a month after her 20th birthday, Diane was found dead in her apartment of a gunshot wound to the chest from a .22-caliber pistol. Diane lay as if asleep across her rented bed.

Police believe she committed suicide. Why she killed herself, if she did, has everybody puzzled.

Diane was the person unpopular girls love to hate. She had everything going for her. Good looks. A car. Athletic ability. A boyfriend. Talent and popularity.

With all of that, what could go wrong? What could be so drastic, ask friends, that it prevented her from seeking help? Why could a person who brought joy to others not find that joy when she needed it?

The answers to most of those questions lie buried with Diane. Meanwhile, those left behind try to re-examine their relationships with her. Could I have helped her, many ask? Was she trying to tell me something?

## Tumbling Finances

Partial answers to some of the questions may lie with Johnson. Diane spent the last days of her life with him. Diane, says Johnson, was burdened with a combination of family and financial problems.

"Diane couldn't pay her rent," says Johnson. "She got an eviction notice that said she had to be out of her apartment by the 15th. Her roommate didn't know about the eviction. She (Diane) didn't want her to know she was having financial problems."

"Plus she worried about her mother. Her mother had a lump on her breast and needed surgery to have it removed. Diane used to say to me, 'Curt, when my mother goes in the hospital, what will I do? If something happens to my mother, what will I do?'"

Betty Robinson, Diane's mother, says she and Diane had talked about her medical problems, but Diane didn't seem preoccupied with them.

"That wasn't weighing heavily on her at all," says Mrs. Robinson. "She was concerned. She told me to go on and get my health straightened out and she said she wanted to get another job to help me with some of my bills when I was in the hospital."

Mrs. Robinson says she knows nothing about Diane's financial problems. Diane, she says, was interested in moving from her present two-bedroom apartment into a one-bedroom unit in another apartment complex, but not because of finances.

"Diane was trying to better herself," says Mrs. Robinson. "In October, she was going to move."

As an only child, Diane had a special relationship with her mother. Her parents were divorced.

"We were a team," says Mrs. Robinson. "Diane drove a bus in high school. Bus 88. She drove the bus and I would clean it out. She would say, 'Momma, that's my job.' But I wanted her to have the

cleanest bus. She kept me busy, and I enjoyed every minute of it."

Her father, who had remarried and had another family, died when Diane was in high school. Because the two had never been close, her father's death didn't seem to bother her, says Felecia Carter, Diane's high school friend.

"All of us in the group didn't have our fathers living at home," says Carter. "So, when Diane's father died, it didn't seem to bother her. I mean, it didn't hurt school (grades) or anything."

## All Seemed Well

Mrs. Robinson says she talked to Diane hours before she was found dead. To her, says Mrs. Robinson, Diane was her jolly self. She talked about coming home later that afternoon to take her mother to the doctor to have her blood pressure checked. She talked about possibly running for homecoming queen and needing something to wear. "She was in the best of moods," says Mrs. Robinson.

Johnson says he knows nothing of Diane's plans to go to Greensboro later that afternoon.

Mrs. Robinson says it wasn't his business to know everywhere Diane went.

Diane spent that last day trying to get the money together she needed for rent, says Johnson. Diane had written a check for August's rent, but the check bounced, he says. It was 15 days into September, and Diane hadn't paid the September rent.

After talking with the manager at Wessex Apartments, Diane had been given until 1 p.m. to get the money for the August rent and until the end of the week to pay September's rent. Diane was confident she could get the money, says Johnson.

When Diane came by, says the manager, Teresa McColl, she was her regular self.

"I didn't know her real well, but she always had a nice attitude," says McColl.

McColl says she can't comment about Diane's finances.

After Diane's visit with McColl, Johnson says, her spirits picked up.

"She called a family member who she knew had the money, but he said he didn't," says Johnson, who says he didn't have the money to help her. "When Diane got off the phone with him, she was depressed. It was getting closer to 1 o'clock, and she still didn't have the money."

"She was worried that she would have to go to jail for writing a bad check and that she would be put out. She said to me, 'Curt, I'm not a bad person.' Then she started crying. 'I can't afford to be in jail,' she said. 'I don't want my credit messed up.'"

James Lewis, head of security at WSSU, said Diane came to him a week before she was found dead and told him about her financial problems. Diane, whose college work-study job was in the security office, went to the same church in Greensboro that Lewis attends.

"She came by and was telling me about a money problem, but I didn't think it would lead to this," says Lewis.

Having the apartment seemed to be a strain on her, says Lewis.

"If she had stayed on campus, she wouldn't have had those financial problems," he says. "But she left here because of the visitation policy."

Since the summer, Diane had worked at a photo processing shop, but quit, says Johnson, because of management changes.

Tavondia Williams, one of Diane's best friends from high school, says she talked to Diane the Wednesday before she died.

"When I called her, she was baking a banana pudding," says Williams. "We talked about her finding another job, and she talked about needing her check from financial aid to pay some bills."

Diane didn't seem particularly worried about anything, says Williams. As the conversation progressed, Diane talked about her mother's health and about Williams coming to State's homecoming.

