

Proof: A True Crime Podcast
Season One: Russian Roulette
Episode 13: What Charlie Childers Saw
Monday, June 6, 2022

Susan Simpson: There were only ever two pieces of evidence that linked Lee Clark directly to the death of Brian Bowling. And they were Angela Bruce, and Charlie Childers.

But Angela Bruce recanted. So that leaves only Charlie.

Charlie had been watching TV at the Bowlings' trailer when Brian was shot. And according to Sgt. Dallas Battle, Charlie told him that, right after the shot went off, he'd glanced out a window, and seen Lee Clark running through the front yard.

But is that really what Charlie told Sgt. Battle?

Because Charlie is deaf, and Sgt. Battle didn't have an interpreter with him when he spoke to Charlie. And even with an interpreter, Charlie's ability to communicate is limited.

[00:50] Jacinda Davis:

He apparently went to the Georgia School of the Deaf for a couple years.

Amanda Bowling: Yeah.

Kenneth Floyd: Yeah, so he wasn't - yeah.

Amanda: Yeah.

Susan: But then his parents isolated him.

Kenneth: His mom was [talk over], lord have mercy.

Amanda: Very protective.

Kenneth: Thought I was the devil.

Susan:

Apparently, he had the ability to speak in high school, like, if, when he was in the deaf community. And then his parents took him away and he was isolated and -

Kenneth Floyd: Then, since...

Susan Simpson: Regressed.

Kenneth: Yeah.

Susan Simpson: Even though communicating with Charlie was going to be difficult, we had to try. We needed to ask him what he'd seen at the Bowling's trailer that night.

But first, we'd have to find him. During our initial trip to Rome, Jacinda and I spent nearly two weeks scouring Silver Creek for Charlie and his brother, Wayne. We had lots of leads to follow, but all of them came to dead ends.

[01:32] Susan:

The guy I talked to – I was like why are they moving around so much? And he was like, "well Wayne has to keep moving, and Charlie follows him". I don't know what that means.

Susan Simpson: We hadn't given up on finding Charlie, but we'd run out of ideas for how to track him down.

Then, on our second to last day in Rome, we stopped by to visit Phil Storey, Cain's uncle, to ask him some follow up questions.

Phil Storey: Did y'all ever meet the Childers man?

Susan: We can't-

Jacinda Davis: We can't find him.

Susan: Yeah.

Phil:

Okay, somebody- let's see. Where'd they tell me he lived now? They don't live down there no more. I'm thinking over here on Park Road.

Susan: Where'd you hear that from?

Phil:

Across from Rhonda's. I forget, I was telling somebody about y'all coming to talk to me. And they said they don't live there no more; they live over there, off Park Road.

Jacinda: Let's go drive down Park Road.

Susan Simpson: It was worth a try, anyway. So Jacinda and Dan and I headed off to track down one last lead on Charlie Childers' whereabouts.

Susan Simpson:

Let's see if we can find someone to ask about Charlie. Well, people standing out there, let's go do it.

Jacinda Davis: Hey.

Man #1: Hey.

Jacinda: Do you guys know Charlie?

Man #1: Charlie?

Jacinda: Deaf Charlie.

Man #1: Deaf? Is he deaf?

Jacinda: Mm-hmm.

Man #1: I think he lives back there in the, if you go that way -

Jacinda: Yep.

Man #1: Back there.

Jacinda: He's back there? Do you know--

Man #1: Yeah. In the red car back there.

Susan: Do you... red car?

Jacinda: Red car?

Man #1: Yeah.

Jacinda: Alright, thank you.

Man #1: You're welcome.

Jacinda:

I can't believe I just asked some random person if they know Deaf Charlie. And he's like, "Oh, yeah."

Dan Whitrock:

I mean, this is honestly, this is the closest we've gotten to finding Charlie in a week.

Jacinda Davis: I know. I'm feeling excited.

Dan: Yeah.

[03:20] Susan Simpson: Hi, my name is Susan Simpson. I'm an attorney and podcaster and previously I hosted the Undisclosed podcast.

Jacinda Davis: Hi, I'm Jacinda Davis, and I'm a true crime TV producer.

Last year Susan and I decided to team up and re-investigate the murder of Brian Bowling. Along with Kevin Fitzpatrick, president of Red Marble Media, we decided to launch – Proof.

You can listen to Proof like you would any podcast. And you can Follow us everywhere with the handle @proofcrimepod, and on our website, proofcrimepod.com

Susan Simpson: Just a note for our listeners: This week's episode features an interview with a deaf witness. In order to fully document it, we had Dan there to film, and we'll be uploading the video to our YouTube Channel later this week. We'll be discussing that video and everything else in this week's episode in this Thursday's Sidebar, so don't forget to check the video out. Our YouTube Channel is at @proofcrimepod.

Thanks for listening and welcome to PROOF.

[04:25] Jacinda Davis: The tip we got from Phil Storey turned out to be a good one. We found multiple people who knew Charlie, and they directed us to a house where they thought he might be living.

Jacinda: What do we think? Should we just go knock on that door?

Susan Simpson: It's like a one in a million shot, but sure why not.

Jacinda: All right.

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Susan Simpson: We come back later. Can we have a notebook?

Jacinda Davis: I'm going to take a picture of (Unintelligible).

Susan: We need a notebook to write. I mean, it seems like someone's home.

Jacinda: I mean, he's not going to hear us knocking...

Susan: If it's just him though, that would explain it.

Jacinda: I feel like we're so close.

Susan: Yeah.

Dan Whitrock: I mean, we have gotten closer to them than we have in days.

[05:18] Jacinda Davis: We didn't make contact with anyone at the house that day, but it really seemed like we might have gotten close to finding Charlie.

We updated Kevin on our progress.

Susan: Oh and guess who found Charlie. We may have.

Dan: Oh man.

Jacinda: So you know that picture I sent you with the Jesus sign.

