

## 22-Month-Old Boy's Death a Homicide, D.O.J. Says; A DHS Examination Obtained by the Consortium Found 'No Neglect' From Parents

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Attorney General Denise George on Tuesday told the press that 22-month-old Tamir Lake was killed after being struck in the head resulting in "blunt force trauma," which Ms. George — citing an autopsy which took well over two months to produce — dated back to December 2018. As a result, the boy had a seizure while at the Queen Louise Home for Children over a year later, and died on May 5, 2020, the territory's attorney general said. At the time, he was in the custody of the Dept. of Human Services.

The case was ruled a homicide by the D.O.J., and Ms. George said it would be turned over to the Virgin Islands Police Department for further investigation. No one was charged.

Ms. George on Monday night had announced that a press conference giving details of the autopsy, even before D.O.J. contacted the mother of the child to share the results, would be held. The press event was to be live-streamed, but that didn't happen. Instead, the press conference was held via telephone.

At about 8:00 a.m. Tuesday — two hours before the press conference — the V.I. D.O.J. Medical Examiner, Dr. Jacqueline Pender, called Tamir's mother, Rhonda Jeremiah, to share the results. Ms. Jeremiah said she was told by the Dept. of Human Services and a Dept. of Justice detective while attempting to learn of her child's cause of death in May, June and July, that the D.O.J. was awaiting bloodwork and that's why the autopsy was taking so long to return.

"This morning the medical examiner confirmed to me that what they (D.H.S. and the D.O.J. detective) were telling me was a lie. They were not waiting on no bloodwork. The medical examiner said she didn't understand why they would tell me that. She told me the autopsy been ready and that she don't know why it took so long for them to give me anything. She confirmed that this morning," Ms. Jeremiah said, referring to the D.O.J. medical examiner.

The D.O.J. said its autopsy found that the boy had multiple skull fractures and hypoxia, a condition in which the body or a region of the body is deprived of adequate oxygen supply at the tissue level. He also suffered with ischemia, which is a condition where not enough blood is supplied to an organ or part of the body, according to the medical examiner. Additionally, D.O.J. said the boy was found to suffer with cerebral palsy, which is a group of permanent movement disorders that appear in early childhood.

The D.O.J. went on to portray the child as having no problems when he was born prematurely at 31 weeks, or 7 months.

### **How Tamir was born**

Ms. Jeremiah said she was at home when she went into labor and subsequently called the ambulance. "It was around after 11 going to 12 p.m. when the ambulance came. They had to situate my other kids at my neighbor's that was two houses down from me," she said.

Ms. Jeremiah said she was then placed in the ambulance. "They told me not to push," she said. She responded by stating that it was difficult not to, but that they pressured her to hold on until arrival to the hospital.

"It took sometime for us to leave from Williams Delight to Juan Luis. I was already fully crowning — like the child was right there. I was squeezing but telling them it wasn't possible. I remember all of this because I was so scared," Ms. Jeremiah said.

By the time she arrived at the hospital, Tamir was out after a couple of pushes. Ms. Jeremiah said she has questioned to this day whether the delay in pushing out her premature son might have caused various complications.

The premature baby stayed at the Juan F. Luis Hospital for a month and a half before being released to his mother.

### **Irregularities noticed**

When Tamir first came out the hospital, his head, to the top part, looked deformed, Ms. Jeremiah said. "A nurse friend of mine from Juan Luis asked me about his head and said she found it

strange that the hospital didn't tell me anything about it," Ms. Jeremiah said.

Within the first 48 hours after Tamir was released to his mother, Ms. Jeremiah brought him back to the hospital for a followup checkup as is required. "They checked him out but didn't tell me anything. I asked them about his feeding issues, including throwing up, which was occurring even while he was at the hospital," she said. "He was constantly throwing up. He wasn't tolerating my breast milk so he was given Similac."

Following the 48-hour check, Ms. Jeremiah said she brought her son for two checkups at Frederiksted Healthcare. But Tamir, she said, continued to struggle and the throwing up had gotten worse, so after doing all what she could at home, Ms. Jeremiah said she took her son back to the hospital on Dec. 12 for evaluation.