"Her mother told me to tell Di that she had talked to the preacher and everything was fine," says Williams. "The last thing she said to me was, 'Love me?' I answered 'yes,' and she said, 'I love you, too.' Then we hung up."

## Putting On A Smile

Although Diane talked with family and friends the week before her death, their inability to notice anything wrong with her shows Diane's ability to hide her true feelings from them, says Johnson. In fact, says Johnson, Diane talked about death and even tried to commit suicide the weekend before she died.

"The Sunday night before she died, she didn't sleep well," says Johnson. "She sat up in bed and asked me, 'What do people at the hospital do for people who take an overdose?' Then she said, 'I tried it once before. Next time I will succeed.'"

Diane then got out of bed and went to the store, her boyfriend says. When she came back she had a box of 16 sleeping pills. She poured all of the pills out of the bottle onto the nightstand, he says. Johnson says he then sent Diane into the kitchen to get him a glass of Coke. While she was gone, he placed all but two of the pills inside his pillowcase.

"When she came back, she looked all over for the pills," says Johnson. "I told her I had them and she kept insisting that I give them to her. Then she went over to the closet and said, 'I got something you want.' That's when I knew she had the gun."

The gun, the .22-caliber pistol Diane was killed with, belonged to Johnson.

"The gun was there at Diane's request," says Johnson. "She asked for protection. She was frightened to be there alone at night."

Johnson says he got the gun from Diane on Sunday night and removed all six bullets. The gun was sensitive, he says. In fact, in late July, Johnson says, he shot himself in the thigh while cleaning it.

As for how Diane could have killed herself if he had removed all of the bullets, Johnson says, others could have been lying around the apartment.

Diane continued to talk about death that night Johnson says.

"She kept saying, 'I don't have nothing to live

for,'" says Johnson. "I can't face Venus (Townsend, her roommate). If I was dead, so many people would be happy," she said. Her mother could get the \$10,000 life insurance policy.

"Then she said, 'Curt, why is it when I need help, nobody is ever there, but I'm always there to help others? I thought the Lord helped people. I need help. Where is the Lord?'"

Johnson says he was finally able to comfort Diane and get her to believe that things would be all right the next day -- Monday.

"I was there to stop her once, but I wasn't there the last time," says Johnson.

Monday for Diane, says Johnson, was like a repeat of Sunday night. She tried to get the money, but couldn't. She didn't go to class that day. She didn't put on any clothes, and she didn't comb her hair. Johnson says he left Diane about 7:30 p.m. to go play basketball. He never saw her alive again, he says.

Diane was found by her roommate, Venus Townsend. According to Johnson, Townsend came into the apartment and was talking to Diane as usual. She even went into the bedroom twice asking her questions. It was not until she pulled back the covers and saw a small hole, surrounded by blood, that she knew something was wrong, says Johnson.

Townsend has since moved out of the apartment and onto campus. Fellow students say she is fine. But she doesn't want to talk about Diane's death.

## Shock Waves

News of Diane's death shocked her friends, they say, because they noticed no signs of problems.

"She seemed firmly footed in terms of where she wanted to go," says Dr. Constance Johnson, who taught Diane general psychology at WSSU. "If there had been something there, I would have noticed it. With my training, I can pick up on things like that."

Says Diane's high school guidance counselor, Rosa Bowden: "I was really upset to hear that tragic story of a good student. She was seemingly well-adjusted. I thought she was a model student. I'm so sorry that her life was so short. I didn't feel she was the type who would give in to her problems."

Adds Judy Desper, Diane's high school cheerleading adviser: "She was very creative and a hard worker. I was shocked to find out about her death. The last I heard, she was doing fine."

Sometimes, says Curtis Johnson, students feel too embarrassed to seek professional help.

"Students have problems so personal they are embarrassed to seek anyone out," says Johnson. "Diane didn't want people to know she couldn't pay her rent."

Because of the questions surrounding Diane's death, Johnson says he has been the victim of insults and accusations. Some people believe he prompted Diane's suicide. Others imply that he may have killed her.

"People said she did it because of me," says Johnson. "That's a lie. I've been getting a lot of

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# This chancellor wears an apron

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can relax."

On this morning, as has been the case since Thompson took over as chancellor in August, he has been busy. Some of his responsibilities have been out of the scope of what most of us consider chancellor's duties. But for Thompson, they are important to his orientation at Winston-Salem State.

For instance, while students were away for fall break, the school held its first-ever employee appreciation breakfast. And the coffee man, believe it or not, was Chancellor Thompson.

Picture this:

"Give me a cup of coffee with two sugars," the woman announces to the man behind the coffee dispenser, wearing a large white apron over his pinstriped blue suit.

The man, Cleon Thompson -- everybody's boss at WSSU -- graciously fills the order, drawing coffee quickly from the institution-size dispenser. He then looks at the woman and says, "I believe you need Sweet n' Low."

Or this:

At the year's -- and Thompson's -- first board of trustees meeting, board members are discussing an issue, and before making a final decision, ask Thompson what he thinks.

