110 - The Unsolved Murders of Sydney Land and Nehemiah Kauffman

Shaun On October twenty seven, twenty sixteen, a friend and neighbor of Sidney Land and Nehemiah Kaufman walked over to their apartment to check on the couple after Sidney's cousin said she couldn't get in touch with her. He found their door unlocked and a horrific scene inside.

John Nearly ten years later, Sidney and Neo's murders remain unsolved despite its seeming like the police have a clear suspect. The more you look at this case, and the more you learn about the circumstances, the more you realize that something here seems to just not add up.

Shaun Hi, and welcome to Sins and Survivors, a Las Vegas true crime podcast where we focus on cases that deal with domestic violence as well as missing persons and unsolved cases. I'm your host, Shaun.

John And I'm your co-host, John.

Shaun This week we're talking about a case from October of twenty sixteen. And as we kind of mentioned in the intro, it's one where at first it seems like it might be a straightforward unsolved murder. Possibly a home invasion. But as we researched more and more into the case, we realized there are a shocking number of people involved and several different investigations that happened by the police, the FBI, a local judge, and the parents of the victims. And it's still unsolved nearly ten years later. Do you want to get us started with what happened on October twenty seven, twenty sixteen?

John Absolutely. On that day, Sidney Lan's cousin's boyfriend, who happened to also be their neighbor, came by their apartment to check on twenty one year old Sidney Land and her boyfriend, Nehemiah Neo Kaufman. He had just turned twenty years old. The couple was worried about them after not seeing them as normal, and went over to check on them in their apartment. What he discovered there was that the couple had been brutally murdered and he called nine hundred eleven. Both of the victims had been shot in the head in their two bedroom apartment, where they had been living together for about two months. There were no signs of forced entry into the apartment, so police investigators assume the couple knew their murderer, and it must have been someone they trusted enough to let in. It's almost unbelievable how many different aspects there are to this case. But as we always do, let's start by talking about the victims.

Shaun This case has been cold for almost a decade, and in that time a lot of rumors, speculation, and conspiracy theories have cropped up to fill the vacuum, and they continue to affect how this case is treated. There have been many articles written about the family, and pages and pages of interviews given to members of the press, so much information available that at times it was difficult to determine what was relevant and what was just fan fiction. We wanted to cover this story since we started the show, but we really needed the time to weed through all of that and to have the opportunity to speak with the victims families before we went forward. Since there are so many painful rumors around this case, we want to start off as we always do, by keeping the focus where it belongs the victims and their families. Sydney was only twenty one years old when she was killed. She was born on March twenty fourth, nineteen ninety five, the oldest child of her dad Steve and her mom, Connie. She had three siblings, two brothers, Preston and Gavin, and a sister named Kendall. Her dad worked as a fire captain for Clark County. Sydney was born right here in Las Vegas and lived here her whole life. She was very loving with her entire family, especially her younger siblings. She graduated from Centennial High and worked at the Palm Steakhouse in Caesars Palace. According to her mom, Sydney loved kids and one day wanted to work with children in some kind of medical career. When talking about Sydney in an interview, her mom told a story about her that really shows the kind of person she was and how much she loved her brothers and sister. About a year before she died, Sydney wrote loving personal messages to each of them on post-it notes, and she placed them around the house for them to find. She wanted them to know how special they were in her eyes. They said things like, you are beautiful, you are courageous, you are loving, and so many more. Her mom said that they left up those post-it notes for years in order to remember Cydney. According to her family and friends, by all accounts, Cydney was compassionate, fun loving, and easygoing. She was smart and had a calm and gentle demeanor. Her mom said that she could be reserved until you got to know her.

John Nehemiah Kaufman, also known as neo, was Sydney Land's boyfriend. He was born October eight, nineteen ninety six, making him just twenty years old. His mom's name is Alethea and he has two brothers and a sister. He was a very successful athlete in high school at Arbor View High. He played junior varsity and varsity football and varsity basketball in his freshman year. He later transferred to Centennial High and graduated from there. His friend Jordan said that he was a gifted athlete and he had huge potential in basketball, and he was very hard working and that people gravitated toward him and that he made everyone laugh. Jordan ended up starting a clothing company with his dad, and eventually created a tribute shirt to help pay for the cost of Nehemiah's funeral. Nehemiah and Sidney started dating and moved in together shortly after they met in August of twenty sixteen. They'd only been together since approximately August, so it was a really new relationship and they moved in together pretty quickly. They lived in the Union Apartments at four thousand four hundred fifty South Hualapai Way, near Hualapai and Peace. We do want to mention that we have read rumors about both Sidney and Neo, about them being involved in various illicit or illegal activities, but we could not find any solid evidence or court records to support those allegations. There have been reports from Sydney's mom and others that neo was controlling in his relationship with Sydney, although whether or not those stories are true. Neo is also a victim here in this case. Some of the people they hung out with, though, did have criminal records or were suspected of certain crimes or questionable activities. But like I said, we found no criminal records for Sidney or Nehemiah. There were also no court records that we could find of any sort that indicated a history of domestic violence, or records of documented problems with them.

