



**STATE CORONER'S COURT
OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

Inquest:	Inquest into the disappearance and suspected death of Paula Lee Denton
Hearing dates:	4 September 2023
Date of findings:	4 September 2023
Place of findings:	Mudgee Court House, Mudgee
Findings of:	Coroner, Magistrate Kasey Pearce
Catchwords:	CORONIAL LAW – missing person, referral to NSW Police Unsolved Homicide Unit
File number:	2018/00064824
Representation:	Advocate Assisting the Coroner: Sergeant Timothy O'Donnell

<p>Findings:</p>	<p>The <i>Coroners Act</i> in s81 (1) requires that when an inquest is held, the coroner must record in writing his or her findings as to various aspects of the death. These are the findings of an inquest into the death of Paula-Lee Denton.</p> <p>Identity of deceased:</p> <p>The deceased person was Paula-Lee Denton.</p> <p>Date of death:</p> <p>Paula-Lee Denton died sometime after January 2014.</p> <p>Place of death</p> <p>The place where Paula-Lee Denton died is unknown.</p> <p>Manner of death</p> <p>The manner of Paula-Lee Denton’s death is unknown.</p> <p>Cause of death</p> <p>The cause of Paula-Lee Denton’s death is unknown.</p>
<p>Recommendations:</p>	<p>That this matter be referred to the Unsolved Homicide Unit of the NSW Police Force for further investigation</p>

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The Coroners Act in s81 (1) requires that when an inquest is held, the coroner must record in writing his or her findings as to various aspects of the death. These are the findings of an inquest into the death of Paula-Lee Denton.

Introduction

1. Section 81(1) of the Coroner's Act 2009 (NSW) requires that when an inquest is held, the coroner must record in writing his or her findings as to various aspects of the death.
2. These are the findings of an inquest into the death of Paula-Lee Denton.
3. In making these findings, I extend my sincere condolences to the family and friends of Paula-Lee Denton. While this inquest cannot answer the ultimate question of where Paula's remains are located, it is hoped that through the inquest process some closure can be achieved for Paula's friends and family.

The Inquest

4. The inquest was held for the purpose of a public examination into the circumstances of Paula's disappearance and suspected death.
5. Pursuant to section 81 of the Coroners Act 2009 (NSW) (the Act), the role of a coroner is to make findings as to the identity of the person who died, and the date, place, cause, and manner of the person's death. In circumstances such as Paula's, where a death is reasonably suspected, but no remains recovered, an inquest is usually required so that a formal determination can first be made as to whether the person is deceased. Proof that the missing person is deceased 'must be clear, cogent and exact'¹ before a finding of the fact of death is made.

The evidence

6. The hearing of the inquest into the disappearance and suspected death of Paula-Lee Denton was held at Mudgee Courthouse on 4 September 2023. The sole witness required to give evidence was Detective Senior Constable John

¹ *Briginshaw v Briginshaw* (1938) 60 CLR 336

Sturman, who is the officer in charge of the investigation into Paula's disappearance.

Background

7. Paula Lee Denton was born on 20 May 1975 to Lynette Ann Minitier. She has a younger half-sister, Leanne, and two younger half-brothers Orm and Kieffer. The identity of Paula's father is unknown. Paula grew up in the Sydney/Wollongong area and moved out of home at around the age of 16 or 17.
8. In 1993, Paula commenced a relationship with a man named Sam MERCEICA and the couple were engaged. Paula fell pregnant and gave birth to a son, Darcy, in October 1994. The relationship between Sam and Paula ended prior to Darcy's birth. Paula had custody of Darcy the majority of the time he was a child and they lived together in Berkely for a number of years, and also in the Dapto area.
9. In 2008, when he was 14 years old, Darcy moved in with his father in Towradji and Paula reportedly moved to Adaminaby. Whilst residing here, Paula developed a strong friendship with Lyn Heidhtmann. Paula began working as a traffic controller for a Canberra-based company and Darcy moved back in with Paula about a year later. However, this only lasted a few months as Darcy and Paula had a falling out. Darcy moved in with Lyn for a period of time, before moving back in with his father in the Newcastle area.
10. In 2012, it was reported that Paula moved back to the Sydney area, before moving in with her sister Leanne in Hargraves. This only lasted for a couple of months before Paula moved to Pyramul and had a brief relationship with a man there named Nick Coultar.
11. Throughout her life, Paula had been the victim of a number of sexual assaults and acts of indecency towards her. She reportedly had psychological problems including anxiety, panic attacks and post-traumatic stress disorder. She was also a heavy user of cannabis. These factors had an obvious impact on her life and her relationships with family and friends.

12. On 23 August 2012, Paula placed an advert in the Awesome Trader stating that she was looking for a small acreage with a shed or liveable area that she could reside in with her dog and cows. As a result, she was contacted by a man named Hugo Tighe and an agreement was made that Paula could reside in a shack on his property in Cope, NSW.
13. On 28 December 2012, Paula was granted a Carers Allowance to care for Jake Silvestro, who resided at a property called 'Dovedale' in Avisford.

