

FORM 37

Rule 60(1)

FINDING INTO DEATH WITH INQUEST

Section 67 of the Coroners Act 2008

Court reference: 3527/03

Inquest into the Death of TINA NHONTHACHITH

Delivered On: 11th July, 2011

Delivered At: Coroners Court of Victoria,
Level 11, 222 Exhibition Street, Melbourne 3000

Hearing Dates: 11th July, 2011

Findings of: JUDGE JENNIFER COATE

Place of death: 420 Wildwood Road South, Sunbury, Victoria 3429

Police Coronial
Support Unit (PCSU): Leading Senior Constable King Taylor

FORM 37

Rule 60(1)

FINDING INTO DEATH WITH INQUEST

Section 67 of the Coroners Act 2008

Court reference: 3527/03

In the Coroners Court of Victoria at Melbourne

I, JUDGE JENNIFER COATE, State Coroner

having investigated the death of:

Details of deceased:

Surname: NHONTHACHITH
First name: TINA
Address: 14 Catherine Street, Coburg, Victoria 3058

AND having held an inquest in relation to this death on 11th July, 2011 at Melbourne

find that the identity of the deceased was TINA NHONTHACHITH and death occurred between 19th October, 2003 and 20th October, 2003

at 420 Wildwood Road South, Sunbury, Victoria 3429

from

1a. GUNSHOT INJURIES TO HEAD

in the following circumstances:

1. Istvan ("Steve") Gulyas was born on November 16, 1953 in Hungary. He does not appear to have had any surviving family in Australia.
2. DOUNGCHITH ("Tina") NHONTHACHITH was born on January 2, 1956 in Thailand. Her parents were living in Coburg at the time of her death. She had three children aged 27, 25 and 23.¹
3. Steve and Tina were in a de facto relationship at the time of their deaths and had been together for more than 10 years.
4. Whilst the couple lived together in Coburg North, they also owned a farm called Willowbank Estate in Wildwood Road, Wildwood.

¹ A family friend attended at the Inquest and confirmed that Istvan and DOUNGCHITH were known as "Steve" and "Tina" to their friends and family.

5. At the time of her death Tina operated a business known as Partner Search Australia and had an interest in a leisure centre.

6. At the time of his death, Steve operated a business known as The Truck Man. The business involved the purchase and repair of light commercial vehicles for resale. He also had an interest in a car yard in Fawkner as well as an interest in Partner Search Australia.

7. At the time of their deaths Steve and Tina were negotiating to purchase a property in Sydney Road Campbellfield.

8. During their last weekend, they were at their farm in Wildwood. The evidence is that a number of people came and went from the property that weekend.

9. Evidence of the last contact with either Steve or Tina came from an employee and close friend of Tina's who had a telephone conversation with Tina at about 8.30pm to 9.00pm on that Sunday evening. At that time, Tina complained that one of the men who remains a suspect in this investigation was at the farm and she was querying why he was back again and what he wanted.

10. On the morning of Monday, October 20, 2003 staff at the business premises of Tina, together with her family, became concerned when she did not arrive at work on that Monday morning as was her routine. Similarly, enquiries as to Steve's whereabouts were unable to locate him.

11. Consequently, the employee and friend of Tina's who had been the last person known to have spoken to her, travelled out to the farm at Wildwood, arriving there at about 12.20pm to discover the bodies of Steve and Tina in their lounge room. Police and ambulance were called to attend.

12. A post-mortem examination conducted by forensic pathologist Dr Matthew Lynch found that Steve had been shot three times in the head. Tina had also been shot three times in the head.

The Homicide/Police Investigation²

13. A homicide squad investigation into these deaths has investigated in excess of 80 information reports and spoken to numerous witnesses and associates of Steve and Tina. Investigations have involved an examination of the premises at Wildwood Road, the home of

² The entire Brief of Evidence from the police investigations to date was tendered into evidence and marked as Exhibit 1.

Steve and Tina in Coburg North and the business premises operated by both Steve and Tina. Forensic tests and scientific analysis searches and results are contained in the brief.

14. The homicide investigator has reported to the coroner that Steve was the subject of a number of investigations undertaken by the Australian Federal police, the Australian Tax Office and Victoria Police Force.

15. There were suspicions that Steve was involved in illegal immigration schemes involving bringing females into Australia from Southeast Asian countries to work as prostitutes, and the illegal importation of motor cars for sale in Australia through his motor trade business. It is alleged by police that the business of Partner Search Australia may have included prostitution and "*ripping off*" clients of that business through "*fake introductions*".

16. The homicide investigators have also reported to the coroner their belief that Steve may have had associations with a number of high profile criminals in Australia and that he had unexplained overt signs of wealth, as well as having recorded attendances at licensed casinos in Australia where it is alleged that he had turned over hundreds of thousands of dollars.

17. Homicide investigators have also reported that they have information which may implicate Tina along with Steve in the running of the immigration and prostitution businesses under the cover of Partner Search Australia. Neither Steve nor Tina had any criminal history.

18. In May 2006, the investigation into the deaths was transferred to the Purana Task Force due to possible organised crime links. In 2007 the investigation was returned to the Homicide Squad. It remains an open and continuing investigation. In April 2010, a reward was offered for information that may lead to the apprehension of the person or persons responsible for these killings. The evidence from the current investigator is that, whilst there is still work being done on analysing the information that has come in, to date no new information of value has emerged.

19. Homicide squad investigators hypothesised that there were a number of factors which suggest that Steve and Tina were murdered by a person or persons known to them.

20. These factors include that the farm where they died was in a relatively isolated area and there were no signs of forced entry. This is despite Steve having become increasingly more security conscious over the last few months of his life and having retrieved keys to the farm from various friends and associates and installed a high security fence and electronic gate, although it had not apparently been operative. Further, there was no evidence that the killings were theft related.

21. A significant proportion of the investigation concentrated on two persons of interest, each apparently with motives relating to financial disputes over business dealings and one of those persons being desperate for quick cash due to bad business dealings and gambling huge quantities of cash from sources unknown. One of those suspects left Australia in April 2006 and his current whereabouts are unknown.

22. To date the murders of Steve Gulyas and Tina Nhonthacith remain unsolved criminal investigations.

Conclusion

I find that Steve Gulyas and Tina Nhonthacith died as a result of gunshot wounds to their heads somewhere between 9.00pm on October 19, 2003 and 12.20pm on October 20, 2003. Their deaths were as the result of gunshot injuries inflicted to their heads by person or persons currently unknown. The criminal investigation remains open.

Signature:



Judge Jennifer Coate
State Coroner
Date: 11th July, 2011