Kevin Fitzpatrick: Yeah.

Jacinda:

We think that's where Charlie and Wayne, or at least Charlie is living right now.

Jacinda Davis: It was our last full day in Floyd County. We were supposed to fly out the following afternoon.

But the next morning, before heading out, we went back to the house, hoping that Charlie or Wayne or both of them might be home.

Susan: Alright, back to Wayne and Charlie's. What do we think?

Jacinda: They're gone.

Susan: They're gone.

Jacinda: No, no. He's there.

Susan Simpson: Oh, they're here.

Jacinda Davis: Charlie and his brother Wayne were home. We'd finally found them.

We spoke to them for a little over an hour, before heading back to the car to figure out what to do next.

Jacinda Davis:

I actually feel like I might throw up because it's like, so heartbreaking.

Susan: God, it's so... that was the -

Jacinda: ...turn -

Susan: The hardest interview I've ever done in terms of trying to do it right.

Jacinda Davis: We didn't get very far before we pulled over to call Kevin and updated him on what had happened.

[Phone rings.]

Kevin Fitzpatrick: Hey.

Jacinda: Hey, there.

Kevin: What's up?

Jacinda: We just had a conversation with Charlie.

Kevin: Can you have a conversation with Charlie?

Susan: Yes.

Jacinda: Yeah.

Susan: Sort of. Yes.

Kevin: What did he say?

Jacinda:

He said that Josh shouldn't be in prison, and Josh is mad, and he's sorry.

Kevin: Oh, man. Yeah.

Susan Simpson:

He has a lot to say. He has things to say. And it feels like - I kept feeling like I'm the failure. Like Charlie clearly knows what he wanted to tell me and I could not -

Jacinda Davis:

He has something to say. It's like he's been waiting twenty-five years for someone to listen to what he's saying.

Susan:

And I'm asking the wrong questions. It's also very difficult, because the way he communicates is open-ended, and you can insert your own interpretation.

Jacinda: Right.

Susan:

And layer your, your own understanding over it. It's really hard to constantly check your questions and make sure there's no premise there that you're assuming that, that Charlie's not, not -

Jacinda: Right.

Susan: There with you on -

Kevin Fitzpatrick:

Because whatever, whatever he's saying you can - you can support whatever - yeah. I understand what -

Jacinda:

Yeah. It could be the perfect example of confirmation bias. Like are we reading into it what we want him to be saying? But we're communicating by - Susan is writing questions, and he's answering yes or no.

I'm trying to spell out things, you know, sign language.

Kevin: You know sign language?

Susan: She does-, she knows letters.

Jacinda: I know the alphabet.

Susan:

It's also hard to totally recapture the conversation because the way he communicates is like sort of interactive, and like he'll reference previous writings and point at that then point at another one and loop them together.

Kevin Fitzpatrick:

You should definitely get the interpreter and see if you can do it tonight. So just take me through now, so I'm sure I understand the big points.

He says Josh shouldn't be in jail, and he's sorry, meaning that -

Susan Simpson:

I asked who shot Brian. Not a great question. And he kept pointing at Brian.

Like, where I wrote Brian, he'd point at that, and then wrote, yes.

So I wrote, Brian shot Brian, and he was very emphatic and nodding like...

Jacinda Davis: He said yes.

Susan: He was--

Jacinda: It's not clear when, but at some point, he saw Brian with a gun -

Susan: With a gun.

Jacinda:

Pointed at himself, and he tried to tell Brian not to do that, and Brian shot the gun, which is something no one else has told us.

[09:29] Jacinda Davis: At least three different times during our first conversation with Charlie, he told us a story, through a combination of gestures and writing notes, about seeing Brian with a gun.

Susan:

He told a story several times, which I'm pretty sure was him saying, I saw Brian get a gun. I, meaning Charlie, tried to stop Brian.

Jacinda: Hit, hit his hand down and said--

Susan: He--

Jacinda: 'Don't play with gun.'

Susan:

Like, that is absolutely what he was trying to tell us.

I said, "Charlie tried to stop Brian?" - Yes.

"Brian did not listen?" - Yes.

And then I asked him, I was trying to ask him about the gun and I don't know what he was trying to communicate...

'Brother. Room. Danny.'

What do you think that was about?

Jacinda Davis:

I was confused about that. Like, is there a brother named Danny?

Danny... Do they have a brother named Danny?

[10:22] Susan Simpson: Talking to Charlie was difficult to begin with. But it was made even harder by Charlie's brother, Wayne.

Charlie had been friendly and happy to talk to us. Wayne had not wanted to talk to us at all. He hadn't wanted Charlie to talk to us either, and the whole time he'd hovered nearby, monitoring our conversation.

Jacinda Davis: ... and at one point I texted Dan -

Dan Whitrock: Well, I was already trying to do that -

Jacinda: Yeah.

Dan: ...and then, yeah. Then--

Jacinda:

I texted Dan like, "Keep Wayne talking," because Wayne came over at one point and told Charlie to be quiet.

Dan: In a combination of verbal and physical gestures. Yeah.

Susan Simpson: Yeah, but what'd he tell us he was telling him?

Jacinda:

I said something like, "Listen, Wayne. I promise you Charlie's not gonna get in trouble for anything he tells us."

And he said, "I'm just telling him to tell you the truth."

Susan: [Laughs.]

Jacinda Davis:

Which was a very weird sign for truth. You know, the finger to your lips, with, "shhh."

[11:22] Susan Simpson: Oddly though, Wayne seemed to alternate between trying to stop us from talking to Charlie, to, at times, actually helping us. Offering some assistance in trying to understand what Charlie was trying to say.

Jacinda:

Wayne is saying he's told you more than he's ever told anybody about this. He wants to tell you. He wants to get it all out.

Susan Simpson: After that first meeting with Charlie, we realized two things: the first was that we needed to change our flights, so that we could come back and talk to Charlie again. And the second was that we needed to make sure we had an interpreter with us when we did.