Events leading to Paula's disappearance.

14. On 24 January 2013, Paula sent an email to a friend, John Young, explaining that she was no longer speaking with her family and had left her traffic control job. She said she was still living on the property in Cope but was spending most of her time at a friend's place.
15. On 29 May 2013, Paula made a request for an advance payment from Centrelink. This is the last contact she made with Centrelink or Human Services.
16. On 4 August 2013, Paula presented to Mudgee District Hospital with a sore hand that she informed them was from chopping firewood.
17. Between 26 and 27 September 2013, Paula was a patient at Bathurst Hospital as she underwent a colonoscopy and other procedures without complication. Whilst she was in Hospital, Paula's Toyota Hilux was located destroyed by fire on Aarons Pass Road, off the Castlereagh Highway in Aarons Pass. On 2 October 2013, Paula attended Bathurst Police Station to report her vehicle stolen from Bathurst Hospital.
18. On 4 October 2013, Paula's mother Lyn Williams passed away. Her brother Orm located Paula in the following days and informed her about Lyn's passing.
19. The funeral was held on 18 October 2013 at Lake Macquarie Memorial Park, Ryhope. The day before the funeral, there was a gathering at Lyn's house in Toronto. Paula attended but left upset following a disagreement with family members. Paula attended the funeral the next day in a Hyundai Excel, believed to be the vehicle of Jake Silvestro. Reportedly, Paula attempted to halt proceedings during the funeral as she wanted to be a pall bearer. Paula did not

attend the wake afterwards. Over the next couple of days, Paula posted a number of messages on her Facebook account stating that she had been kicked out of the funeral and raising issues in regard to her mother's estate.

20. On 22 October 2013, just after midnight, Paula sent a Facebook message to her son Darcy. In this message she stated, *"I love you Darcy Paul never forget it, because it seems I will die before I can tell you face to face again son..."*

21. On 24 October 2013, Paula posted on her Facebook account, *"I'm on pre-paid internet and I've done 30 bucks in 3 days to you all"*. Paula provided her mobile number and instructed people to text her first, then ring her the next day so she knew who they are. She said she would only get on the internet every couple of months. This appears to be the last time Paula was active on Facebook.

22. On 5 December 2013, Kim Bailey, the partner of Lyn Williams and executor of her will, posted a letter addressed to Paula to a PO Box in Mudgee. Enclosed in the letter was a cover note written by Kim which outlined that the belongings of Lyn Williams were shared between Paula's brothers Orm and Keiffer, and sister Leanne. The only thing that was left to Paula was a letter written by her mother Lyn. This letter explained to Paula that she would not be receiving any inheritance due to their falling out and Paula's actions. Lyn also refused to disclose to Paula the identity of her father as she believed, if she did, Paula would attempt to track him down and interfere with his life. The letter ended with:

'You are a bitch who is only interested in what you can screw out of people and so now that I am gone I get the final say and that makes me happy. Enjoy the rest of your life. Mum.'

23. Paula's Commonwealth bank account records show regular small purchases occurring up until 21 December 2013. The last purchases made with her card were at the Reject Shop in Mudgee, and Mudgee Woolworths on this date.

24. On 16 January 2014, Leanne Mckenzie, Paula's sister, sent a text message to Kim Bailey after having a conversation with Jake Silvestro. The text read, *"Found out Paula did get the letters, she went beserk, wanted to kill everyone, shoot everyone and burn everything. She is out at Ulan (at her place) or in*

rehab but been told it is the quiet before the storm, she may be up to causing a whole lot of trouble”.

Investigations following Paula’s disappearance

25. On 19 October 2017, Mudgee Detectives received a file from the Australian Government Department of Human Services which related to concerns for the welfare of Paula Denton. The file outlined that in 2017, they had conducted an income review which revealed that on 1 August 2016, Paula’s Commonwealth Bank account had more than \$30,000 accumulated from fortnightly payments. They had sent a letter to Paula requesting further information but there was no response to this letter. As a result, the DHS cancelled Paula’s pension on 5 March 2017. Paula had not contacted Centrelink or the DHS in relation to the cancellation of these payments.
26. Mudgee Detectives began their investigation and contacted family members. Leanne McKenzie informed police that the last time she had contact with Paula was around Christmas 2013 when she received a text message that said words to effect of, *‘family is dead to me. Don’t ever come look for me.’* Leanne said that Paula had previously been out of contact with family for periods of 12-18 months but would return on her own accord. Leanne mentioned the letter that was sent to her after the death of their mother and believed its contents may have something to do with why Paula didn’t want contact with the family.
27. Paula’s son, Darcy, was contacted. The last time Darcy had seen Paula was at her mother’s funeral. The last contact he had with her was via Facebook message. He had sent her a text message about 12 months prior and she didn’t respond, which he said was unusual.
28. Police contacted a close friend of Paula’s, Nathalie Settertree. Nathalie had not had any contact with Paula since the messages she sent her on 24 October 2013. She knew Paula was in a dark place following her mother’s funeral but never spoke about self-harm and doesn’t believe she would harm herself. She said that if Paula was alive, she wouldn’t go this long without contacting her son Darcy.
29. Paula’s brothers Orm and Keiffer were spoken to by police but also had not seen Paula since their mother’s funeral.

