

FEATURED

With rally, family looks for answers in woman's death

ASHLEY HODGE
Mar 24, 2019



Shawna Krohn shows off a tattoo of her late sister, Emma Compton Layne, who went missing in June of 2017. Her body was later found in November 2017.

Ashley Hodge/Gazette-Virginian

“That’s Emma,” said Kenny Jarels of The Aware Foundation pointing to a smiling photo of the late Emma Compton Layne who was known for her cheerful demeanor each day when she worked at Cody Store.

Jarels stood outside that very store Saturday as a Justice for Emma rally took place.

“And, there’s no better person to help fight for justice for Emma than Shawna,” said Jarels.



Shawna Krohn, who lives in Mississippi, is one of Layne’s two sisters. She and her sister may have lived miles apart, but they were always close.

They shared a birthday on March 6, and even though Layne was three years younger, Krohn said, “She should’ve been a big sister.

“She took care of me. I may as well as tell you she saved me from drugs. She saved me from an abusive relationship. She put imaginary band-aids on my emotional boo-boos,” said Krohn.

For Krohn, Layne was her “biggest hero” and “biggest cheerleader.”

“She was everything,” said Krohn. “She saved my life more than once.”

When Krohn was in a wreck on June 10, 2006, Layne rushed to be by her side, and her sister said that was the type of person she was.

Her friends and family agree Layne always was thinking of others, even when she bought Cody Store.

“She told me I don’t know how many times, ‘I don’t care if I make any money or not, as long as I can pay the bills. I want to give back to the community’,” said Krohn.

That Cody store ended up being the last place anyone saw Layne alive on June 17, 2017.

An employee was the last person to see her before they locked up and left for the night.

The next day Layne had made plans to spend the day with her late mother, Sylvia Whitlow-McCurry, but Layne never showed.

Krohn said she immediately knew something was wrong, so she got in touch with their other sister, Wynona Childress, of Altavista, and on Monday, Childress went to Layne’s house to check on her.

But their baby sister wasn’t there.

Even though she was missing, her car, purse, keys, medication and cell phone were there.

On Tuesday, they filed a missing person’s report. The family told police they waited, because they didn’t want to panic their mother.

Even if Layne had decided to take a break from everything, Krohn felt her little sister would have talked to her.

Then on Nov. 22, 2017, the family’s worst fears were confirmed when hunters found human remains in a heavily wooded area off Sandy Ridge Road in Nathalie.

The remains were later confirmed to be those of Layne.

Police confirm the case is being treated as a homicide, but no arrests have been made.

“What happened to her, she didn’t deserve,” said Krohn.

Before her sister’s disappearance, the two had made plans for the summer.



They hadn't seen each other since December of 2016, but they talked on the phone almost every day.

"The last time I talked to her was June 17," said Krohn.

Her husband, Mark, was having hernia surgery, so they were planning to visit with each other for three weeks in July.

"We were making big plans, but it didn't happen. The last thing I said to her was 'I love you,' double butterfly kisses, and we hung up. We never hung up without doing that."

Struggling daily, Krohn has held on to Layne's support system just as she did Saturday working with The Aware Foundation alongside friends and family.

The foundation has worked on more than 66,000 cases since its inception in 2016.

After working with Help Save the Next Girl, Jarels decided to start his own organization for missing persons, and now he has become a resource contact for 15 police departments.

"We try to reach so many people... we try to use social media to our benefit by getting the information out there in the first 24 to 48 hours, because they are critical," said Jarels.

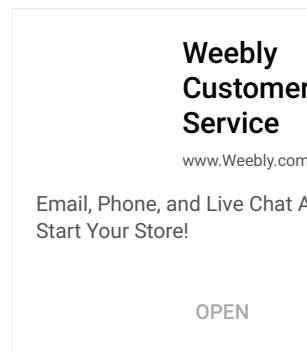
Being that Cody Store was the last place Emma was seen, it seemed important for the family to return there on Saturday, according to Jarels.

"It's important to continue to tell her story until the family has closure. The family first had some closure when the body was found, and next will be when they find out who did it. I'm confident the police are heading in the right direction," said Jarels.

Krohn is hoping that Jarels is right.

"I'm not going anywhere. I don't care how many times I'm going to have to come up here from Mississippi. I promised Emma justice in June of 2017, and unless I drop dead, I have no intention of breaking that promise," she concluded.

