

The Progress - Index

WS

Their father was buried without them knowing. Now they're trying to pick up the pieces.

Joyce Chu The Progress-Index

Published 9:52 a.m. ET Feb. 21, 2022 | Updated 12:50 p.m. ET Feb. 21, 2022

PETERSBURG — On a chilly January day, the body of Leander Jones went down to the ground at King Memorial Park in Baltimore, 170 miles away from home.

Jones, 65, was a retired Pocahontas Island resident. While he was recovering from brain surgery at a Virginia nursing home, he was taken to Maryland. Two months later, he died at a Baltimore hospital.

His body sat for three weeks at the morgue.

No headstone was placed to mark Jones' gravesite. No memorial service was given to commemorate his life. None of his close family and friends were present.

Nor were they aware of his death until weeks after he had passed.

A Virginia family in disbelief, grieving

Three miles from downtown Petersburg there's a sharp right turn over a bridge that leads to the historic Pocahontas Island, one of oldest free Black communities in the country.

Right in the quiet cluster of homes that have hung on for decades, some with the exterior falling apart, is a pale yellow house with red porch railings.

That's where Leander Jones' fiancée lives and where she expected him to make a full recovery, anticipating the day they would share the same bed again.

But in mid-January, she got a letter that would change everything.

On Jan.18, Bonita Fitzgerald, 57, opened the mailbox and found what was a normal looking business envelope from UnitedHealthcare, one that had come multiple times before. As soon as she read the letter, Fitzgerald fell apart.

“We’re sorry to inform you about the recent loss of Leander Jones. We want to share some information with you without placing any extra burden on you at this time. Medicare has asked us to end Leander’s membership in AARP MedicareRx Saver Plus as of December 31, 2021.”

She then called one of Jones’ sons to tell him about the mail and sent him a picture of it. He dispersed it to the rest of his siblings.

They looked at the letter in disbelief.

“That can’t be right. That can’t be right,” said one of the sons, Leander "Lee" Jones III.

Lee, 31, works in insurance. On rare occasions, companies have mistakenly sent letters to family members informing them of their loved one’s death. At first, the siblings were convinced it was a hoax.

Lee's sister made follow-up phone calls to confirm.

Terronda Green, 48, found out that their father had indeed passed away Dec. 27 at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. His body had been sitting in the morgue for three weeks before he was buried. According to the family, an estranged relative buried him.

The local family is now left in the dark, with no closure and more questions than they can get answers for.

A death far, far away from home

On Aug. 8, Leander Jones fell face down on the street outside his home in Petersburg.

His teeth were knocked out and he was bleeding out of his mouth, according to the family. His fiancée Fitzgerald rushed him to Southside Medical Center, where they discovered his brain was bleeding in two places. He was transferred to another hospital in Richmond for surgery that same day.

After three weeks, Jones was then transferred to The Laurels of University Park nursing home for rehabilitation. The nursing home went on quarantine in early September after having a COVID outbreak. They allowed outside visitations a month later.

When Fitzgerald visited him on Oct. 7 at the nursing home, Jones was no longer in his right state of mind.

His head was bent down to one side and he had a glazed look over his eyes. His body had a bad odor. Drool was coming down the side of his mouth and he could not talk. Fitzgerald shaved his face and cleaned him up with a towel. According to the nurse, he had been in that condition for a week.

“This is not like my baby,” she told the nurse. “Something is going on with him. Why isn’t he talking??”

“He doesn’t talk,” she replied.

“He was talking before ya’ll went on quarantine,” Fitzgerald shot back.

After asking the nurses to look into Jones’ condition, he was shipped to the hospital and put in the ICU. He was severely dehydrated, his blood pressure had dropped to a dangerous level, and he was septic.

Fitzgerald visited him every day and saw him regaining consciousness.

When she came on Oct. 11, he asked her for a kiss. She came up on the bed and laid on his right side while he swung his left arm across her. His 65th birthday was coming up and his daughters had bought him a card, planning to surprise him with it the next week.

As soon as his condition began to improve, he was brought back to the nursing home.

On Oct. 14, Fitzgerald went to the nursing home for an afternoon visitation. She waited outside for over half an hour but her fiancée was nowhere in sight. The social worker then came outside to tell Fitzgerald that Jones was no longer there.

A relative had come that morning and taken him to Maryland. According to the social worker, the relative had signed Jones out against medical advice.

Between Jones' leaving the nursing home and passing away at Johns Hopkins Hospital, the family knows nothing else about his condition. At some point, he also contracted COVID. Due to HIPPA laws, the nurses and doctors aren't able to release any of his medical records to them.

The relative had cut off communication with Jones' children. When he passed two months later, they were not notified.

"The fact that we weren't able to have the opportunity to say goodbye, that's gut-wrenching," said Green who is also an elder at her church. "For me, it's the fact that he was buried alone. That's the part that crushes me."

Ironically, Green was only 12 miles from Johns Hopkins Hospital the day her dad died. She had driven to Baltimore/Washington International Airport to pick up one of her son's friends to bring him home for the holidays.

"I do funerals. To know that I've been there for other families and I wasn't given the opportunity to be there for my own, that takes me to a whole other level," Green said through tears.

'How do we pick up the pieces?'

After learning about his death, the siblings and Fitzgerald organized a memorial service in Petersburg in late January. They didn't have Jones' body or his ashes, only a painting of him that Lee made.

Friends, family, and neighbors packed out the chapel at J.M. Wilkerson Funeral Establishment.

"That's all we had," Lee said. "And here we are. How do we pick up the pieces?"