Jacinda:

So, we have to call the interpreter and see if he's available because if he is, I feel like we need to get this now because who knows where Charlie and Wayne will be.

Susan Simpson:

I said, "Thank you for talking to us," and I said, "We'll try to come back with Mike Burton, the interpreter."

And he wrote, "I am talk. I love you." And underlined Mike Burton several times. Making it like, he was like, "I love Mike Burton."

Jacinda: Because Mike Burton taught him how to talk.

Susan Simpson: Mike Burton is the father of Gola Burton, who had been the interpreter at Lee's and Cain's trial. Mike is an interpreter as well – and he had offered to help us talk to Charlie, if we ever found him.

Susan: Oh, this is him. Hello?

Mike Burton:

Hey Susan, this is Mike Burton. It's good that you found him. I'll be around tomorrow.

Susan: That would be fantastic. We could pick you up around noon?

Mike Burton: That will work.

Susan Simpson: Alrighty, well... we'll see you then.

Jacinda Davis: The next day, we had everything in place for our interview with Charlie Childers.

Jacinda Davis: It's our last day in Rome.

Susan:

Supposed to be already on the way back, but we did some last-minute logistical shuffling. Because this is important, and the stars may never align like this again.

Jacinda: So, we're on our way to pick up Mike Burton,

Dan Whitrock:

I mean, when you guys mentioned Mike, Charlie was very excited.

Jacinda: Yeah.

Susan: Well, you-- you know who also was excited? Wayne.

Dan Whitrock:

It's true. Which is a good sign because of... you know. As I've expressed, I'm a little worried about Wayne trying to stop things today.

[13:43] Jacinda Davis: When we'd mentioned trying to come back with Mike Burton, Wayne had seemed relieved. He told us that he'd been having some trouble with Charlie lately. Charlie had seemed upset, but Wayne had no way of talking to him to find out what was wrong. Having Mike Burton there would give Wayne a chance to talk to Charlie too.

We picked up Mike Burton and headed back to Charlie's. On the way, we gave him an update on how our meeting the previous day had gone.

Mike Burton: Yeah. Well, we'll see what happens. It's gonna be difficult.

Susan:

Not as difficult maybe, as I was fearing, at first. I think I, I think I may have been underestimating Charlie's abilities a little bit.

Not, not to say he's easy to communicate with. But he clearly had his own sense of mind that he wanted to convey.

Mike Burton: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Susan: He wanted to communicate.

Mike Burton:

You know I remember in the 70s, in high school, I mean, he was not a high-functioning kid, but he was okay.

Susan Simson:

He was telling us one story that I want to make sure we actually understood right.

Mike Burton: Yeah.

Susan: That he was emotional about.

Jacinda Davis: He actually, he put my hand in, like...

Susan: Like a gun.

Jacinda:

Like a gun. And then he grabbed my wrist, put it down, and just went, "No, no, no."

Like saying... we couldn't tell whether he was saying he stopped someone or tried to stop someone.

Jacinda Davis: When we pulled up at the house, we weren't certain if Charlie would still be there. We knew if he wasn't, we might lose our one shot to ever truly speak to him.

Susan: Ok, who's that?

Jacinda: Look, there's Charlie.

Dan: There's Charlie.

Mike Burton: There he is.

[15:32] Susan Simpson: For this interview, recording audio alone wouldn't cut it. Without visuals you wouldn't truly have a record of what Charlie was trying to say.

So Dan set up his camera, and I started recording video on my phone.

Charlie began signing to Mike even before we asked our first question, and Mike relayed to us what Charlie was saying.

[15:53] Mike Burton:

Well he's talking about the shooting, and he thought he was going to jail. The police came to him one of his friends was a cop and told him no he wasn't going to jail, it's these other guys.

Susan Simpson: We asked Charlie to tell us again what he'd been trying so hard to tell us the day before. About how Brian had been playing with a gun, and Charlie had tried to stop him.

Mike Burton [translation for Charlie Childers italicized]:

The boy that did the shooting. He pulled something out of a drawer.

He went, 'No, don't, don't, no, don't get that, no, don't get that gun.'

He said, 'No, no, no, don't get the gun.'

The boy... just fiddling with it, put it down. Telling him 'Put it back, put it

down.'

And then the boy later, he got the gun out and I told him again, 'No,' and then he shot himself in the mouth.

The cop kept asking me, "Did you do it?"

I said, "No, I didn't do it. No, it was someone else," and Wayne and the cops were talking and... and that he didn't do it.

'He shot himself in the mouth. I don't know what happened. I didn't, I didn't see it. I was sitting in there.'

And then I shook him, but Kenneth, the brother and Mike and all four of them were in there, and we all went to the funeral together. We hugged each other at the funeral.

They buried him over in Bartow County, it's over by this forest and that's where the grave was, in that area.

Then after all the funeral stuff, the next week, everything quieted down, and it was over with.

[17:43] Susan Simpson: Charlie had a detailed memory of Brian being shot – but his details were all wrong. For instance, Charlie's description of where Brian was buried – he had such a precise memory of it.

But Brian was buried in Floyd County not Bartow County like Charlie was saying.

And one thing Charlie kept mentioning was a window.

[18:09] Mike Burton:

The boys are just playing in the bedroom and there was a window on that side. Yeah, I was watching some kind of deaf program on TV.

Susan Simpson:

He mentioned a window. What was the context of the window?

Mike Burton:

I turned on the light and, and I saw him shoot himself. And I saw Brian shoot himself and the blood went everywhere. And then just like that, he was gone. There was smoke and blood and, and I went and I was just, I was just, yeah, exhausted.

And then, Amanda came and, and she was shocked when she saw it.

Brian, he's the one that got the gun out of the drawer and he did the shooting. I didn't see all of that.

Susan Simpson: That's when Wayne interrupted us.

