

1966 Duke Incident Witness Comes Forward

By Alex Malm

On Oct. 7, 1966, Robert Walker, who was 13-years-old at the time, was on his way to deliver the *Newport Daily News* to Doris Duke at her Newport estate, Rough Point, when he was within an earshot of what would become a long-lasting mystery in the city of Newport.

Eduardo Tirella, the tobacco heiress's close confidant and interior designer, had been found dead, and police ruled it an "unfortunate accident."

But Walker's memory of what happened is different.

The Newport Police Department's account is that Duke slid across the seat of the car while Tirella opened the gate. After the gate was opened, she drove through it.

However, police concluded that the car suddenly sped forward when Duke accidentally put her foot on the accelerator, instead of the brake, hitting Tirella and driving him 77 feet, across the street, up an eight-inch curb, across the sidewalk, through an iron fence and against a tree.

Walker recently told *Newport This Week*, "My memory of the events did not match the narrative

that was ultimately accepted by the Newport police."

He said that he heard fighting and arguing between two people, and then there was quiet. Then, he heard the roar of a motor, a crash and a man screaming.

After hearing screaming for a few seconds, he then heard the deceleration of the motor, and a skidding noise.

"It was a distinct skidding sound," Walker said.

As he continued to ride his bike towards the gate, Walker then heard a man screaming, and the roar of a motor accelerating once again. At that point, the man was screaming in horror, Walker said.

Since that night, he has told his story of what happened many times in informal settings, but never made a formal statement to police. That changed this year.

Earlier this year, Newport native and longtime investigative journalist Peter Lance wrote a book, "Homicide at Rough Point." When Walker heard about the book, he debated whether to read it. He hadn't read any of the books written about the tragic incident.

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"It took a long time to get to the point where I read the book," he said, saying he had various reasons for not reading books about it before.

In the book, Lance concluded that Duke had "deliberately plowed into Tirella."

"I based my findings on long-missing documents, including crime-scene photos, official police reports, autopsy summaries, and new evidence from witnesses who quickly arrived on the scene, including Officer Edward Angel, a Newport patrolman," Lance wrote. "He explained how the case had actually been solved within hours by Sgt. Fred Newton, the department's top accident investigator."

What sparked Walker's attention was the conclusion made by Newton, which is exactly what he believes happened.

"When I read that, it was spot on to my memory, a memory that I never released, a memory that I never let go of even though the narrative didn't meet what the police department wrote," Walker said.

He knew from the moment he put down the book that he needed to come forward, but wondered how. He was finally convinced to tell his story by former Newport Mayor Harry Winthrop, who told him that it needed to be told. Winthrop, who was 16 when the incident took place, said that it was "an open secret way back then" that the police narrative didn't match up to what really happened. He suggested Walker tell Lance his story.

"It was good to get another fact out there," Winthrop said.

When Walker learned that Lance would be having a book-signing



Bob Walker

at the Brenton Hotel earlier this summer, he decided to talk to him about what he heard and saw over 50 years ago. Lance found his story compelling.

"He was unbelievably convincing, straightforward and never wavered once," he said.

But before talking to Lance, Walker walked into the Newport Police Department to tell police what he had witnessed that night.

Police found Walker to be credible. In a memo obtained by *NTW*, Det. Jacque Wuest, a 22-year veteran on the force, wrote on Aug. 2, "I did tell Mr. Walker something to the effect that I am now assigned to follow up with this case and it's not going to be ignored. This case is now open for further review due to new facts coming forward."

"It is too early to make the determination to alter the conclusion that Eduardo Tirella's death was the result of an unfortunate accident," the memo said. "Regarding this, myself and the Newport Police Department would like to look

further into this [due to the new information we've been given], and rectify any possible misinformation concluded in the past, if any."

Lt. Corey Huck, a member of Newport's criminal investigation unit, said the case has been assigned for a follow-up after the agency was approached by Walker.

"Each case is looked at in its entirety to see if there is any new evidence presented," he said. "As technology changes and advancement in forensics increase, it is always advantageous to see a particular case from a fresh perspective. Det. Wuest has been tasked with reviewing cold cases as time permits in an effort to see if any new evidence is present that would warrant the case to be reopened."

Although Walker is now 68, he said he isn't telling the story as an older adult.

"You're talking to a 68-year-old man, but when we're talking about this, you're really talking to a 13-year-old child," he said.

Following that night in 1966, Walker's father prohibited him from talking about what happened. For a few years, Walker accepted that, until one day he confronted him about it.

"He said to me, 'I was more concerned about you ending up dead. I never thought you'd make it to the witness stand alive,'" Walker said.

To this day, he thinks his father was wrong in not letting him come forward.

When asked if he thinks that justice will be done regarding Tirella's death, he said, "I don't know."

He is hopeful, however.