

## THE AUSTRALIAN


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# Pamela Young: NSW police and the death of Scott Johnson

JANA WENDT

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By JANA WENDT

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Three years ago, the head of NSW's unsolved homicide squad, detective chief inspector Pamela Young, entered an ABC television studio to be interviewed for a national audience. The police hierarchy had dispatched the steely lead investigator to set out the facts of a two-year probe into one of the state's most contentious cold cases.

As part of an agreed strategy, Young hoped to counter the hail of criticism raining down on the NSW Police Force for its handling of what was then a 27-year-old mystery. Instead, at the conclusion of Young's articulate, tough-minded *Lateline* appearance, the three-decade career of the detective, pursuer of some of the state's worst criminals, was effectively over.

During the course of her appearance on April 13, 2015, Young accused the police minister of the day of "absolutely improper" conduct, adding that he was "kowtowing" to the demands of a wealthy man who was pushing for priority in the investigation of his brother's death. There were hundreds of other victims' families, the detective insisted, who were equally deserving of her attention. She assessed the minister's intervention as "wrong on every level".

The police minister in question was the state Liberal government's Mike Gallacher, and the wealthy man was American millionaire internet developer Steve Johnson, whose younger brother Scott had been found dead at the foot of a cliff, a known gay beat, in Sydney's North Head in 1988.

If Young was aware of the political typhoon her words were whipping up, she didn't show it. Nor did she expect her world was about to cave in.

Three years on, in an exclusive interview with *Inquirer*, the former detective is speaking publicly for the first time since her unexpected downfall.

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Pamela Young: NSW police and the death of Scott Johnson

Young sits straight backed, a feline figure sipping coffee in the centre of Sydney's business district. There is no retreat.

"I believe in what I said," she says. "I would do that (TV) interview again without hesitation." She has the air of a loner, both fragile and resilient, confident and self-deprecating by turns.

She says of the fateful interview, "I realised after how politically naive I was — despite having been around that long. Part of it really pissed me off about myself, and part of it made me feel that I'm still a decent human being despite everything."

Young joined the NSW police at age 20, "determined every day to be as good, or better than, any male example around me". The now 54-year-old recalls "seeing errors and inefficiencies on jobs through people being matey and friendly, and soft and indecisive ... That's really how I learned to be the opposite of so much I had seen."

She became the meticulous and seemingly remote "ice queen", a title bestowed by colleagues and one Young does not altogether dislike — it was "the only way I was known to do business", she says. "I never approached any person or any job to be liked. There's a lot of commanding during a properly run investigation and you have no time to waste."

Nearly half of Young's investigations as a detective over 15 years concentrated on the gravest of transgressions — homicide. She claims to have an "almost flashback clarity" about some of the hundreds of crime scenes she attended: "blood, guts, weapons, signs of struggle, a dead face ... and the wailing of relatives".

The police veteran has been married twice and had a long-term relationship with fellow detective Gary Jubelin, himself in the spotlight most recently for the investigation into the 2014 disappearance of toddler William Tyrrell.

The youngest in a family of five who grew up in suburban Sydney, Young announces a tally of 22 nieces and nephews, although she declares herself content with her choice not to have children. "I loved my career ... I thought, will I regret that decision when I'm older? Well, I am older and I don't regret it."

Her working life, says Young, was anchored in what she describes as the "high purpose" of the paramilitary organisation she joined.

“She’s the real deal,” says respected former NSW deputy police commissioner Nick Kaldas, who has known Young since the 1990s. “You want people who will not give up. She was really someone you could rely on ... an ethical person.”

Formidable NSW crown prosecutor Margaret Cunneen has worked on many cases briefed by Young across the decades. “Homicide investigation is such a sad and exacting thing,” observes Cunneen. “Young wanted to make sure that every aspect of that brief had gone into your head. She is a person of such high moral courage and high integrity that I would accept what she has to say about the outcome of an investigation.”

The life of Scott Johnson, a gifted mathematician, might have ended below a cliff at North Head in December 1988, but the story of how the 27-year-old died endured.

Atop the steep bluff towering over his motionless body, Scott’s clothing lay neatly folded, with a \$10 note, a cash card, a student ID and a bus ticket tucked into a shirt pocket.

His older brother’s dissatisfaction with the initial police investigation and some of the judicial proceedings resulting from it was the spark for a dynamic public relations assault at a reported cost of \$1 million. Johnson never accepted the findings of two coronial inquiries.

The first, held in March 1989, three months after Scott’s body was discovered, found the young man had taken his own life.

Johnson did not believe his brother had committed suicide. In response to his urgings to have the matter reopened, a second inquest was held in 2012. Carmel Forbes, the then deputy state coroner, ruled that the way Scott Johnson died was impossible to determine, and handed down an open finding.