He'd been lurking nearby the whole time we'd been talking to his brother, but he hadn't wanted to be on camera, so he'd mostly stayed out of the way.

But now, he had something he wanted to tell us.

Wayne Childers:

Hold on, y'all. Hold on. He's getting all confused. He's talking about a boy that got killed at my house. At our house.

Susan Simpson: Which house? Who got killed at your house?

Wayne: We ain't going there, but.

Susan: Well, it would help us to clarify with Charlie. Who got...?

Wayne: He is getting confused here.

Susan: Who's the, what happened in the other shooting?

Wayne: See, he thinks.

Susan: What was the other shooting though?

Wayne Childers: It was an accident.

[19:49] Susan Simpson: Wayne told us that Charlie wasn't talking about Brian Bowling's death at all. He was talking about a different shooting. A different boy who'd been killed. Though, Wayne was cagey about the details of this other supposed shooting.

I'd already been expecting Wayne to try to interfere with our interview, so part of me wondered if that's what was going on here. But Wayne was insistent – Charlie was talking about a different boy's death.

Wayne: Mike, would you ask him is it Greg [Quarles] that he's talking about?

Mike Burton: Greg?

Wayne: Greg [Quarles]? Wasn't he sitting on the side of the bed?

Mike Burton: Yeah. Yeah, Greg was sitting on the bed.

Wayne Childers:

He's talking about the wrong one, because he was in the living room when Brian got shot.

Mike Burton:

Yeah, when Brian got shot, yeah.

I was watching TV. I was in the living room.

Wayne:

See? He's getting... he's getting confused here.

A boy named Greg [Quarles] got killed at my house one night, and Charlie seen that. So Charlie's getting confused with Brian and Greg.

Because when he's saying he seen Brian shot himself, that wasn't Brian.

Jacinda: Right. He didn't see it.

Wayne: So all this he's telling y'all is confused.

[21:06] **Susan Simpson:** After a lot of prompting, Wayne finally started to explain.

Sometime before Brian died, a young boy had been shot and killed at the Childers' house. The gun had belonged to Charlie's uncle Danny.

That's the Danny that Charlie had kept mentioning the first time we'd spoken to him, and we'd been confused about.

But after Wayne explained about the two shootings, we finally started to understand what Charlie was trying to say. Wayne continued to interrupt though, so I pulled him to the side and struck up a conversation with him, while Jacinda kept talking to Charlie.

Susan Simpson:

So, did you ever go to the police and tell them Charlie had seen something?

Wayne Childers: They come talk to us about it.

Susan: The report says that you went to them. ... No?

Wayne: Uh-uh [negative].

Susan:

The report says that you came into the station because "My brother Charlie--"

Wayne: They called the house. Dallas did.

Susan Simpson: Mm-hmm...

Wayne Childers: So, they come into the house, and they talked to us.

Susan: What did they want to talk to you about?

Wayne: What went on.

Susan:

Did they ask you... what? If Charlie had seen anyone? Did you know that Charlie had seen someone?

Wayne: [Unintelligible.]

Susan: Do you think Charlie saw someone?

Wayne: I can't say for sure.

Susan Simpson: What Wayne was saying surprised me. The official story – the one that Dallas Battle gave when he testified – is that it was Wayne who first contacted investigators, and he who told them that Charlie had seen someone run by a window outside of the Bowling's trailer. But Wayne insisted to me that this didn't happen. Dallas Battle had called him, he said.

In fact, Wayne said that before the police came and talked to Charlie, he hadn't known that Charlie had seen someone outside the trailer.

Though Wayne was skeptical that Charlie had seen anyone at all.

[22:51] **Susan Simpson:** Why was Charlie in court, do you remember?

Wayne Childers:

Because he claimed he seen everything, heard everything. I don't understand how he heard it.

Susan: What did he see?

Wayne: I don't know, I wasn't inside the courtroom when he was on trial.

Susan Simpson: At trial, Charlie had said over and over again that when Brian Bowling was shot at the Bowlings' trailer, there had been only Cain Storey with Brian.

"Only one went in there," Charlie had said. "Storey was the only one. Only Storey."

But at times, when we were talking to him, Charlie seemed to be saying something different.

Mike Burton:

He said, *'Josh was in the bedroom with Brian with another guy, I don't know who the other guy was. There were three of them in there.'*

Yeah. *'Josh was with him and I don't know who the third guy was.'*

Susan Simpson: How does he know there's a third guy?

Mike Burton:

'I was leaning out the window, and then I went around and it happened. I don't know how it happened, why it happened.'

Susan Simpson: If you think Charlie is talking about how Brian Bowling died, then you'd naturally start to make assumptions about what he's trying to say here. If Josh and Brian were in a bedroom, but Charlie is saying there was a third guy there too – well, that third guy has to be Lee Clark, right?

Except – according to Wayne, when Charlie was telling us about three boys in the bedroom, he was not talking about Brian Bowling at all.

Mike Burton: *'I saw this guy go by the window.'*

Susan Simpson: Who?

Mike Burton: *'I don't know who it was. He was their friend, I guess.'*

Susan: Whose friend?

Mike Burton:

'I don't know who he was. Brian's friend. That was a group of them. Yeah. And... I don't know, you know... I told him not to get that gun and not to shoot himself, and I grabbed it.'

Wayne Childers: Y'all need to stop it right there. He's getting all confused.

Jacinda Davis: He's getting confused.

Wayne:

See, he thinks y'all talking about that Greg [Quarles].

They ain't talking about that boy. They're talking about the other one!

He's talking about the boy that got killed at *our* house.

No. They ain't talking about him.

Mike Burton:

He keeps coming back, he keeps coming back to that. Yeah.

I'm not talking about the trailer, I'm talking about my house, yeah. What happened in there.

Wayne Childers: They don't want to know about that. No. At the...

Mike Burton: Ricky. Ricky was on the telephone.

Susan Simpson: Ricky.