The family asks if anyone recalls seeing any suspicious vehicles or persons along Sandy Ridge Road any time between June and November 2017 to call the Halifax County Sheriff's Office at 434-476-3334.



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FEATURED

With billboard, a search for answers continues in death of Emma Compton Layne

ASHLEY HODGE

Sep 25, 2019



This billboard saying, “Who murdered Emma Compton Layne?” now sits alongside Highway 501 near Four Forks in Nathalie.

Submitted photo

A billboard saying, “Who murdered Emma Compton Layne?” accompanied by a photo of Emma and a notice of a \$10,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction now sits alongside Highway 501 in the northern end of Halifax County.

It was put up Monday morning, three months after the Chief Medical Examiner in the Central District Office released Layne’s cause of death as “homicidal violence to include traumatic neck injury, and the manner is homicide.”

Sisters Shawna Krohn of Mississippi and Wynona Childress of Altavista met at the billboard Tuesday to speak to members of the press and to see it in person together.

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“It was hard to see,” said Krohn, who was able to see the billboard for the first time Monday.

“As much as I wanted this, seeing Emma’s face next to murdered...,” she added as her voice trailed off.

She partnered with Kenny Jarels, president of The Aware Foundation, and Lamar Advertising to get this billboard in place.

“Kenny and Breanne and Anne made my dream a reality. They did an excellent job,” said Krohn.

Now that it’s up near Four Forks, she’s hoping it’s going to hit the right person’s conscious.

“They’re going to have to ride by at least once a week. I hope one day they’ll throw their hands up and say they just can’t take it anymore. Someone knows something, and I hope it bothers them until they come forward. I hope it pushes for justice for Emma,” said Krohn.

Childress added, “I’m hoping the same as I did for everything else we have done. By putting Emma’s face up there, it shows that we’re not giving up.”

The photo that was chosen for the billboard shows the Emma they all knew.

“It didn’t matter what she was going through, she always had that smile,” said Childress.

She also said, “This billboard shows other people that you can pursue different things. You don’t have to roll over and say the law is going to handle it.”

But, the two have worked with authorities throughout the two years since their sister’s disappearance in June of 2017.

Krohn said she speaks with investigator Jeff Burton weekly, and she plans to meet with authorities this week while she’s in town.

“They always tell me they’re still working, and they’re still looking,” she added.

Layne died in June 2017 at the age of 52. An employee at Cody Store last reported seeing her alive on June 17, 2017.

Five months after Emma was reported missing, hunters found her remains in a shallow grave in a wooded area approximately 700 yards off Sandy Ridge Road, mere miles from her Nathalie home.



In January of 2018, those remains were positively identified as Emma’s, and Sheriff Fred S. Clark said at that time, “We are treating this as a homicide investigation and are continuing to pursue all possible leads related to Mrs. Layne’s death. This investigation is top priority.”

To date, no one has been arrested and charged in connection with her death, but the sheriff’s office and Tracy Q. Martin, commonwealth’s attorney, maintain that resolving this case is of top precedence.

In addition to the billboard, Childress’ daughter, Rachel Harrison, has begun a Go Fund Me page to help raise funds towards the \$10,000.

“I come to you all humbly seeking donations to offer as a reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person who murdered my beloved Auntie Em two years ago, as well as anyone who assisted in covering up the horrendous crime, “ she wrote on the Go Fund Me site.

If a conviction is reached without someone coming forward, she said all funds raised would be donated to charities dedicated to finding missing persons and domestic abuse.

The Go Fund Me can be found at <https://www.gofundme.com/f/helpgetjusticeforemma>.

“We’re all doing what we can,” said Childress who added, “I’m proud of Shawna for all of her efforts in getting this billboard.”

Krohn ended her thoughts with this final message, “If you know something that could lead to an arrest and conviction, please come forward. It’s time for the guilty to pay their dues.”



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TOP STORY

Medical examiner: Neck injury caused death in 2017 homicide

ASHLEY HODGE

Jun 20, 2019



Emma Compton Layne was last seen on June 17, 2017. Her body was found later in November that year. Authorities are still investigating her death.

Submitted photo

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner Central District this week released the cause of death for Emma Compton Layne — “homicidal violence to include traumatic neck injury, and the manner is homicide.”