Once at the hospital, between 3-4 different nurses were attempting to prick on the boy's cephalic vein for IV purposes but multiple attempts were unsuccessful, Ms. Jeremiah said. He then started to swell and became black and blue in certain areas because the IV was not catching the right vein. When it was finally accomplished, Tamir was given fluids through the IV. He was admitted to the hospital and Ms. Jeremiah, who said she was at JFL from 9:00 a.m. that day, left the hospital at about 4:00 p.m.

Then at about 5:00 p.m., Ms. Jeremiah said she received a call from JFL informing her that her son had a seizure. After the seizure, JFL said it performed a CT scan and found bleeding in the brain, and decided to airlift Tamir for further testing because they didn't like how he was looking.

Ms. Jeremiah said Tamir never had a seizure while he was with her. She had brought him to the hospital during the morning of Dec. 12 because, she said, he was still vomiting, and had gotten worse. The hospital had placed the boy on ranitidine for acid reflux, but that was ineffective. "He wasn't responding well. He really didn't sleep much. I would rock him to sleep, but he just wasn't acting normal," Ms. Jeremiah said.

The V.I. D.O.J., citing a JFL ultrasound result performed on the boy, said Tamir's brain was functioning normally at the hospital before being released to his mother. The boy, however, had a number of abnormalities. His left ear was situated lower and smaller than the right, and his left leg was shorter than the right leg. He was also having problems with his left hip, she said. Ms. Jeremiah said she has pictures of the abnormalities.

### **Airlift to Miami**

According to Medical Examiner Pender, after the child was flown to the Miami Children's Hospital, it was determined by doctors at the medical facility that he had suffered multiple skull fractures, to include broken bones and other extensive damage as a result of his head being violently shaken, or blunt force trauma to the head. Because of this, he suffered permanent brain damage, the hospital said, according to Ms. Pender.

Ms. Pender also said blood samples were sent to the University of Washington on Dec. 28, 2018, to determine whether the boy suffered brittle bone disease. However the results showed he did not suffer with said disorder, Ms. Pender said.

### **Back to St. Croix**

In January 2019, he was turned over to the care of the Queen Louise Home for Children, according to Ms. Jeremiah. D.O.J. says the boy was placed at the children's home from March

2019 and resided in the Sister Emma Cottage, where children who suffer severe disabilities reside.

Ms. Jeremiah, battered mentally and emotionally by the protracted ordeal, was lost for words at one point on Tuesday during an interview with the Consortium. She was also tired, having gone over a year without her son and fighting to regain custody, only to receive a call of his death on May 5.

"I don't agree with the finding. It's basically just taking everything they said in court and putting it on paper. The cause of death is Queen Louise negligence; that child been with them from six months old. They said he died of a seizure. How? I also believe Juan Luis dropped the ball from the beginning. Miami is famous for calling Child Protective Services without investigating. There was no thorough investigation," Ms. Jeremiah said.

### **D.H.S. medical examination finds 'no neglect'**

A medical examination from the Dept. of Human Services, Division of Children, Youth and Families, the result of which was [obtained by the Consortium](#), showed that there was no neglect of Tamir by his parents. The examination also determined that the child should be returned to his home before an investigation commenced. Additionally, it said the boy may have been malnourished, but that it could be as a result of being a premature baby. This examination was dated Dec. 13, 2018.

But Human Services neglected its own findings and moved ahead with the case. And even after taking the matter to court in early 2019, the department only requested temporary custody of the child and asked the court to require that the parents enroll and complete parenting skills through the Women's Coalition of St. Croix. Ms. Jeremiah said she completed almost all the courses. The child's father had done the same, she said.

Asked by a Consortium reporter what was the status of the investigation in Dec. 2018, when Tamir was diagnosed as having non-accidental head trauma and taken away from his mother's care, Ms. George said, "As far as the communications and everything that we do in the AG Office, we are not going to reveal that information."

Asked by the Consortium if one child was taken from the mother, why is it that the other two children are still left in her care, Ms. George refused to give a direct answer.