[25:37] **Jacinda Davis:** "I'm not talking about the trailer," Charlie told us. "I'm talking about my house."

Charlie knew that a boy was also shot and killed at the Bowlings' trailer. But that was not the shooting he wanted to tell us about.

Charlie wanted to talk about the boy who had died at his house. According to Wayne, that had been a boy named Greg [Quarles].

Susan Simpson:

Can you ask him, when Greg, when Greg died, did you see someone through a window?

Mike Burton: *Yeah, yeah, I did. I saw somebody go by the window.*

We asked Mike to stop interpreting for a moment, and to tell us what he thought Charlie was trying to say.

Susan: What's your understanding of what the window was about?

Mike Burton:

Sort of like Wayne, he's really mixing these two stories up. I don't know how you separate these two stories.

Jacinda Davis: I don't know either.

Mike Burton: But he's certainly got them all...

Jacinda: Confused.

Mike Burton: All intertwined.

Susan Simpson: I had still been talking to Wayne off to the side, keeping him away from Charlie. That's when he made a suggestion – and this one was actually helpful.

Wayne Childers:

Now I believe, y'all want the truth now, y'all are going to have to take him down there and let him show you. Sigh...

Susan:

Wayne has a good point. If we want to know what Charlie saw, we have to take him to the house. Is that possible?

Wayne Childers: That's the only way y'all going to get the truth out of him.

Mike Burton: Yeah, yeah, we can do that.

Jacinda: Let's go.

Jacinda Davis: We all climbed into the van with Charlie and headed to the Bowling's trailer. On the way there, we asked Mike Burton how interpreting for Charlie had gone.

Susan Simpson: It seemed like y'all were conversing pretty well.

Mike Burton:

Yeah, yeah, I mean, he's, his sign language is, we would call it sloppy.

Susan: But it's interpretable?

Mike Burton:

But I understand it. Yeah. I understand it.

I'll say this. Maybe the little bit I've seen him in the last few years has helped me understand him more.

Jacinda Davis: Mike Burton was just as lost as we were, though, when it came to unraveling Charlie's conflated memories.

Mike Burton: I mean that's fascinating that he's got these 2 stories -

Susan: Totally mixed up.

Mike Burton:

Yeah. Yeah and, the, the detail in the second story, the blood spatter, the -

Susan: It sounds like he saw something, I don't -

Mike Burton:

Yeah, I mean he's talking about the pistol in the mouth and the brains being splattered on the walls. And, the way he talks about the bed and the bookshelves. He's got a lot of detail in that, for him.

Susan:

He also seems really concerned about like, that he might have been in trouble or he thought that he might -

Mike Burton: Oh yeah, oh extremely.

Susan:

So, what, I'm confused about why he thought that he could ever be in trouble for either of these shootings.

Mike Burton:

Well, that's what I can tell you about being deaf. Deaf people often get blamed for things they don't do. Charlie probably has been blamed for a lot of things through the years.

Susan: No wonder Charlie's so nervous about being questioned.

Mike Burton:

Yeah, being the fall guy. I mean, and I see it happen so many times, yeah. Yeah, yeah. "Let's put it on the deaf guy."

[29:13] **Jacinda Davis:** When we got to the Bowlings' trailer, Mike Burton interpreted for Charlie as he explained to us who had lived here.

Susan: All right. We're at the trailer.

Mike Burton:

'Rocky lived here but he's dead now. And Brian lives in that little home over there.'

Susan: Who does?

Mike Burton:

'My mother and father home. Yeah. Brian's mother and father's home is right over there.'

You lived over there and Brian lived over here with his mother and father, so this was Rocky's house.

Jacinda Davis: As he was talking, Charlie was pointing towards the various locations he was describing. When talking about where Rocky Bowling – Brian's father – had lived, he pointed at the Bowling's trailer.

When speaking about his own parents, he pointed across the highway towards the house he'd grown up in.

And when he talked about Brian, he turned around and pointed up the hill to Cain Storey's trailer – that, Charlie said, is where Brian had lived.

At the time, this hadn't made any sense to us. Brian had lived here, at the trailer where we were standing. He hadn't lived up the hill, where Cain Storey and his family had their trailer.

So, we asked Charlie if he knew someone had been shot at this trailer. "Yes," he said. "Ricky's brother."

Then Charlie took us around to the back side of the trailer and walked up towards the window of the bedroom where Brian had been shot.

Mike Burton:

'That's the window where they went on the telephone in that window, right there.'

[31:03] Susan Simpson: Which window was Brian's window?

Mike Burton:

'It wasn't Brian. Brian didn't live here. He had nothing to do with this. It was Ricky.'

Susan: So, what, what is he showing us back here?

Mike Burton(?): Yeah, *'Ricky's brother, that was his room.'*

Jacinda Davis: Charlie insisted, over and over, that Brian had not died at this trailer. That had been a different boy that died here.

Susan: He knows Brian was killed though right?

Jacinda Davis:

He said, *'Ricky was killed over there.'*

Tell him, we should just tell him Brian was killed here. Brian died here.

[31:38] Susan: Brian died here. No, Brian died at this house.

Mike Burton:

'Ricky's brother killed himself right here. Brian died in my house, shot himself in the mouth.'

Jacinda: Does he know we want to talk about the night Brian died in this trailer?

Mike Burton: *'All that happened at my house.'*

Susan Simpson: Tell him Brian Bowling died in this house.

Mike Burton: *'No, he didn't. He died in my house.'*

Jacinda Davis: We couldn't figure out why Charlie was so certain that Brian had died at Charlie's house, or why he believed Brian had lived up the hill behind the cemetery where Cain Storey lived.

We wanted to make sure that Charlie actually knew who Brian Bowling was. So, we showed him a photo of Brian, taken not long before he died.

[32:32] Mike Burton: *'That's Ricky's brother.'*

Susan: Ricky's brother...

Mike Burton: *'Yeah. He killed himself while using the phone.'*

Jacinda Davis: Yeah...

