

Was High School Grad Being Chased Before Grisly Train Death?

MYSTERIOUS

Tiffany Valiante was 18 when she was struck and killed by a train in New Jersey. Her death was ruled a suicide but her parents say several clues point to something more sinister.



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Reporter

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Photo illustration by Elizabeth Brockway/The Daily Beast/Handout

EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP, New Jersey—Exactly four weeks after she graduated high school with varsity letters in multiple sports and a volleyball scholarship to attend New York's Mercy College in the fall, New Jersey teenager Tiffany Ida Mae Valiante was killed by a speeding train on its way to Atlantic City.

The 18-year-old's death shocked the tight-knit community of Mays Landing, especially after it was quickly ruled that she had deliberately jumped in front of the train.

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For her parents, Dianne and Steve Valiante, the idea that Tiffany had died by suicide didn't make any sense. They are convinced that something much more sinister happened to their daughter on the night of July 12, 2015, and have spent the past seven years, and thousands of dollars, to try and put together pieces of a puzzle they say simply do not fit.

"There's somebody out there that did this," Dianne told The Daily Beast in the backyard of her home last month. "There's a murderer walking around."

They are not alone in thinking that the facts don't quite add up in a case that has been marred by claims of mishandled evidence, and what the Valiante family says was a rush to judgment by authorities over their daughter's death.

Stephan Rosenfeld, a Philadelphia-based consultant working with the Valiantes, is the former assistant general manager of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA). He says the words "confirmation bias" were uttered practically from day one by experts determined to have Tiffany's death deemed a suicide.

"The deeper you dig, the more questions that surface," Rosenfeld told *The Daily Beast*. "But if you... bought the 'theory' [early on] that it was an open-and-shut case of suicide—not mysterious in the least—there's no reason to even entertain myriad puzzling, troubling questions. You just tell your supervisor, 'There's nothing to see here.'"



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The day that Tiffany died was much like any other, Dianne Valiante said as she showed *The Daily Beast* around the woodsy piece of property where her daughter was last seen, on a deer camera at the end of the driveway.

Tiffany spent the morning at the family home in Mays Landing, leaving briefly to get a lemonade at a local Wawa. That afternoon, Tiffany and her parents walked across the street to Steve's brother's house for a party. His daughter, Tiffany's cousin, had just graduated from Holy Spirit High School in the nearby town of Absecon, and they were celebrating with a large group of friends and family who

came and went throughout the day and into the evening.

Her family said at the party that Tiffany spoke enthusiastically about going off to college and was hatching a plan with one of her two half-sisters to go with her to pick up a kitten for their mom a week or so later as a birthday surprise.



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Shortly after 9 p.m. a close friend of Tiffany's called Steve and Dianne saying she needed to speak with them in person and the couple left the party and returned home to meet her.

The friend, who did not respond to multiple interview requests for this story and whose name The Daily Beast is withholding, showed up to the Valiantes' place around 9:15 p.m. with her mom and told them that Tiffany had used her debit card without permission to buy about \$300 worth of clothes and food. (The Valiantes say the amount was actually \$86, and that this figure was backed up at the time by receipts later found in Tiffany's room.)

Steve, a maintenance worker for the State of New Jersey, and Dianne, an administrative assistant for the local public school district, then called Tiffany on her cellphone, and she showed up a minute or two later. According to civil deposition transcripts obtained by The Daily Beast, Dianne at first defended Tiffany, saying she had no reason to use her friend's card since she and Steve had given her their credit card. Apparently shocked by the accusation, Tiffany—who had been caught by her parents taking money from their bank account a few months earlier—asked her friend how she thought she could ever steal from her, and flatly denied it all.

The conversation ended less than 10 minutes after it began and at 9:24 p.m., Tiffany's friend drove off with her mother.

According to a timeline provided by Valiante family lawyer Paul D'Amato, Dianne began to search Tiffany's car with her daughter when she saw the teenager slip the card into her back pocket. Dianne immediately went into the house to get Steve but when they came back out a minute or so later, Tiffany was gone.

Dianne called the friend, and told her that Tiffany "ran away," according to the deposition transcript, and the friend rushed back to the Valiante house, along with two other girls who knew Tiffany to help look for her. (Dianne claims she never used the term "ran away.")





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The skies in Mays Landing, a quiet community of just under 6,000 people, about 20 miles west of Atlantic City, were virtually pitch-black on the night Tiffany vanished. According to Steve and Dianne, Tiffany suffered from near-crippling nyctophobia—a debilitating fear of the dark.