Thompson, with all the innocence of a third-grader interrupted during a daydream, replies: "Excuse me, I wasn't listening. What were you talking about?"

It would seem to take a bold, or crazy man, to, during his first official meeting with his policy-making board, admit that he simply wasn't listening. Thompson is neither. Whether it's pouring coffee, addressing the University of North Carolina's Board of Governors or having lunch with WSSU's janitorial staff, Thompson does it all with the same easygoing style. Maybe it's because of the ulcer he got while serving as the number one black in the UNC hierarchy, responsible for presenting the black viewpoint to UNC and explaining to blacks UNC's position. Thompson's duties with UNC as vice president for student affairs and special programs came during UNC's decade-long struggle with the

Department of Health, Education and Welfare over the system's desegregation plan.

Then again, maybe it's just his way of doing business.

"I believe in making people happy and comfortable," says Thompson. "If you are satisfied and happy working here, you will do much more work than I could think to ask you to do. But if you are not satisfied, relaxed, at ease and comfortable, you will only do what I ask you to do and you won't do that right."

"No one can pay them (the employees) to do the work. Everybody thinks they are worth a million dollars. We have to pay them what we can afford and then create the atmosphere where they will do a good job."

But Thompson's laid-back style shouldn't be confused with laxness, he says.

"Oh, I'm very much about my priorities," says Thompson, drawing on a cigarette. "The only way to get things done is to have priorities and mine are in order."

Thompson and the school are in the midst of implementing a four-point program. The first matter of business, he says, is a complete self-study of the general education curriculum. A faculty committee, with the help of outside consultants, will evaluate the general studies curriculum and remove any courses that are not preparing the students for higher-level major courses and add any new courses that are needed.

Second, Thompson is studying all areas in which the school presently offers majors and determining if all are up to national standards. For example, although the school is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, as most universities are, most individual departments do not have national accreditation.

Third, Thompson wants to recruit more academic high-achievers to the school, but not at the expense of turning down lower-level students.

"It doesn't matter if you have the best faculty from all over the world," he says. "If the ma-

jority of the students need remedial courses, it won't work. We need to mix the student body. Peer pressure is more effective than student-teacher relationship."

Twenty-five WSSU faculty members as well as alumni from across the nation have agreed to serve as volunteer recruiters, says Thompson. In addition, Thompson wants more older students on campus.

Fourth, Thompson has plans to improve the school's library by enlarging the present structure and increasing its holdings.

"Once we get all those four basic components in place, then we are on the ball," says Thompson. "It's my job to make sure that those components are there, then the students are out on their own."

"If a student comes in here and says she flunked a course, I want to be able to say *you* have a problem. Now I can't say that. I'm not so sure we are doing all we can to make sure the students have an atmosphere that is conducive for learning."

After working 11 years for the University of North Carolina's General Administration, Thompson says he knows what North Carolina expects of its educational institutions and he intends to make sure Winston-Salem State is meeting and exceeding the state's expectations.

"I've worked on both sides of the street," says Thompson. "I know what North Carolina is asking. They want quality."

"Winston-Salem State has quality now, but it has been suffering under an image problem. We have the best computer science program in the state. We have one of the best nursing schools in the state and our business school is on the horizon of greatness. But how many people know that?"

Thompson said his goal is to make Winston-Salem State a Harvard.

"The only difference between Harvard and Winston-Salem State is that somebody said Harvard was good -- and they got a billion dollars in the bank," says Thompson. "I went to Harvard and expected to be anointed overnight. I want to

make Winston-Salem State good. I want people knocking on the door wanting to get in."

But Thompson admits that what he has is a vision and that he's not quite sure how to make vision reality.

"I don't know how to put it all together, but part of it is having the right people with the right attitude and that's what we are working on."

Thompson says he knows there are people standing by waiting for him to make a mistake, or waiting for him to make drastic changes so they can say they won't go along with his plans. And Thompson says he wants those people to know that mistakes *will* come. But not before the successes, he hopes.

In addition to Thompson's four-point program, he also has other goals outlined, such as increasing enrollment, both in- and out-of-state; renovating the former Anderson High School into WSSU's continuing education center and designing an Afro-American cultural center that establishes Winston-Salem State, once and for all, he says, as a black school. The cultural center, says Thompson, will be a monument to all black people and salute the successes of all blacks beginning with the kings and queens of Africa.

"Once we build the center, we can close the book on the question, 'Is Winston-Salem State a black school?' and go on and have education," says Thompson. "We won't have to defend ourselves any longer. It will be here for all the world to see."

If all goes well, Thompson estimates that he will be at WSSU for 12 years -- that's when state law says he must retire. But between now and then, Thompson says, he has a lot of work to do.

"The time for me to come here was right," he says. "I haven't met one person that does not want to make this institution better and the town is receptive and supportive of the institution. If I fail here, it is my fault."

"My mother called recently and asked, 'How is it down there?' And I told her the same thing. It's a great opportunity and, if I fail, it's my fault."