Susan Simpson: Where did he die? He died here?

Mike Burton:

'Yeah. Yeah, I loved him, too. ... Ricky's brother shot himself while he was on the phone.'

'Brian shot himself over at my house.'

[33:00] Jacinda Davis: It took us a while before we finally understood what Charlie had been trying to tell us. Our questions had been all wrong – we were the ones causing the confusion.

Because when Charlie was talking about Brian, he was not talking about Brian Bowling. The boy that Charlie calls Brian was another boy altogether – a boy who had been killed at the Childers' house.

But Charlie had known a second boy who'd been shot and killed. This boy had also been a good friend of Charlie's, but Charlie told us he had forgotten his name. Charlie identified him as "Ricky's brother" – but he was talking about Brian Bowling.

Susan: So when Ricky's brother died here, was he here?

Mike Burton:

'I heard the gunshot. I jumped up, and then I took off and went straight home.'

Susan: When Ricky's brother died here, was he in the living room?

Mike Burton:

'Yeah. I was in the living room. I heard the gunshot. I was scared. I heard the shot. It startled me and I got... I got out of here.'

[34:06] Susan Simpson: Now that we knew how to ask about the right shooting, we turned to the most important question that we had for Charlie. On the night Brian Bowling was shot – on the night Ricky’s brother was shot – Charlie had been sitting in the living room of the trailer we were standing next to.

“Charlie,” we asked, “Did you see a boy through the window, running past the trailer?”

Susan: Charlie, you told the police you saw a boy through a window.

Mike Burton: *‘No I didn’t. No.’*

Susan Simpson:

The police thought you told them about a boy that you saw through a window.

Mike Burton:

‘They must have misunderstood. I didn’t see anything out the window. I was just watching TV. And talking with my brother so I really don’t know. It’s not my fault. I didn’t have anything to do with it. I got out of here.’

Susan: No one thinks it’s your fault.

Mike Burton:

‘Ricky’s brother was on the telephone and he shot himself. And it startled all of us and I just got out of here.’

‘I don’t know a thing about anybody running. I didn’t see anybody. I didn’t see anybody.’

Susan: Did the police ask you if you saw a boy?

Mike Burton:

‘Over at Brian’s- over at my house. Not here. They questioned me over there.’

Susan: So, you never saw a boy here, outside?

Mike Burton: *‘Nope. Nope. Nothing.’*

Jacinda: Positive.

Mike Burton: *‘Never. Nope. No. No way.’*

[35:45] Susan Simpson: To be absolutely certain that Charlie understood the question we were asking him, I reenacted what the prosecutor claimed Lee Clark had done on the night of the shooting and ran through the Bowling's front yard.

Had Charlie seen anyone running where I had run?

Susan:

So, Charlie you never saw someone run up through here, never?

Mike Burton: *'I testified in court about what happened over there, not here.'*

Susan:

So, everything you said in court about seeing a boy out a window, was about what happened over there.

Mike Burton: *Yeah, yeah. They're separate.*

Susan Simpson:

When you were in court, did you tell the court about the shooting that happened here at this house?

Mike Burton: *No.*

Susan: What shooting did you tell the court about?

Mike Burton: *Over there at my house. I never, no it wasn't this one.*

[36:38] Susan Simpson: If all this sounds confusing – well yes, it is. Extremely so. At the trailer, Charlie could see how confused I was, and how hard I was trying to make sense of everything. He came over and tapped me on the shoulder.

Susan: Ask him, show him the first photo, the photo of Brian.

Mike Burton: You all right?

Susan: I'm good. I'm just trying to understand.

Mike Burton:

I'm just gonna say you know, we're confused...

[To Charlie:] We thought that you saw a boy through the window.

Charlie Childers:

No, no, no, no.

Mike Burton:

[To Charlie] ...and the police thought you said that boy was coming here, so the police got him.

[Interpreting for Charlie] They were wrong. They're just wrong.

Susan: They were just wrong.

Mike Burton:

Police are wrong. No, the police just misunderstood, that's not what happened.

[To Charlie] But they thought that you saw him so they arrested him and now he's in jail.

No, that's not it, that's not it. No, no, this is two separate incidents.

Susan Simpson:

Charlie, the police thought that you saw a boy run up through here.

Mike Burton: *No way.*

Susan: The police sent a boy--

Mike Burton: *Nope, that didn't happen.*

Susan: The police sent a boy to prison because--

Mike Burton: *The police have just made a mistake.*

[38:03] **Jacinda Davis:** After talking to Charlie, Susan and I had been left with many questions. There was a lot that we didn't yet understand.

But we both felt certain about one thing.

Susan: He never saw a boy.

Jacinda Davis: Okay.

Susan: Thank you, Charlie.

Jacinda: Charlie, thank you.

Susan: I'm sorry to bring this all up for you again.

Mike Burton:

'I think the police made a mistake. Whoever... or... someone needs to talk to their boss, because I think they were confused.'

[38:37] After we dropped Charlie back off at his home, we talked to Mike Burton about how the interview had gone.

Susan: I like Charlie's suggestion that someone talk to the cop's boss.

Mike Burton: Yeah, yeah. Well, that was pretty astute actually.

Susan: Yeah.

Mike Burton:

He said several things today that I was a little bit surprised that he was that sophisticated.

Susan Simpson: I think... I think--

Mike Burton:

His language, now, let me assure you, his language is not that sophisticated. But his thinking processes and what he was intending to say...

[39:15] **Jacinda Davis:** We had been able to communicate with Charlie more than we'd expected going into the interview. But at the same time – because of our assumptions about what Charlie had been trying to tell us - it took us a long time to finally hear what Charlie actually had to say.

Jacinda Davis:

I mean, I think we're kind of guilty of exactly what the police were doing in a way. Like yesterday, we thought we were understanding maybe more than we were.

Susan Simpson:

We understood parts of it. We didn't understand the bigger context.