At first, they thought Tiffany might have been playing some sort of joke on them, hiding in the woods behind the house and watching the search effort from behind a tree. Eventually, it became clear this wasn't the case, and a large group of family and friends split up into search parties.

Dianne and Steve searched the area on foot and by car. A short time later, Tiffany's two older half-sisters, Jessica and Krystal, as well as her uncle began scouring the surrounding woods on quad bikes.

At around 11 p.m., Steve spotted Tiffany's cellphone in some brush near the end of the driveway. This was highly unusual, he thought, since Tiffany didn't go anywhere without her phone (she had even purchased a special case for it so she could use it in the shower, according to her parents). Without any sign of Tiffany, the family called off the search around midnight and contacted police.

But by that time, Tiffany was already dead. She had been fatally struck by a speeding train headed from Philadelphia to Atlantic City along an isolated stretch of track four miles from where she lived.



Justin Rohrich/The Daily Beast

Speaking to a reporter from *The Press of Atlantic City*, a New Jersey Transit spokesperson said Tiffany “was standing on the train tracks near Tilton Road in Galloway Township, but did not move when the train’s engineer sounded the horn and applied emergency brakes.”

The medical examiner’s report was particularly grim—all four of Tiffany’s limbs had been ripped from her torso, her face and head were completely crushed, and her brain “extruded from the cranial cavity.” The report, issued six days after Tiffany was killed, listed the cause of death as “multiple traumatic injuries.” Tiffany’s torso was clad only in underwear, and her feet, which were severed completely from her body, were found without the shoes she left home in.

Apprentice engineer Marvin Olivares, who had been on the job for a little over a year, was at the controls of NJ Transit train 4693 that night. As he accelerated up to the 80 mph speed limit on the way to rendezvous with a disabled train, supervising engineer Wayne Daniels briefly stepped out of the cab to go over the rescue game plan with his lead conductor.

"I had turned around to tell him, nke, 'Bill, this is—this is how we're going to set everything up,'" Daniels later told cops, according to a police report reviewed by The Daily Beast. "And at the same time that this was going on, I heard my... student engineer, blow the horn, put the train into emergency, and say... a girl had jumped out in front of us."

The train hit Tiffany at 11:07 p.m., dragging and cutting up her body for about a quarter-mile before coming to a stop. At the stroke of midnight, nurse practitioner Michelle Amendolia arrived on the scene and pronounced Tiffany dead.



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D'Amato has long been bothered by what he says amounted to "inconsistent statements" by both Olivares and Daniels in interviews with detectives.

In a 2019 civil suit against NJ Transit that D'Amato filed on behalf of the Valiante family, he pointed out that Olivares was questioned three separate times by investigators, providing a different version of events each time. (The Daily Beast has reviewed transcripts of these interviews.) In one, Olivares said that Tiffany had "darted out" from the woods and ran onto the tracks, after which she was hit. In another, Olivares said he didn't see Tiffany until the train was "right on top" of her. In a third interview conducted under oath six days later, Olivares claimed he first spotted Tiffany from about a half-mile away, crouched alongside the tracks. She then stood up and dove in front of the train, according to Olivares.

Daniels also gave conflicting accounts of what happened that night, D'Amato said.

In court filings, D'Amato pointed to the statement Daniels initially gave investigators, telling them that he "instructed the apprentice engineer to blow the horn and ring the bell as he put the train into emergency brake application." However, when he was subsequently put under oath, Daniels admitted that he had had his back to the cab while chatting with his conductor. Neither of them ever rang the bell, according to the train's "black box," the lawsuit states.

Olivares and Daniels did not respond to multiple interview requests by The Daily Beast.

The errors continued mounting for years, said D'Amato. NJ Transit detectives somehow managed to lose an ax with "red markings" found near the crash site before it could be tested. In March 2022, a forensic examiner hired by D'Amato found that the remaining evidence in Tiffany's case had been stored improperly by police, making it all but worthless for a new round of DNA testing.

The shirt Tiffany was wearing the night she died had been stuffed into a plastic bag which was tied with a knot, leaving it "covered with mold" and scientifically useless. Other items, which "had been outdoors, exposed to the elements for a few weeks, prior to being collected," made them similarly contaminated, according to a private DNA testing lab that D'Amato hired on behalf of the Valiantes.

An NJ Transit spokesperson did not respond to The Daily Beast's request for comment.



