

The Rayco woodchipper at the death scene in Goomboorian.

Gympie Police and SES crews search at the Goomboorian property, near Gympie, on March 6.

Bruce Saunders (in a Facebook photo) "was a good man," his stepson Liam Rodgers tells WHO.

'CARING AND KIND'

Liam Rodgers (right) says his stepfather was a "caring and really kind" person: "Whoever is responsible for this, clearly doesn't understand the big effect it's had on everyone."

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During a second search of the scene, police collected body fragments.

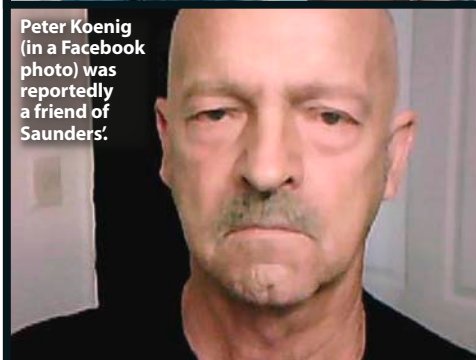
WOODCHIPPER DEATH

MISTAKE OR MURDER?

Family members break their silence as police probe if a love triangle led to the killing of a butcher



Greg Roser with Sharon Graham in a Facebook photo.



Peter Koenig (in a Facebook photo) was reportedly a friend of Saunders'.

As the former owner of a Bundaberg butcher's shop that had been in his family for three generations, Bruce Saunders was among the Queensland city's most-treasured blokes. Each day, the twice married 54-year-old crossed paths with just about everyone in his local community and, according to stepson Liam Rodgers, he was always generous with his time. "If we walked down the street together we'd have to add an extra half-hour because everyone wanted to stop and say hi to him," Liam, 19, tells WHO. "He was loved. Everyone liked Bruce, he always had a smile, he always lent a helping hand. He was so trusting."

Nearly five months after Saunders's horrific death, police are investigating if that trusting nature led to his murder. In what at first appeared to be an accident on Nov. 12 last year,

police said Saunders was killed after becoming trapped in an active industrial woodchipper on a property in Goomboorian, nearly 200km north of Brisbane, while helping two men clear a driveway for a recently widowed woman. But since then police have launched a homicide investigation, with reports citing a possible love triangle as the motive for the murder of the much-loved butcher. "It was awful when it happened, even when we thought it was an accident—it was just awful on all of us," says Liam, who is the son of Saunders's second wife, Bernadette Rodgers, with whom Saunders had remained in contact. "But now that there's a police investigation it's so hard to think about. How could someone do that?"

It's the question at the heart of the Queensland Police probe. On the day of his death, Saunders, who sold his butcher's

business in 2016 and relocated to Nambour on Queensland's Sunshine Coast, had been working on the property as "an act of goodwill," police said. The female property owner, who is not implicated in Saunders's death, was planning to sell the home and the men had been doing a clean-up for her over three weekends. At some point late on the Sunday of Nov. 12, Saunders somehow entered the machine, which has a 38cm blade, and died "within a few seconds," Gympie police acting inspector Paul Algie told *The Gympie Times* at the time. A veteran cop, Algie called it "one of the worst incident scenes I've ever seen."

Still, it wasn't considered a crime until police received a tip-off and have now "reached an informed conclusion that the death ... is

suspicious," said Det Insp Gary Pettiford in February, adding that there were persons of interest in the case. While police have not released their names, Queensland's *The Courier Mail* named three people the police have spoken

"It's been horrible. We just want a resolution"

—Liam Rodgers

to for information in their investigation: Greg Roser, 58, and Peter Koenig, 61, who were reportedly the two men with Saunders at the time of his death and who told police he had "fallen" into the vegetation shredder; and Saunders's former girlfriend Sharon Graham, 57.

WHO does not suggest the three people had anything to do with the death.

According to reports, Graham is the sole beneficiary of Saunders's will and has been romantically linked to Roser. "The family is

contesting the will," read a family statement that said the will was "out of character" with what Bruce had previously said. Graham, who now reportedly lives in Saunders's former Nambour home, could not be reached by WHO for comment. "Today is the saddest day to say my goodbyes to a beautiful man Bruce,"

she wrote in a Dec. 1 post on a funeral service website. "He treated me like gold. His love to me was bigger than anything in this world. I'm so lost without you, Bruce. Will always have you in my thoughts and heart."

As loved ones reeled over the case's shocking developments, detectives returned to the crime scene in early February for a "more thorough search of the area," said Det Insp Pettiford. They took away several items of interest from the property including fragments of human remains, clothing and parts of a mobile phone that went into the woodchipper, according to *The Courier Mail*. It has not been confirmed whether Saunders, who reportedly raised the value of his life insurance policy before his death, died in the shredder or was already dead at the time. Whatever the case, "We expect to lay charges," said Pettiford.

It would be a day that can't come soon enough for his loved ones, including his son, Blake, with his first wife, Deborah, who died of breast cancer in 2009, and his stepsons, Liam and Nolan. "Mum has been distraught; it's been horrible. We just want a resolution," Liam tells WHO. "You couldn't meet a nicer man, he would always welcome you with open arms. He didn't deserve this."

■ By Michael Crooks and Lesley Johns
Crime Stoppers: 1800 333 000