Jacinda: Right. We didn't understand there were two, two deaths by gun.

Mike Burton: No, I didn't either and he kept... I thought this is so confusing.

Susan: Like, we knew he was saying Brian killed Brian.

Mike Burton: Yeah.

Susan:

But we didn't know that he thought Brian was the boy that died at his house.

Mike Burton: Yeah...

Susan:

So, the whole, like, our whole framework for questioning him was just wrong.

Jacinda Davis: After talking to Charlie and Wayne we had some of the context we'd been missing. But there was still a lot we didn't understand.

Dan:

Is there any way to look up at least the case of this Quarles guy?

Jacinda: Yeah, we're gonna try to find it.

Dan:

Yeah. Like was it deemed a suicide? Was it not? What happened? I mean, he did seem to go into it in detail as far as opening the drawer, saying no, and he shot himself.

Jacinda Davis: Once we'd gotten back from Floyd County, we called Kevin to update him on our interview with Charlie.

Kevin Fitzpatrick: So, Charlie saw someone commit suicide in his house.

Susan Simpson:

It's hard to tell if he's describing a suicide or a gun accident. But he described how the boy took the gun out of a drawer, and Charlie's there and he's like, "No, no, no, no, stop. Don't do that. Don't do that."

But the boy or young man doesn't listen or intentionally kills himself and Charlie seemed to like... the way he was explaining it, it was a shot in the mouth.

Kevin: Jesus Christ, okay.

Jacinda Davis: Kevin asked the obvious question: "Who was the boy who'd died at the Childers' house?"

We didn't have an answer for him.

Susan:

All we know about it is that it happened, both Charlie and Wayne agree it happened one, at their house on Rockmart Highway.

Two, it occurred before Brian Bowling's death.

And three, according to Wayne it was the death of someone named Greg [Quarles.]

Now, unfortunately Wayne could not spell the name for me. And the way the southern accent pronounces [Quarles] leaves a lot of possibilities about what that would actually be.

Susan Simpson: A few weeks later, on another Zoom call with Jacinda and Kevin, I told them I finally had an update: I knew who the boy had been.

[42:05] Susan:

In the end, I had to go through the social security death index and look up every male who died under the age of 20, in Floyd County, from like, 1970 to like, 1985.

Kevin Fitzpatrick: How long did that take you?

Susan:

It took forever because I had to cross reference with the newspaper articles that I could find that document their deaths.

So, in the end, I finally stumbled across Jerry Ronny Quarles, who at 12, died of a gunshot. And that was it.

Kevin:

So, by going through like this enormous list of the people who were killed, you pieced together who it was? You know that's mental, right? That you did that?

Susan: ...It worked.

[42:55] Susan Simpson: On the evening of December 29, 1976, 12-year-old Ronnie Quarles was shot while at the Childers' home.

The similarities between Ronnie's death and Brian's are striking. Both Ronnie and Brian had been sitting on a bed, hanging out with friends, when they were shot in the head.

Both boys initially survived, and were transported to the hospital, but were pronounced dead the following day.

Charlie and Wayne Childers had been present in the house when both shootings occurred. And in the minutes leading up to both shootings, Charlie had been in a different room watching TV.

But there was one huge difference between the two shootings.

[43:33] Susan:

So, here's from the Rome News Tribune article, now this is allegedly Charlie talking.

'I walked in the bedroom where the boys were playing and saw Ronny looking at the rifles in the gun case.'

'The glass doors were open, and I was afraid the boys might get the guns out and hurt themselves. I motioned him away from the gun case and closed the glass doors and he returned to the bed to play checkers.'

'The drawer of the gun case was partially opened, and I saw our handgun there in its holster. I took it out of the drawer and removed the clip from the bottom of the handgun. I felt nothing in the gun, and I shook it to make sure it was empty.'

'A mistake. The gun went off.'

Jacinda Davis: It was Charlie Childers who killed Ronnie Quarles. It turns out the gun had been in Charlie's hand when it went off.

Or at least, that's what the coroner's inquest had concluded. On the night Ronnie was shot, he and a boy named Joe Hyfield had been visiting the Childers. Wayne had been playing with Ronnie and Joe. Charlie, who was several years older, had also been home.

According to an article about the inquest, "The three younger boys were playing a game of checkers on the bed when the accident occurred."

We hadn't realized it when we'd spoken to Charlie, but this matched exactly with what Charlie had been telling us.

Jacinda Davis: But that night, who was in Brian's bedroom playing with Brian?

Mike Burton: Yeah. *There were three guys in there playing.*

Jacinda Davis: Three boys, sitting on a bed, playing a game.

Charlie had been talking about Ronnie Quarles all along. Not Brian Bowling.

The third boy Charlie had mentioned had nothing to do with Brian's death.

After learning what had happened to Ronnie, many of the things that Charlie told us that we hadn't understood finally clicked into place.

Mike Burton:

Brian's brother was mad and blaming me. Kenneth said, 'No, stay away, now, don't...'

His brother, he said, 'No, you stay over here, you leave, get out of here,' pulled him away.

No, don't want you to fight, no, don't fight anybody.

Jacinda Davis: Brian Bowling didn't have a brother, but Ronnie Quarles did. His brother's name was Greg. And it made perfect sense now why Greg would have been angry and blaming Charlie.

He had the names confused. Which is why we thought he was talking about Brian Bowling. But if you ignore the name confusion, everything else Charlie says is right.

To find out more about Ronnie, we talked to his mother, Shirley.

[46:23] Shirley Quarles:

So, what happened is Ronnie wanted to go over there and visit. They were all at - over there with Charlie and Wayne were at their house.

So, then he went over there. And of course, that's the last time I ever saw him alive.

He got shot there in the back of the head.

Jacinda Davis: When Charlie had told us where Brian lived, he had pointed up the hill, to the trailer on the hill behind Pleasant Hope Church.