There is, in fact, some evidence pointing to suicide.

On July 16, the Atlantic County Sheriff's Office sent out a K-9 handler with a bloodhound to "conduct a track from the house she left from to attempt to ascertain her direction of travel," states an operations report obtained by The Daily Beast. Investigators wanted to learn if Tiffany might have been picked up by a vehicle on the night of July 12 and driven to the train tracks—in which case the bloodhound would presumably lose her scent at some point between the Valiantes' driveway and the point of impact with the train.

"I advised all present... that I did not want to know the location of the incident," the K-9 handler wrote in the report. "I wanted to conduct the track blind and let my K-9 partner lead the way and discuss the track when completed."

Over the next hour and 10 minutes, the bloodhound led the handler from the Valiantes' driveway along a 3.2 mile route that culminated in the "general area" of where the locomotive hit Tiffany. However, while driving the route with The Daily Beast last month, D'Amato said he considered the K-9 results unreliable, since it had rained heavily in the period since Tiffany disappeared.

On a personal level, Dianne told The Daily Beast, she and Tiffany had been having issues throughout the year preceding her death, but that she considered this "normal teenage stuff" and that nothing that went beyond the typical problems teenage girls and their mothers often have.



Justin Rohrich/The Daily Beast

Yet, the two had been bickering more and more frequently, and child protection officials in 2014 paid three separate visits to the Valiante home after one of Tiffany's teachers noticed bruising on her arm, according to a summary of medical records reviewed by The Daily Beast. Dianne admitted to having caused the bruise by punching Tiffany after an argument. A caseworker recommended the pair seek counseling, which Dianne and Tiffany agreed to do.

During their first and only session, on Nov. 17, 2014, Dianne told the therapist that she had been especially short-tempered of late, but blamed it on menopausal changes. Two days later, Tiffany's grandfather died. She started skipping class and smoking a little pot, and took some money from Dianne's bank account shortly before Christmas without telling her, according to the summary. (The parents dispute that she skipped class.) Although they had "trouble communicating," the therapist's official assessment was that the pair enjoyed a "stable" family relationship.

Tiffany told the therapist she was neither depressed nor suicidal, the summary states. Dianne "acknowledged not being able to move on from the incidents" due to her own anxiety, and said she would seek "independent support, if needed." The following month, their case was closed.

In early 2015, roughly six months before her death, Tiffany came out as gay.

She began dating a young woman in Philadelphia, and after an amicable breakup, struck up a new relationship with a girl she met online. At first, Dianne told Tiffany that she was just going through a phase. However, she said she and Steve were accepting of Tiffany's sexuality.

Others, however, may not have been as open minded, according to D'Amato.

“Some of the other girls in school wanted to ‘experiment’ with her,” he said, laying out one of the various theories that have been floated over the years. “Which may have upset certain girls, and also certain guys.”

One classmate said Tiffany had been acting differently for a couple of months before she died, that she had been feeling distant from her parents, and that she was “lonely.”

Another said she heard that Tiffany texted a friend the night of her death with a cryptic message: “Just answer yes or no: should I do it?”



Justin Rohlfich/The Daily Beast

Even though Tiffany was popular and well-liked she put on a brave face, said a third, but still felt she could “never fit in,” and felt “sad” about life in general. However, they insisted that while Tiffany could be impulsive and had a hot temper, she had never talked about suicide.

A couple of Tiffany’s friends told investigators that she had harmed herself, intentionally cutting her wrist and her leg on two separate occasions. One claimed Tiffany had been depressed, and suggested untreated mental illness may have played a role. Steve and Dianne didn’t buy it, and told investigators they thought these claims were untrue.

D’Amato said that when authorities initially determined that Tiffany had died by suicide, Dianne and Steve begrudgingly accepted it because they felt they no choice—even though, as they both insist, they had no indication whatsoever that Tiffany had been depressed or emotionally unstable, and certainly not suicidal.

Then roughly two weeks after Tiffany died, Dianne went out for a walk to clear her head. She told The Daily Beast that about a mile away from home she spotted something under a tree and walked closer to take a look. What she discovered shocked her to her core.

Tiffany’s headband, and brand-new shoes, which she had worn for the first time to her cousin’s graduation party, were sitting together in the grass, completely undisturbed. The shoes were neatly lined up next to each other, as if someone had set them down purposefully, according to Dianne. There was also a keychain

nearby, which Dianne didn't recognize, as well as a sweatshirt about 15 feet away that Dianne said wasn't Tiffany's.