Shaun So turning back to the day of the murder, when the police first arrived at the scene, they thought they were walking into a murder suicide. And they thought that because the the neighbor, the Sidney's cousin's boyfriend who called into nine hundred eleven, he said that Sidney had been shot, but that also the shooter was down. So they knew there was a second person that was shot and killed in the apartment, and it led them to think that one had been the murderer and it had been a murder suicide. But the autopsy would reveal that both Sidney and Nehemiah were shot at close range. Neo had been shot in the back of the head and Sidney had been shot in her face. Sidney was found in the bedroom, and Nehemiah was in the living room of the apartment, and it showed that they had been killed the day before. So it would have been the night of October twenty sixth. But there weren't any reports of gunshots coming from nearby apartments that night, and there were no nine hundred eleven calls to the police. The police reviewed Sidney and Neo's phone records, and based on what the two were wearing and what they observed was the state of the apartment, they were able to start to piece together what their plan had been for that night. The police believe the two of them were on their way out to spend the night on the strip. They found messages on Sidney's phone that she had booked a hotel room, and she was dressed up, ready to go to a nightclub and in the process of packing an overnight bag. Their investigation revealed that the two were planning to meet up with friends that night at Drai's nightclub, and later at the Link Hotel. But they never checked in. There's been some questions about this plan that doesn't quite add up, because neo had just turned twenty years old, and technically, he'd be too young to get into Dres because the drinking age in the USA is twenty one. But it's believed that is what Sydney's plan was. And she did have that hotel confirmation on her phone. As John said, there was no sign of forced entry. The door of the apartment was open, unlocked, and the police and as well as family and friends believed that whoever killed them had to have been someone they trusted, someone they would have welcomed in to their apartment. John and I have some different ideas about that, and we'll be getting into that in the Swing Shift episode this week. Homicide detective Jared Grimmett later told Crime Watch Daily that there were multiple items in the apartment that had DNA on them, including several cigarette butts in the ashtrays and multiple drink cups left out around the apartment. The detective mentioned that this didn't lead to any suspects, because the couple had a lot of friends over all the time, so there could be DNA from visitors everywhere, and they couldn't know which DNA, if any, belonged to the murder or murderers. He said that because Sydney and Nehemiah had multiple people come over and hang out frequently, it was hard to sort out DNA. That's not Sydney's or Neo's. If it was actually relevant or could lead to a suspect. Also, the neighbour slash friend who called nine hundred eleven after he found them, posted about their deaths on social media, resulting in friends and family members beating the police to the apartment. It was known to the police that the caller had been in the apartment, but they don't know for sure who else if anyone entered the apartment before they got there. Metro also pulled surveillance footage from the apartment complex, the entry gate, other areas of the complex. Detective Grimmett said they reviewed hours and hours of footage looking for clues, but they found nothing that led them to a suspect. The police had told the press that the evidence led them to believe it was two male suspects, but they didn't offer any specifics on how they had drawn that conclusion. We're going to

pause here for a quick break, and we'll be back with the details of Steve and Connie's investigation into the murders.