In 1996, that's where Cain Storey had lived. Which is why, when we spoke to Charlie, we thought he'd simply been confused, and gotten Brian's home and Cain's home mixed up.

But after talking to Ronnie's mother, we realized that Charlie had been right all along.

Shirley Quarles:

Well, that's where we lived, up behind the Pleasant Hope Church.

Jacinda Davis: And Ronnie had been buried in a cemetery in Bartow County. Again, just like Charlie had told us.

Every time Charlie had been talking about Brian, he'd been describing Ronnie Quarles.

Rather than have the police investigate the shooting, the case was given to the coroner, who held a coroner's inquest.

Today, coroner's inquests don't happen often. But a few decades ago, it's how many cases were resolved in Floyd County. The coroner would impanel a jury, present evidence, and leave it to them to decide the cause of death.

[47:42] Susan Simpson: Did you testify at the coroner's jury?

Shirley Quarles: Yes.

Susan: What did they ask you about?

Shirley Quarles:

I guess they just want to know if I thought it was accidental. And I told them what I've told you, that Charlie loved Ronnie, he would never have hurt him on purpose.

And I don't know who else was there or what else might have happened, but I don't think Charlie would ever have hurt Ronnie.

Jacinda Davis: Did Charlie seem worried that he was going to get in trouble?

Shirley Quarles: Yes, he was terrified.

Jacinda: He was.

Susan Simpson: How did he express that? Did--

Shirley Quarles:

He was afraid because he couldn't communicate, I think it's why he was so afraid.

The police had taken him in, he didn't know what was happening. Or what would happen to him.

[48:24] Susan Simpson: The coroner's jury concluded that Charlie Childers had accidentally killed Ronnie Quarles. No further action was taken in the case.

But all of this is very different from what Charlie and Wayne had told us.

Charlie had said over and over that the boy who'd died at his house had shot himself, after Charlie had tried but failed to stop him.

And Wayne told me that Charlie hadn't even been in the room when the shooting occurred.

[48:46] Wayne Childers:
He wouldn't know anything about Greg Quarles.

Susan: So he wasn't there when Greg Quarles was shot?

Wayne: Yeah.... He was in the den.

Susan Simpson: When we spoke to Charlie, he never once indicated that he had been the one to shoot the boy in his house.

Despite the record of what he'd supposedly testified to at the coroner's inquest, Charlie seemed oblivious to the fact that, at least according to the official record, he had been the one who had killed Ronnie.

[49:07] Mike Burton:
The police said, "What happened here?"

And I said, "I don't know. It was, he shot himself, that's all I know."

I said, "I didn't have anything to do with it, it wasn't me. It was them."

And the police said, "Okay, they said, it's alright."

The police talked to them for a while, and then talked to them, asked me if I did, had anything to do with it and I said no, it was all Brian, he did it. Yeah. Yeah.

[49:43] Susan Simpson: I told Ronnie's mother that the version of events that I'd heard from Charlie and Wayne seemed to be at odds with the official record.

Susan:

When I finally found articles that said that he shot him, I was kind of shocked, because that's not what I understood Charlie to try to tell us.

Shirley Quarles:

So that's the story that was told at the time, is that he had unloaded the gun and he shook it and there was still a bullet in the chamber.

Susan:

And when I spoke to Wayne, Wayne told me he was not in the house when your son died.

Shirley Quarles: Who was playing checkers with Ronnie?

Susan:

He didn't mention that. He just said, "I was not there in the house. I don't know what happened."

Shirley Quarles:

I was told that he and Ronnie were sitting on the bed playing checkers. And that Ronnie was laughing and said, "I've got you now!"

And he jumped the last man that Wayne had, and then about that time, he got shot in the back of the head.

Susan: So, Ronnie had just won the game?

Susan Simpson: Not everyone was so confident, though, that Ronnie's death had been an accident. There had been doubts whether Charlie had truly been the one holding the gun when it went off.

Susan Simpson:

Did you think the police took the investigation seriously when this happened?

Shirley Quarles:

My husband at the time didn't think so, he didn't think it was an accident.

We wound up getting divorced over it because I did not want to prosecute Charlie.

Susan:

Yeah, I just - I - Wayne was so insistent he wasn't there at all. And all the reports say he was.

Jacinda Davis:

I know Wayne... Wayne - I think they're still very protective of each other, Wayne and Charlie. And -

Shirley Quarles: No, I think Charlie is protective of Wayne.

Susan: You think Charlie's -

Shirley Quarles: He's the older brother.

[51:12] **Susan Simpson:** Not long after Ronnie Quarles died, Charlie Childers left the Georgia School for the Deaf. His mother isolated him from the deaf community, effectively cutting off his ability to communicate with the outside world.

Forty-five years later, Ronnie's death still weighs heavily on Charlie's mind – so much so that, when a group of strangers showed up on his doorstep, he thought that is what we wanted to ask him about. He tried to tell us all about it.

I don't know what happened to Ronnie Quarles. The only other witness, the third boy in the room when the shooting happened, has since passed away. But after talking to Charlie with the assistance of Mike Burton, here's what I am confident of.

On the night Brian Bowling was shot, Charlie didn't see anyone outside running by the Bowlings' trailer.

And there is no remaining evidence whatsoever that Lee Clark had anything to do with the death of Brian Bowling.

Next week on *Proof*, and the final episode covering our investigation in this case...

My name is Craig Burns. I am returning a call to you and I am going to see in what limited capacity I can try to help you.

-

If these boys would've been big football players, quarterbacks, well-known... they would've never went to jail. But these are just two little redneck boys. Country boys. That's what that was. You know what I'm sayin'? So... they didn't stand out in the public eye. You know? And uh, yeah. I've been pissed off for a long time.

-
*I just heard about it later on, that they may have had a life insurance policy on him,
[unintelligible] impact, and all that other stuff.*

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That's all for this week... thanks for listening.

Transcribed by Skylar Park