Dianne immediately called Steve, who showed up and called the cops. The shoes and headband were indeed Tiffany's. Detectives interviewed the Valiantes for the first time three days later. They subsequently misplaced the keychain before it had a chance to be analyzed.

The police later asked Steve and Dianne for access to a deer camera in their yard. On it, they discovered the last known image of Tiffany, who was seen walking down the driveway after the blow-up with her mom, wearing her shoes and the headband that Dianne later found.



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After she found the shoes and the headband, Dianne began to believe Tiffany was lured into a vehicle by someone parked at the end of the driveway, who then fled the area with her. She theorizes that her daughter escaped from the car and was chased onto the train tracks, jumping directly into the path of the 50-ton locomotive bearing down on her.

Alternatively, Dianne says, Tiffany's attacker may have killed her first and then hurled her corpse in front of the train to destroy any evidence.

An analysis D'Amato and the Valiantes commissioned in 2016 from Louise Houseman, a former senior investigator with the Atlantic County Medical Examiner's Office, also casts doubt on the official narrative.

"It is highly unlikely that this very accomplished 18-year-old female athlete walked barefoot, alone in the woods, without her cellphone, over stones and brush, in the dark along 1.5 miles of isolated railroad tracks on a hot summer night for a total of nearly four hours in order to commit suicide," [Houseman wrote](#).

She noted that death by train is "an extremely unusual method of suicide to be contemplated by anyone, especially a female teenager with no history of emotional instability. The loud sound of an approaching train is much more likely to invoke a flight response in a sober individual had she wanted to commit suicide, Tiffany could have walked in front of a car on a [much closer] heavily traveled four lane highway."

No drugs or alcohol were found in Tiffany's system the night she died, [according to a toxicology report issued two weeks later](#).





Justin Rohrich/The Daily Beast

Former Atlantic County Medical Examiner Dr. Donald Jason, now a professor emeritus of pathology at the Wake Forest School of Medicine, has been in practice for nearly 50 years. Searching for answers, D'Amato hired Jason in 2018 to reexamine various aspects of the case in the wake of Houseman's report.

"In my career, I've done between 10,000 and 20,000 autopsies," Jason told The Daily Beast, noting that of those "probably 100 or so" involved people being hit by trains.

Jason said he finds it "very improbable" that Tiffany walked four miles to end her life when there were closer and easier ways to do it, but that NJ Transit was "very happy to just call it a suicide because then they're off the hook." A death on the tracks due to negligence can trigger increased oversight, large fines, and even possible criminal charges.

"I think it's more probable that she was running away from somebody and trying to escape," Dr. Jason said. "So I would call that either an accident or a homicide. But certainly not a suicide... In my report, I concluded it's probably safest just to call it undetermined, because we don't know the facts yet. And they never really fully investigated anything other than suicide."

In the report he prepared for D'Amato, Dr. Jason said investigators treated Tiffany's "apparently unnatural death... with the assumption that it was a suicide. This bias negatively affected the way in which the scene was processed by all members of the team, both responding police and medical examiner's staff."

In her report, Houseman criticized New Jersey officials for not conducting a so-called psychological autopsy on Tiffany. If they had, it would have been clear that she was not at risk for suicide, according to Houseman's analysis. For Rosenfeld, the former transport consultant, he says the psychological autopsy should have been a key part of the response after Tiffany's death.

"Every pathologist we talked to from Day One said [that] before you can assign suicide... [as] the cause of death, you have to conclusively determine there was a motive on the part of the deceased to take his or her own life," Rosenfeld told The Daily Beast. "And the rhetorical question we have been educated [on] over the intervening years is, what was the motive? And not one person in this case has said, 'Oh, there was a clear motive here on the part of this young woman.'"



Courtesy of the Vallante Family

In the initial aftermath of Tiffany's death there were some enticing initial leads, such as the Wawa manager who claimed he overheard a group of teenage boys talking about Tiffany having been kidnapped at gunpoint, humiliated, forced to strip down to her underwear, and driven to the train station by her abductors.

The manager, whose name D'Amato and Rosenfeld asked The Daily Beast not to publish in light of past death threats, claimed the three boys who worked at Wawa

had spoken to him about “things they heard in reference to the Valiante incident,” according to the transcript from a November 2016 interview—under oath—with a detective from the Atlantic County Prosecutor’s Office.