In addition, Forbes directed NSW police to reinvestigate the case. Strike Force Macnamir, with Young at its helm, set to work in early 2013.

In the years since his brother’s death, the influential Johnson had co-opted US senator Ted Kennedy to petition Australian authorities and had made regular trips to Australia, establishing connections with gay activists who had long highlighted a number of suspected gay-hate deaths in the 1980s and 90s.

He used his considerable resources to hire an American journalist-investigator, Daniel Glick, to look into the circumstances of Scott’s death. Johnson also paid for the services of a former NSW

detective and Sue Thompson, a former police gay and lesbian consultant, who in 2002 had identified 88 NSW homicides potentially involving anti-gay bias.

Johnson and his associates effectively operated as a shadow investigative unit, working to construct a case they hoped would confirm Johnson's belief that his brother had been the victim of violent assault. The team fed a hungry Australian media keen to pursue what Johnson claimed was another instance in an epidemic of gay-hate crime in NSW.

The ABC's *Australian Story* dedicated an episode to the Scott Johnson case and this aired in 2013 just as Young and Strike Force Macnamir began their re-investigation. The show featured extensive interviews with Johnson and Glick. Its message was alarming and highly critical of police.

Johnson's investigator emphatically supported his employer's unshakable conviction that Scott had been the victim of a gay-hate killing.

The program cited what was presented as a breakthrough discovery by Glick of a local newspaper report regarding a 1986 stabbing. According to Johnson, that knife attack was a gay-hate crime, and it took place at precisely the same location where his brother's belongings were found a couple of years later.

The discovery was highlighted as a critical refutation of police who, while identifying gay-hate assaults in other Manly locations, had found no instances of anti-gay violence on North Head.

Young claims that unlike many of her agitated colleagues inside the NSW Police Force, she was untroubled by the broadcast. She asserted there had been no reports of violence, whether motivated by gay hate or anything else, at North Head with the exception of the 1986 stabbing referenced by Johnson. And contrary to Johnson's claim, Young insisted that even this stabbing was not a gay-hate crime since it arose out of two men having consensual sex.

Further, she claimed the location was not, as Glick had stated, identical to the one where Scott's clothing was found — the knife attack took place in a disused bunker about 300m away.

In the *Lateline* interview, Young claimed the Johnson family were "perhaps using definitions of gay-hate crime that suit their purpose".

Today she sees no reason to change her mind. "In all the time, in all the time in that (gay) beat, no one, not one person has said that they have direct knowledge of assaults there — unlike

every other beat.”

She acknowledges fear was unquestionably a barrier to the reporting of such crimes. “I completely accept that, particularly in that era, there was reluctance, a fear of reporting,” Young says. “I completely accept that, always have. But that reluctance and fear surely applied across beats generally ... Every other beat has direct reports — except that one.”

Her steadfastness aside, Young admits that in 2013-15, as Strike Force Macnamir proceeded with its work, she staggered under the blows from the Johnson campaign. It was a barrage, she claims, of “criticism, complaints, demands, and all negative about all the police efforts, historically and currently”.

The distance between Johnson and Young grew vast.

Johnson maintained Young was wedded to her theory his brother had committed suicide. Young calls this a misrepresentation, which became a trope in the campaign waged against her and the police. “I have never said Scott suicided. Never. Not in written word. Not in spoken word,” Young insists. In line with the 2012 coronial inquiry conclusions, Young believes Johnson’s death remains a mystery. “What’s completely appropriate, and supported by all the evidence gathered prior, and at inquest, is an open finding. That’s what I believe.”

In one of our conversations, Young agrees that she allowed Johnson and his team to get under her skin. At our next meeting, she calibrates the admission.

“Every job gets under my skin. Every job I carry with me intimately from the start ... What was unusual was feeling isolated from the next of kin. That’s never happened. That feeling that they thought I was harmful to them in some way, that I wasn’t helpful, and ... in some sort of conspiracy to cover up the truth ... That’s definitely under the skin, and a one-off.” At the apogee of the controversy, a social media post by the Johnson team refers to “DCI Young’s hostility, resentment and strong bias against considering violence as a possibility in Scott’s case”, an attitude “we sensed all along”.

The criticisms were disturbing, Young claims, for reasons beyond professional pride. “It’s about the community fear and people believing that gay deaths and crimes aren’t important and aren’t properly investigated.”

But she concedes, “There was a personal, painful element for someone who became instinctive about homicides. I’m f..king good at them —that’s just been through hard work, and exposure

and saturation, not any special gift I have ... I was the best person Steve Johnson could have on that case ... He just never realised it.”