“I want the guilty party or parties held accountable. That was wrong what they did to her. Emma deserves justice. She was a beautiful person,” said sister Shawna Krohn who lives in Mississippi.

Her sister Wynona Childress of Hurt feels the same way.

CONTINUE

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“I want someone arrested, convicted and to have to serve the maximum prison sentence. It’s not enough, because nothing will bring Emma back,” Childress added.

Layne died in June 2017 at the age of 52. An employee at Cody Store last reported seeing her alive on June 17, 2017.

Her family reported her missing on June 20, 2017.

Childress recalls going to Emma's house that Monday and again on Tuesday to meet with law enforcement. After being inside the home, she began to have suspicions about how her late sister had died, but seeing it in print was much more upsetting.

"To see it so graphically printed, I was shocked," said Childress. "When you know something in your heart and mind, you still don't picture it."

Five months after Emma was reported missing, hunters found her remains in a shallow grave in a wooded area approximately 700 yards off Sandy Ridge Road, mere miles from her Nathalie home.

The location of the remains is adjacent to property of one of the farms owned by Emma's husband, Russell Layne.

In January of 2018 those remains were positively identified as Emma's, and Sheriff Fred S. Clark said at that time, "We are treating this as a homicide investigation and are continuing to pursue all possible leads related to Mrs. Layne's death. This investigation is top priority."

To date, no one has been arrested and charged in connection with her death, but the sheriff's office and Commonwealth's Attorney Tracy Q. Martin maintain that resolving this case is of utmost importance.

"She didn't deserve this," said Krohn. "I don't know how someone can sleep at night knowing what they did. If someone who was hungry came to Emma, she fed them. If someone came to Emma who needed gas but didn't have money, she would put gas in their car. For this person or persons to do that to her and then put her and leave her..."

Krohn and her sister, Childress, said they both found out about the cause and manner of their sister's untimely death from a news report.

"It was just a shock to see it as a news report," said Childress who contacted Investigator Jeff Burton right away.

He was not aware the information was being released, she said.



"I had thought about asking (about the cause of death). I felt if they had wanted it public, the police would have made it public," said Childress.

Meanwhile, Krohn said she felt in her gut all along that something bad had happened to her late sister.

When she first went missing in 2017, Krohn said she knew Emma did not just walk away.

"That wasn't Emma. She didn't decide to just up and walk away, and if she did, she would have been with her in Mississippi," said Krohn. "I don't ever want another family to go through this. But, I'm not going to quit fighting. Someone is going to stand accountable."

While her sisters wish police could have made an arrest in 2017, Childress acknowledged they have a process to go through.

And she would like the public to understand that Emma's case is not a cold case.

"Emma's case is not a cold case. It's ongoing," said Childress. "I feel like somebody besides the person who committed the crime knows what happened. I don't know how they live with themselves. I don't know how they close their eyes at night..."

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FEATURED

‘There are times when I want to pick up the phone and call her. It’s too hard.’

ASHLEY HODGE

Jun 18, 2019



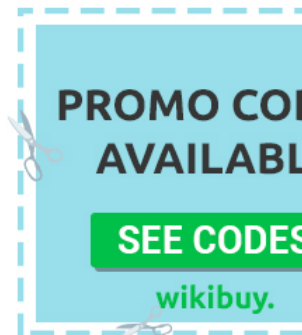
Emma Compton Layne was last seen on June 17, 2017. Her body was found later in November that year. Authorities are still investigating her death.

Submitted photo

For the past two years, sisters Shawn Krohn of Mississippi and Wynona Childress of Altavista have had to live life without their sister, the late Emma Compton Layne.

First she was missing. Cody Store ended up being the last place that anyone reported seeing Layne alive on June 17, 2017.

An employee was the last person to see her alive before they locked up and left for the night.



Then she was reported missing on June 20, 2017.

Her body was later found in a wooded area in the northern part of the county in November of that year.

In January, those remains were confirmed to be Layne's.

Dealing with the anniversary of her disappearance, Krohn said, "I'm going through a really tough time. There are times when I want to pick up the phone and call her. It's too hard."

Her sister agreed saying, "I've been a mess lately. It's pretty much all I've been thinking about. As the day gets closer, my anxiety increases."

But, just as they deal with these hard days, they feel the Halifax County Sheriff's Office is working just as hard.

