

A MOTHER'S SEARCH



JEANA-DEE ALLEN/THE STATE NEWS

For more than a year, Mason resident Nancy Cotter has been looking for answers concerning her daughter Rylan Cotter's death. The windows of her home still contain faint traces of Rylan's name. "On the night of the visitation, we had a bonfire. I stood here smoking cigarettes and writing her name a thousand times (on the fogged windows)," she said. It helped Nancy Cotter process her daughter's death, she said, because she didn't know what to do.

Cotter's quest to learn more about her daughter's death continues 1 year later

By Jacob Carpenter

THE STATE NEWS

Dozens of pages with hastily scribbled notes are crammed into a leather-covered binder on a table in Nancy Cotter's house. Inside are records of every phone call, every inquiry, every plea she has made to answer the question that has devastated her for more than a year: How did her daughter, Rylan, die on Jan. 7, 2008?

Police said Cotter's daughter, an MSU junior majoring in international relations, jumped from an electrical tower and killed herself in a small Indiana town. Her mother, however, disagrees. She said shoddy police work and a coroner's incorrect suicide ruling have marred the investigation. For months, Cotter has fought to clear her daughter's name with little success. From neighboring police agencies to state governors' offices, Cotter has spent countless hours looking for somebody to take up her cause. But the question remains whether there is enough evidence to prove police wrong in their ongoing investigation of Rylan Cotter's death.



Searching for a reason
In the early afternoon of Jan. 9, 2008, a maintenance worker at Brassie Golf Course in Chesterton, Ind., found

the body of Rylan Cotter.

She was 28 feet from the base of an electrical tower, lying with her arms outstretched, keys in one hand, a lighter in the other and a small cut on her left wrist wrapped in toilet paper.

Rylan left East Lansing by herself at about 2 a.m. Jan. 7, 2008, and checked in to a Benton Harbor hotel at 3:30 a.m. She checked out alone eight hours later and drove to Chesterton.

While in Chesterton, a town of about 10,000 residents located 20 miles from the Indiana-Michigan border near Lake Michigan, Rylan stopped at a travel bureau to look at a map of local trails, according to witness reports. She also went to an unidentified local business to buy a box cutter and the allergy medicine Benadryl, police said. She was not seen with anyone at either stop.

In the early evening, Rylan was seen by a man walking his dog on a trail near Brassie Golf Course, located about two and a half miles from the nearest major road. Cotter parked her car near the Prairie-Duneland

From East Lansing to Indiana (right)

The day of her death, Rylan Cotter left East Lansing, stayed at a Benton Harbor hotel and was seen in Chesterton, Ind.



YIQING SHAO / ISN

Trail, got out to walk and returned to her car in a short time. She sat in her unstarted car and the man walked away. He would be the last known person to see her alive.

To date, nobody knows why Rylan would leave East Lansing in the early morning hours and drive to Chesterton, where she did not have any known contacts.

Searching for evidence

Chesterton police arrived on the scene of Brassie Golf Course at about 1:15 p.m. two days later. Rylan was found about 500 feet south from the Prairie-Duneland Trail and

a half mile from her car. The subsequent investigation was performed by the Chesterton Police Department, led by Lt. Dave Cincoski. With few answers and questions about how the investigation was conducted, Cincoski has come under fire from Rylan's mother and her supporters.

Nancy Cotter and others have questioned whether golfers were allowed to continue rounds while detectives investigated the initial scene on Jan. 9.

The course's general manager, Duane Borcharding, said six members were on the semi-private course that



Chesterton, Ind. (left)

1 Rylan Cotter's car was found in a parking lot a half mile from where her body was found in Chesterton.

2 She was seen walking along a path near the electrical tower police said she jumped from.

3 Her body was found by the maintenance staff of the Brassie Golf Club near the tower.

4 One mystery is why Cotter wouldn't have jumped from a closer tower if she intended to jump.

Cotter case timeline

Jan. 7, 2008

2 a.m. — Rylan Cotter is last seen in East Lansing.

3:30 a.m. — She checks into a Benton Harbor hotel by herself.

11:30 a.m. — Cotter checks out of the hotel alone.

12:45 p.m. — Cotter is spotted at a Chesterton, Ind.-area business as well as a visitors bureau.

5:30 p.m. — She is seen by Chesterton resident John Jackson on a trail near Brassie Golf Course.

Jan. 9, 2008

1:15 p.m. — Police respond to a body found by maintenance workers at Brassie Golf Course.

1:45 p.m. — Police find Cotter's car in a parking lot about a half of a mile from where her body was found.

Jan. 10, 2008

An autopsy reveals Cotter died of blunt force trauma to her chest and abdomen.

March 7, 2008

Porter County Coroner Victoria Deppe rules the death a suicide, and police suspend the criminal investigation. SOURCE: CHESTERTON POLICE

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Interactive map

What happened during Rylan's last hours? Where was she seen, and what was she doing?

Audio slideshow

See photos of Rylan through the years, shared by her mother and a former roommate.

Records

Read the coroner's report that said Cotter's death a suicide as well as the initial police report.

A longer version of this story is available online

day and "there were probably a couple on the course" during the investigation who were advised to stay away from the area where Rylan's body was found.

Cincoski said he couldn't verify whether golfers were on the course during the investigation but said there were no golfers near the scene. Officers also did not close off the trail where Rylan was last seen. Cincoski said, adding "there was no need to cordon off the bike trail."

Kenneth Ouellette, a retired police detective and licensed private investigator who has worked on death investiga-

tations, said police generally "want to cordon off a pretty good area" when investigating a death. That area is dependent on the investigation scene circumstances, said Ouellette, who is not familiar with the Cotter investigation.

Cotter also said police didn't accept enough assistance from other police departments to supplement the investigation. Cincoski said Chesterton police received "personal, property, equipment and assistance" in the investigation from Indiana State Police.