During questioning, the manager said the teens told him that Tiffany’s friend—whom the manager did not know—had been incredibly upset about the stolen debit card. After Tiffany stormed off from her house, the manager claimed the friend called someone who came by and picked her up in a truck with an “unidentified guy,” according to the transcript. From there, Tiffany was led to her death on the train tracks.

But the manager had gotten the information third-hand, and his version of the story was littered with holes. For starters, he claimed, erroneously, that the argument between Tiffany and her friend occurred at the graduation party, in front of a crowd. The manager also said the friend had not once reached out to Steve and Dianne after Tiffany’s death. However, the friend wrote a speech for Tiffany’s funeral, and said she brought over mementoes of Tiffany for Dianne, who wanted to hang them on the wall at home. (Two weeks later, the Valiantes blocked the friend’s phone number and kicked her mom off their property when she showed up to find out what was going on, according to the transcript. The friend said she never got an explanation as to why she was suddenly iced out.)

When investigators interviewed the three teens, the trio—who were each questioned separately—seemed flummoxed by what they considered to be nothing short of an outlandish tale, according to transcripts reviewed by *The Daily Beast*. None of them had any idea what the manager was talking about, and each appeared to have an airtight alibi.

D’Amato said the manager, who did not respond to requests for comment by *The Daily Beast*, was deemed “credible” by the Atlantic County Prosecutor’s Office, but that there was not enough evidence to bring the case to a grand jury.



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Despite a number of red herrings, authorities agreed to revisit Tiffany’s death and reevaluate the initial medical examiner’s findings in 2017, according to D’Amato, who has taken *NJ Transit* to court on behalf of the Valiantes several times to pry loose investigative records—which has produced some of the case files to date, but not all of them. D’Amato has also been fighting to get the official manner of death changed from suicide to “undetermined,” so far unsuccessfully. The family also

filed lawsuits against unnamed defendants, listed anonymously as “Steve Does 1-5,” and “Shirley Does 1-5,” alleging kidnapping, assault and battery, manslaughter, murder, conspiracy, and destruction of evidence.

“While we strongly believe she was murdered, the complaint allows for the possibility that the co-conspirators did not intend to kill her, but that their violent actions still resulted in her death,” D’Amato said in 2017. “One way or another, they were responsible for her being on the railroad tracks, and they must and will be held accountable for their unconscionable conduct.”

In March 2018, New Jersey State Medical Examiner Andrew Falzon decided to leave the manner of death unchanged. Updating it to “undetermined” would allow police to reopen the investigation, according to D’Amato.

“My examination supports the investigation’s original conclusion that the manner of death be deemed a suicide,” Falzon wrote in a letter to D’Amato, which he shared with The Daily Beast. “... As the State Medical Examiner and a parent, please extend my condolences to the Valiante family for their tragic loss.”

It’s still not enough for D’Amato, who remains certain that something doesn’t add up.

“With all the attention this case has gotten, and there’s a \$20,000 cash reward. Nothing,” he argued. “And I keep saying, Where’s that person who’s gonna come up to me and say, ‘Paul—she was talking to me about suicide for months?’”

To Rosenfeld, the Valiantes deserve nothing short of a fresh look at their daughter’s case.

“If nothing else, society owes them justice, and the full pursuit of it,” he said. “And frankly, that never occurred. There are more questions today than there were seven years ago.”

In the years following her death, the Valiante family erected a small hut on a concrete patch by the train tracks where Tiffany died. Inside, it is decorated with pictures of Tiffany during happier times. A bench is set up for visitors to sit and remember her. A small radio plays nonstop, powered by a portable generator Steve installed.

In Tiffany’s honor, Steve also constructed the regulation-size beach volleyball court he long promised to build her. A sculpture he made out of two large tree trunks bears the inscription: “Tiffany we love you so very much.” Among the scattered vintage tractors he rebuilds as a hobby, a plaque Steve laid down in a backyard memorial garden reads, “Rooted in love, forever in our hearts.”



■ Courtesy of the Valiante Family

Standing in her driveway, with a large “Justice for Tiffany” decal affixed to the rear window of her SUV, Dianne Valiante chokes back tears as her daughter’s beloved golden retriever romps happily through the large yard that now serves as a shrine of sorts to a young life interrupted.

“They didn’t think the family was gonna fight,” she said. “They figured we’d give

up.

In a follow-up email from both Steve and Dianne, they wrote, “Seven years later, we haven’t given up hope or lost our faith.”