30. Police spoke with Hugo Tighe, the owner and occupier of the property Paula last resided at. He said he had very little to do with Paula while she lived there and at one point, saw her taking some of her belongings and assumed she was moving out. There was still property of hers in the shack she resided in, which he left there until about 2016, before taking it to Gulgong tip.
31. On 20 and 21 March 2018, police searched the property in Cope and its surrounds with no evidence of interest or signs of Paula. The property known as "Dovedale" where Paula was spending a lot of time as the carer for Jake Silvestro, was also searched by police with no signs of Paula or any evidence of interest that could indicate where she was.
32. Jake Silvestro was spoken to by police on 11 March 2020. He informed them he knew Paula as a friend and she was his carer for a period of time while he was sick. She assisted during this period by taking care of him and looking after the property. Jake believed the last time he saw Paula was around January 2014 when she travelled to Orange with him and Graham Mobbs to a Butcher Supply Shop. They returned to his place on the Dovedale property and she slept on the lounge that night but left early the next morning before he woke up. Jake had CCTV footage on his property at the time and said he checked the footage and saw Paula walking down his driveway at about 7am that morning. He knew Paula did not have a motor vehicle at the time so he assumed someone picked her up on the road, but the CCTV didn't cover that area. The footage had been overridden by the time police enquired. He could not recall having any contact with her after that date. Jake moved to Tooraweenah in 2016. Jake Silvestro didn't recall telling Leanne McKenzie about Paula receiving the letter but accepts it may have happened and remembers Leanne attending Dovedale to collect things of Paula's. He informed police that Paula 'went downhill' after her mother died and had been using Ice but the last time he saw her, she didn't say or do anything that made him think she would harm herself.
33. Jake was also of the belief he may have seen Paula in 2017 on the main street of Tamworth, leaving on the back of a motorcycle with a "Big guy with a red beard" riding it. However, this sighting cannot be confirmed, and Jake acknowledged he was about 25 metres away.

34. Graham Mobbs was spoken to by police and supplied a statement in April 2020. Graham knew Paula and also her sister Leanne. He remembered going to Orange with Jake Silvestro in January 2014 but did not recall Paula being on the trip with them. Graham believes the last time he saw Paula she was driving through Hargraves in a vehicle with her sister Leanne.
35. It is important to acknowledge that it was a number of years after Paula's disappearance that she was reported missing, and many of the statements and interviews conducted by police occurred over five years after Paula's last known movements. Inconsistencies with the chronology of events and last known sightings are not uncommon in these types of investigations.
36. Police conducted checks with immigration and interstate agencies with no record of Paula in any other state, or ever owning a passport to leave the country. Police also made numerous media releases appealing for information about Paula, but nothing of significance was ever reported.
37. DNA samples were taken from Darcy and Leanne and placed on file with the police database for comparison for any unidentified human remains. So far, none have been identified that would match the DNA profile of Paula Denton.

Sign of Life Checks

38. During the original investigation, Police conducted the standard enquiries that would be made in the event of a person being reported missing. These included requests to external agencies for any signs that Paula was still alive, including various interstate and national bodies, including police forces, road authorities, utility providers, government housing providers, corrective service organisations, Births, Deaths and Marriages Departments, Medicare, financial institutions, and Centrelink. These enquiries were repeated in May 2023. No signs of life were detected.
39. Sadly, to this date, there has been no further evidence to indicate that Paula is still alive.

Time, Date and Place of Death

40. The last time Paula was seen alive was January 2014.

Cause and Manner of death

41. The cause of Paula's death is unknown at this stage.

42. The manner of Paula's death is unknown at this stage.

Findings required by s81(1)

As a result of considering all of the documentary evidence and the oral evidence given at the inquest, I am able to confirm that the death occurred and make the following findings in relation to it.

The identity of the deceased

The person who died was Paula-Lee Denton.

Date of death

The date of Paula-Lee Denton's death is unknown.

Place of death

The place of Paula-Lee Denton's death is unknown.

Cause of death

The cause of Paula-Lee Denton's death is unknown.

Manner of death

The manner of Paula-Lee Denton's death is unknown.

Recommendations

Pursuant to s 82 of the *Coroners Act 2009*, Coroners may make recommendations connected with a death.

It is recommended that this matter be referred to the Unsolved Homicide Unit of the NSW Police Force for further investigation.

I close this inquest.

Kasey Pearce

Magistrate

Mudgee

Date 4 September 2023