Young recalls being spat on in the inner-city suburb where she lived at the time of the Johnson investigation. She admits to misreading the gay community’s “momentum, and the need for positive support, publicity (and) action ... I don’t begrudge them that. You’ve got to grab your opportunities where they come.” She adds a caveat: “I think it distorted some truth and made people take sides, regardless of the facts on the ground ... and that’s not always helpful, even if they’re good-hearted intentions.” There is, she observes, a “constant, unresolved anguish” in the gay community.

Johnson’s zealous campaign won an unprecedented third inquest. Ultimately, the coroner’s findings, brought down last November, smashed Young’s expectations and the police case. Having successfully urged that Young be removed from the investigation after the *Lateline* appearance in 2015, as her involvement would “make it very difficult to regain the confidence of the key stakeholders in the inquest”, coroner Michael Barnes found Johnson died “as a result of actual or threatened violence by unidentified persons who attacked him because they perceived him to be homosexual”.

The coroner “readily conclude(d) that homicide is more likely than either of the other two scenarios — accident or suicide”.

The sidelined Young — who, as the coroner acknowledged, had “an intimate knowledge of a very complex investigation”, sat through every day of the inquest and was never called to give evidence. To this day, and despite the offer of a \$100,000 reward, no one has been charged in relation to Scott Johnson’s death.

Young is no longer a member of the police force. The door opened to her premature retirement, Young believes, the day after the TV broadcast and her reference to the “improper” conduct of the “kowtowing” minister.

It was then, as Young tells it, that the NSW police executive, which had blessed her TV appearance, began to put a distance between itself and Young.

She recounts that what had been daily communication with her immediate superior, Mick Willing, then homicide chief, effectively stopped. (Willing is now Assistant Commissioner.) Willing’s public statement on the matter was a declaration that Young’s language in the TV interview had been “inopportune”. The statement poleaxed Young, as did her humiliation in front

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of former team members, some of whom, she claims, were instructed to no longer deal with their chief.

“That is really personal,” a shaken Young says of the ban.

Two further glimpses into the homicide detective’s working life are instructive.

Asked to disclose what she feared on the job, Young is unable to land on anything at all. “Head to head with bikies and murderers,” Young declares, “I would feel nothing — nothing. I would just deal with the situation (and) come out the other end ... Now that is not healthy.”

There is also the story of her involvement with a young man whose father was murdered in squalid circumstances. She discloses the man developed an attachment to Young when she brought to justice the gang responsible for the killing. The grieving son would call her several times a day at first, then at least once a week, raging with anguish. The contact continued for 11 years.

“He was someone I gave everything I possibly could to. And he — he did appreciate it. He liked me for that, and that was important to me at the time. But then he ...” Young’s speech dissolves to silence. “I got a call from his sister to say he’d suicided ... Everyone’s life does what it does,” she sighs, “whether you feel you help or feel you don’t help.”

Until the crucible of the Johnson case, Young claims she had no thought of a break. In 33 years she had taken no time off while on duty. But in August 2015, having also wrapped up the charging of alleged Family Law Court bomber Leonard Warwick, the stress of her sense of being cast adrift by police management laid her low. She lodged a sick leave claim and went home to recover, expecting eventually to return to her job.

The following year Young was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition from which she had evidently suffered since the early 2000s — a period coinciding with her years in homicide.

In the end, Young decided to stay away for good.

As the former detective’s once frenetic days slowed, she “entered a non-existence”.

“I guess I unravelled much more than I had planned ... It’s been hell to extract myself from that world I gave everything to.

“I only realised in hindsight: I need to believe in something, and that something was this organisation ... And when I no longer believed in them ... I had no focus. I had no mission,” she says.

“It was the betrayal that finished me off. They don’t want me — and I don’t want them.”

Kaldas considers Young to have been “crucified by the (police) hierarchy”.

“Not everyone,” says Cunneen, “has the courage of a Pam Young. A lot of people put their heads down.”

NSW police declined all requests for interviews for this article. Attempts to contact Steve Johnson were unsuccessful.

In a small apartment decorated with carefully arranged groupings of favourite objects, Young keeps her own company. “I’ve been getting to know myself,” she says with a half-smile. “I was very good at one thing — and there aren’t too many other places you can go to investigate homicide.” Now that she no longer has the “honour and privilege” of “digging around in people’s lives” to solve crime, she wonders how to fill the void. Her ego, Young quips, demands she do something “important”.

But her past investigative life, Young considers, has taught her an important truth: “there are some things that can never be known. To me, that’s part of human existence, and some people cannot accept that mystery of the human condition.”

*Jana Wendt is a Sydney-based freelance journalist.*