"Like, I just spoke to him and we had a really, really solid conversation. Because growing up with him was tough but we were supposed to pick up where we left off. I can't focus at work. I don't care about a lot of s--- now. I just really need some type of answers or closure or something, something," Lee says in a shaky voice.

His hands are trembling.

The last in-person conversation he had with his father before he was hospitalized was on May 5. Jones called him at 11:30 p.m. to tell him to come over and meet Fitzgerald, his girlfriend at the time. Jones had a habit of calling all his children at odd hours of the night. Lee, tired as he was, felt a tug to go to his father's house even though he had to get up at 6 a.m. for work the next day.

"I just really want you to know that I love you and I'm sorry," Jones told his son. Growing up, Jones would constantly fight with Lee's mother and wasn't present for most of his life. When they divorced, Lee blamed himself.

"Stop saying sorry," Lee told his father. "I forgive you, I need you to forgive yourself. I want to get to know you now that I'm an adult. I want to know what your favorite colors are. How was it growing up here?"

"Alright, we can do that," he replied.

Jones took Lee to the guest room and showed him a picture of when he was a chef in the military and asked him to make a painting of it. Lee started the painting but put it aside when things got busy.

After finding out about his dad's death, he finished the painting the day before the memorial service.

"I felt a sense of relief," Lee said. "It finally clicked with him because I've forgiven him over years, but it was something different about that. I think it was God touching us that night. The way he looked at me, the way he put his hand on my leg and was like, 'I love you. Thank you. And I'm proud of you.'"

"That's gonna forever stay with me."

A love cut tragically short, a life stolen

Fitzgerald met Jones last year on Jan.12 while shopping at Food Lion in the meat section. Fitzgerald was reaching for some hamburger meat and Jones was looking for steak.

"Excuse me miss, am I in your way?" Jones said. What she didn't know was that Jones had planned to bump into her. She had caught his eye when he first saw her, and he had circled the store three times looking for her.

Upon hearing his voice, Fitzgerald looked to her left, and then had to tilt her head up to see him. He towered above her at over 6 feet.

Oh my god, that's a nice tall drink of water, she thought to herself.

"Has anyone told you that you got some pretty eyes?" he said to her. "But all I can see is your eyes." Fitzgerald proceeded to pull her mask down. He dropped his head down as he was shaking it back and forth. "You are the most beautiful woman." He handed her his business card.

The next day Fitzgerald gave him a call.

"How was the T-bone steaks last night?" she said. Upon recognizing her voice, he hollered excitedly on the phone, "She called me! She called me!" He took her over to his house that night and prepared an elaborate meal: pork chops, sausage, fried potatoes and collard greens. They sat in the kitchen talking until midnight like two giddy teenagers. Her belly was doing butterfly flips the whole time.

"It was love at first sight," she said. "It was like we were meant to be. I felt really happy." Her eyes light up and she smiles whenever she recounts their stories.

Four months later, he got down on one knee to propose to her.

"I miss him. I cry every day. It just hurts so bad," she said. "I never loved a man the way I loved Leander. I didn't just love him, I was in love. And he was in love with me."

"There was a spark how you looked at him that I haven't seen anybody else look at him," Lee says to Fitzgerald.

She hasn't washed the cloth she used to shave his beard while he was in the nursing home. She keeps it right next to their bed. His scent lingers.

"All I have is memories," she said as she sighed.

A month after discovering he died, they struggle to find closure

Lee called his dad "onion." That was one of the first words that came out of his mouth as a baby, and since the womb he never stopped calling his dad by that nickname.

He also loves to cook, taking after his dad. He prepared a scrumptious potato and cheese dish to share when I came over to Jones' house.

"There are patches in time that I'm experiencing where it's like, this is not real," Lee said. "Then I'll have almost an existential crisis. I'll have episodes where it comes crashing down on me."

He tries to keep himself busy every minute so his mind doesn't wander to his dad's death. He no longer has a regular sleep schedule. Some nights, he won't even be able to get any shut eye.

"Nobody can give me what it is I need here," Leander says as he puts his hand over his heart. "I feel a void."

Another sibling, LaTisha Ellis, jumped straight back to work after they held the memorial service. Now she's dealing with constant chest pains. She continues to juggle her various responsibilities at work as a supervisor and her role as a wife and mom while emotions of grief, anger, bitterness and emptiness tear at her from the inside.

"We did a memorial service, and it was beautiful," said Ellis, 43. "But I still feel it did not give us closure. For me, this has been hell, traumatic. It's not normal. And to be placed in this situation is very hateful and very evil."

Every Father's Day, Green gave her father a "Redskins" collectible, which is also her favorite NFL team. Last June, she had a cup made with the logo and the words "Grandpa Leander" written over it and mailed it to him. The USPS box is still in kitchen. He would not let Fitzgerald to throw it away.

Upon seeing the gift box still in the house, Green burst into tears.

Through the turmoil, the family has been a rock of emotional support for each other. It's a pain that only they feel, that only they can understand. They hold each others hands when one of them feels unsteady. Perhaps the one silver lining is the closeness this situation has compelled them to be. In a way, they are honoring their father's wishes.

The siblings have two other brothers who live in Georgia. They want them to come to Virginia so that they could take the family photo their father always wanted.

“We’re gonna do that picture,” Green said. “I’ve been begging them for years to get a sibling picture. Tomorrow is just not promised.”

They plan to get his body exhumed and brought to Petersburg so that they could give their father a proper burial.

Joyce Chu is the Social Justice Watchdog Reporter for The Progress Index. Contact her at Jchu1@gannett.com or on Twitter @joyce_speaks.