Sheriff Fred S. Clark said the case remains a top priority for his office.

"We're still working diligently with local and state officials to bring to justice the person or persons responsible for committing this senseless act. Our thoughts and prayers continue to be with Emma's family," Clark added.

Also commenting on the ongoing investigation, Commonwealth's Attorney Tracy Q. Martin said, "The death of Emma Layne was a tragic event for the Compton family and for the entire Halifax County community. Emma is neither lost nor forgotten. Resolving this case is a priority for my office and the investigating police agencies.

"The Halifax County Sheriff's Office, in conjunction with the Virginia State Police, continues to work hard investigating this important matter, as they have from the beginning, seeking out sufficient evidence for a successful prosecution.

"My office is working closely with both police agencies and fulfilling our role advising and supporting their investigation. As much as I would like to share details of the case with the community, it is an active investigation. As a result, I am ethically prohibited from providing this information."

No cause of death or date of death has been released due to the ongoing investigation.

"I know Halifax (police) is working hard. It's just being her sister, I want it done yesterday. But I know it takes time, and we only have one chance at this," said Krohn.

Childress added, "It's not what people would consider a cold case. They're still investigating, and we have that to be thankful for. It's just been really hard since Easter – any holiday is harder. Emma, mama and I used to spend them together, and now I don't have either of them. It's a lot to deal with."

Everything reminds the sisters of Emma, and more than anything, they wish they could hear her voice again.

Summertime reminds Krohn of all the times that Emma came down to visit her.

She had her own bedroom in Mississippi and some of her clothes still hang in the closet, and others sit in the chest of drawers.

"I refuse to move on," said Krohn. "I made a promise on June 17 that I would get justice for Emma, and I intend on keeping my promise. Emma was a good person."

While running Cody Store, Layne would do anything for her customers, and it wasn't about the money for her, Krohn said remembering the generosity of her sister.

"She wanted to give back to the community she grew up in," said Krohn, who added it wasn't uncommon for Emma to open the store on Sundays for funerals or birthdays or make deliveries.

She said if a customer came in wanting something, and Emma didn't have it at the time, she'd say, "Come back tomorrow, and I'll have some." And she always did.

"She gave the same respect to everyone who came in the store," said Krohn.

Both of her sisters miss her calls, and Childress misses knowing that her sister once lived only 30 minutes away.

"Sometimes I can hear her. I wish I had a voicemail saved, so I could really hear her voice. I just miss her being here," said Childress.

Krohn added, "I miss her talk and her laugh. We'd be on the phone, and she'd say hold on -- listen to this and sing a song."

The last CD she had playing in her car was Leonard Skynyrd, but Krohn said Layne enjoyed a mix of blues and rock n' roll.

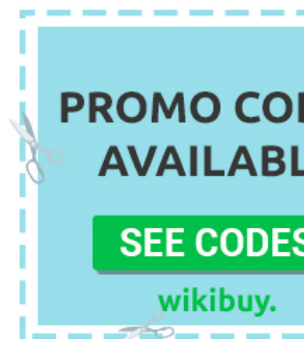
She also misses Layne's random calls to tell her a "Laffy Taffy" joke or knock-knock joke.

"I could never get her on a "Laffy Taffy" joke. She knew them all, and I gave her a knock-knock joke book, and I think we went through the entire book. We rode back roads together and shared secrets. She held me together," said Krohn, describing Layne as a nurturing person.

When Krohn would visit, she would always get emotional when it came time to leave, and she recalled Layne would wipe away her tears saying, "Don't you cry."

Childress misses spending all the holidays together and eating Layne's specialties – macaroni salad, potato salad and green beans.

"The time we spent together was quality time," said Childress.



To help remember their sister, both sisters share Layne's story on Facebook in various pages such as the Friends for Justice for Emma page, and they have held rallies and vigils.

Krohn worked with Kenny Jarels of The Aware Foundation to hold a rally in March, and more recently, he named his newest pet dog after Emma in her memory.

To honor her sister's memory, Childress runs in 5Ks wearing her "Emma" pens on her shoes and "Justice For Emma" T-shirts. She also is taking self-defense classes in her memory.

"Every class I think about her," said Childress.

While she doesn't know how her late sister died, she can't help but think maybe this is what happened each time she learns a new defense technique.

"I don't know, but maybe," she added.

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