

Stonewall

NEWS

Police Reverses Suicide Designation of Marsha P. Johnson's Death

In a rare move, the Police Department and Medical Examiner announced on December 17 that they had reversed their ruling that the July death of transvestite and activist Marsha P. Johnson was the result of a suicide. That ruling had been criticized from many quarters in the gay and lesbian community, and from its announcement, there had been calls to reconsider the case.

Johnson, who was one of the few living participants in the 1969 Stonewall Riots, was a well-known and beloved member of New York's gay and lesbian community. Her eclectic life included touring Europe with the '70s troupe Hot Peaches and being a fixture (as panhandler and prostitute) on Christopher Street. Her body was found floating in the Hudson River near the Christopher Street pier on Monday, July 6. In a display of unusual haste, her death was ruled a suicide within 24 hours. This ruling spawned instant criticism because it was based on scant hard evidence, and was perceived as an insensitive and stereo-

typic response to the death of a black male transvestite.

The campaign to change the suicide designation and get the police to seriously investigate Johnson's death included the Anti-Violence Project posting a \$5,000 reward for information. As a result of that reward, two witnesses came forward who had seen Johnson being harassed by groups of youths on July 4, the last day she was seen alive. The Anti-Violence Project interviewed the primary witnesses relied upon by the police, and determined that there was no factual basis for the suicide designation. On December 8, members of Johnson's family, her roommate, representatives of the Anti-Violence Project, and City Council member Tom Duane met with police brass and investigators. As a result, the suicide designation was rescinded and the cause of death is now officially listed as "drowning of an undetermined nature." The case remains officially "Open" by the Police Department.

Bea Hanson, the director of Client

Services at the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, said, "Finally, a small amount of justice for a very unjust death. The police think that the community doesn't care about the death of a drag queen, but they are wrong. Marsha was a vital part of our community's history, and the Police Department's rush to the suicide designation was a disgrace." Hanson added that the Police Department's initial designation of the case as a suicide may make a final resolution very difficult. If they had investigated it as a suspicious death, she points out, "The real facts might have come out. Unfortunately, by the time they started to look at possible wrongdoing, the trail was cold."

Hanson said also that violence against transvestites remain a serious problem receiving scant attention. In the last two weeks, two male transvestites have been found dead, one floating in the river, and one found with a slit throat in the meat market area of the West Village. ■