

Hard life, brutal death: Dad torn up over his girl

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CANTON, Ohio — The last time he saw Celeste, she was behind the wheel of his truck, ignoring his demand to return the keys, shouting out the window in that booming voice of hers.

Dad, I'll be right back.

Jim Fronsman watched the truck drive away. Celeste said she was going to Walmart, but he knew better. His daughter had taken his vehicle before. He'd even called the police on her — told the cops in April that his own child wouldn't give him back his truck.

This time, she was gone for two days before he walked into a Canton police station to report his vehicle missing. It was Aug. 26, a sunny Sunday afternoon. Just four hours earlier, a passing motorist had found Celeste 80 miles away, dying alone on a rural Muskingum County road.

“We go home and I'm sitting on the front porch, and here come two guys,” Fronsman said, re-lighting his cigarette and recalling the moment he still can't comprehend. “I saw the badges. Gold badges. (One) said, ‘Jim, we got something to tell you.’”

It's Celeste, the detectives said. She's got maybe 48 hours to live. She was set on fire.

Set on fire? Fronsman's head felt fuzzy. Who could have done this? He thought over everything that had happened in the past month. He knew.

“Well,” he said, “KC told me she was going to kill her.”

Celeste Elaine Fronsman died on Aug. 28. A preliminary autopsy report didn't reveal an immediate cause of death, but it did show that she'd been burned over nearly 80 percent of her body. She was 29. She'd lived the kind of life no father wants for his daughter.

She hopped from couch to bed to motel room. She sold her body and bought drugs with her earnings. Court records list more than 20 charges brought against Celeste since 2002, including cocaine possession and motor-vehicle theft. She was arrested so often that they knew her by name at the Stark County jail.

“She was a street person that had a good heart,” said Howard Cammon, a friend who often let Celeste crash on his couch. “I had talked to her (about getting clean), and she wasn’t ready. She was having fun.”

A series of Stark County jail mug shots serves as a yearbook of Celeste’s street life. Some days seemed better than others. In one shot, she’s barely able to hold up her head, her eyes unfocused, the bags under them deep and dark. In another picture, she stares at the camera, her long, thick hair thrown over her shoulder as if she’d fixed it for the photographer. There was promise there; Celeste was pretty.

“A very, very handsome lady,” Cammon called her. “She was a free spirit. She was young.”

For most of Celeste’s life, Fronsman wasn’t there. He and her mother, Debbie, who died in 2009, divorced the year after Celeste was born. Debbie told him he wasn’t Celeste’s father. More than a decade passed before Debbie recanted, he said, and told him she wanted her daughter to have a relationship with her father. By then, Celeste was a teenager.

The two were never close. She went her own way. He still wasn’t certain they were related. He can’t remember the name of her daughter, Jordyn, who died of a lung condition in 2005 when she was just 2. Most nights, he didn’t know where Celeste was or what she was doing.

But in recent years, he’d tried to connect with his grown daughter, he said. He talked about getting a trailer for the two of them. Sometimes, they’d both stay at Cammon’s house, and Celeste would offer her father iced tea and cigarettes. He’d tickle her feet and try to wake her to eat.

“I started to get back in her life a bit,” said Fronsman, 54, a retired steelworker who has four other children. “I tried to be a halfway-good father.” Celeste confided in him that she’d been having problems with Katrina “KC” Culberson, a fellow prostitute and one of three people now accused in Celeste’s murder.

Culberson thought Celeste had taken \$350 from her purse, Fronsman said. Celeste swore she hadn’t. She told her father Culberson had fired a gun at her. On Aug. 7, she reported to Canton police that someone had shot her with a BB gun and struck her in the face with the gun.

Culberson wasn’t named on the report, nor was she charged in the incident.

“After that, I said (to Celeste), ‘I want you to stay around the house,’” Fronsman said. “But she couldn’t stay home.”

One night, Fronsman said, he was staying at Cammon's house and awoke to yelling outside. Culberson, a baby-faced 20-year-old whose good looks had captured the attention of more than one man in town, was banging on the door.

She was looking for Celeste. Fronsman told her she wasn't there.

"She said, 'Jimmy, if you know where Celeste is, I'll give you \$300.' And I kind of looked at KC and said, 'Why?'" Fronsman said. "She said, 'I'm going to kill her. I'm going to kill her.' She said it twice."

"I said, 'KC, you're ignorant.' She said, 'Just watch me.'"

Three days after Celeste died at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center, Katrina Marie Culberson was arrested and charged in her slaying. The arrests of Monica Jean Washington, 24, and LaFonse Darney Dixon, 33, followed less than a week later. All three have been indicted in Muskingum County on charges of aggravated murder, kidnapping and aggravated arson.

Dixon, who reportedly was a boyfriend of Culberson's, also has been indicted on conspiracy charges. He's accused of plotting Celeste's kidnapping and murder with Culberson in the week before it happened.

Authorities say that the Canton trio, some of whom had ties to Muskingum County, took Celeste to dense woods there, doused her body in gasoline and set her on fire. A motorist found her on a nearby road.

She'd managed to crawl from the woods and tell her rescuer who she was and what had happened. Her final words might have helped catch her killers.

Celeste "wasn't going to die a lie," Cammon said. "That was God's spirit not letting Katrina have the last word."

In jailhouse interviews with the *Zanesville Times-Recorder*, Dixon professed his love for Culberson and said he had nothing to do with Celeste's death. Culberson, however, said all three had a part in it. She apologized to Celeste's family.

"I want to be a human being again, not some monster," Culberson told the newspaper. "Some of the decisions I've made are not even the real Katrina. I just want to be normal."

Culberson and the others could face the death penalty. Trials for the three likely are months away.

In the meantime, Fronsman can't do much but sit and wait, regretting all that has happened. He walks for miles and comes home with tears in his eyes — and still, nothing has changed. Celeste is gone. So is his truck, which was found in a Canton fast-food

parking lot and seized as evidence. He doesn't know if he'll get it back, and he isn't even sure he wants it back.

He fears it took his daughter to Muskingum County.

He thinks about the death penalty. He wants whoever did this to pay the way Celeste did. She might not have been an angel, he said, but she was a living human being. She deserved better.

If he had it his way, he'd give the lethal injection, the final act of a father who couldn't help his daughter during her troubled life.