John As far as people of interest go, police discovered that a friend of the couple's, a high school friend of Sidney's named Frankie Zappia, was the last person to see the two of them alive on October twenty fifth, which caused her to receive a lot of scrutiny in the media. According to police, she was always straightforward with them, and she's never been considered a suspect or has never been arrested in connection with Sidney and Nia's murders. Frankie posted this on her Facebook in twenty seventeen. It reads. I would like to post this because I feel people need to know Sidney Land was my best friend. We did everything together. She knew me better than I knew myself. She was everything to me. I had never met someone like her in my whole life. She was always just there for me. I was in jail for four months, and she's the only person I wanted to talk to every day, and I did. She never missed a phone call. She was always there, no matter if I was being dramatic or not. And then she passed away and everyone felt the need to blame me for it. I'm a twenty two year old girl, just like she is. I'm a human and I have feelings. Sidney was my everything. She was my bestest friend in the world. I would never put her in danger. It's been a year since she left. And to this day, people have my name in their mouth just so they have someone to blame. Sidney knows it wasn't me. Sidney knows I was her biggest fan. Sidney knows how much love I have for her, and I cry every day over her. And the fact that people keep saying I had something to do with her passing breaks my heart. We were hesitant to get into this with this case, because it may never be clear how relevant this is to bringing Sidney and Nehemiah's murder or murderers to justice, but Frankie does have a record of soliciting prostitution. As a reminder, in Clark County, where Las Vegas is located, and in Washoe County, where Reno is, prostitution is illegal. In other parts of the state, prostitution is legal when it occurs in licensed establishments like brothels. There has been speculation in this case that perhaps sex work and sex trafficking were motives in the murder of Sidney and Nehemiah, based on who they were and who they were hanging out with, including one of the most commonly talked about potential suspects, Shane Valentine. Initially, Shane was considered a person of interest, and then later he was cleared by Metro shortly after the crime. However, in twenty eighteen, Metro again said they considered him to be a person of interest. Shane has been suspected and rumored to be operating as a pimp or a sex trafficker, and has been accused of luring teen girls into sex work. Shane's in his thirties now, but in twenty sixteen he was twenty one or twenty two, Not much older than Sydney and Neo, and he was known to hang out with them. He has an extensive criminal history, including burglary, home invasion and assault with a deadly weapon. One of the key reasons of why police and others suspected chain of potentially being involved in the murder is because of an incident where he shot at Alethea Kauffman's house. That's Neo's mother. This happened about two weeks before Neo and Sydney were killed. When investigating that, the grand jury had text message exchanges between Valentine and Kauffman. From that day, October eighth, Valentine was threatening to kill Kauffman, his family and Sydney land, and he was accusing neo of being a snitch. He drove to Neo's mother's house and drove his car into the garage, leaving a piece of it behind in the broken garage door, threw a rock through the window and shot his gun into the house. After that, he changed his cell phone number, deleted all the threatening text messages. The police recovered them, of course. And right after the murders, he fled to California, where he started posting on Instagram, having a great time at Universal Studios Halloween Horror Nights. Somehow, despite this evidence, Valentine was initially cleared by Metro Police immediately after the crime, and it's not clear why. It wasn't until after Sidney and Neo were killed that a D.A. sought an indictment for Valentine for shooting into Neo's mother's home, which was occupied at the time by three kids and two adults. Not for the murder of Sidney Land and Neo. Also, it's important to note here that Metro did not recover the bullets from inside Neo's mom's house on October eighth when the shooting happened, so they couldn't then later compare them to the bullets that murdered Sidney and Neo. It wasn't until three days after the murders, which was three weeks after Shane shot into the house, that those bullets were finally recovered. There are no reports of those bullets matched match the bullets from the murder, but it does raise significant chain of custody issues for law enforcement if there had been a match and an arrest. Shane pleaded guilty to the charge of discharging a weapon at an occupied structure, and was sentenced to twenty four to seventy two months for that shooting incident and served about twenty four months for that. Shane is currently incarcerated, serving time for a felony stalking charge that he pleaded guilty to. He also recently pleaded guilty to animal abuse charges and is scheduled to be sentenced for that crime on February sixth, twenty twenty six.

Shaun Frankie's sister Ariane told reporter Doug Papa at the Baltimore Post Examiner this about Shane and his possible involvement with Sydney and Neo's murders. Shane Valentine. Everywhere you go, anyone you

ask anyone talking about this story at Shane Valentine, Shane Valentine, Shane Valentine, he's a fucking horrible person. But in my heart and in my gut, I did not believe that Shane either. A was the only person involved in that series of events or B was the person that actually killed them. The reason why everyone knows for one hundred percent Frankie has even said this to homicide. After Shane Valentine pulled the gun on them at the beginning of October, she was talking about the shooting at Nia's mom's house. Sidney, Frankie and Neo were terrified of Shane. They would never, ever open the door for Shane Valentine to come inside. And as we know, there were no signs of forced entry. They didn't break in. Whoever killed them, they were familiar with and trusted them because they allowed them into their home.

John Sidney's parents, Connie and Steve, pleaded for help from the public continually for several years. They put up several billboards around the city at a personal cost of up to four thousand five hundred dollars a month. Steve told the Baltimore Examiner that he went to the crime scene three days afterwards and found additional evidence, including a paycheck stub with another man's name on it and a jar that contained love letters from Neo's former girlfriend. He collected them, put them in an envelope, and gave them to Metro detective Jared Grimmett, who he met at a cemetery. Police never interviewed Connie, and Steve never came by and searched their home. She'd only left two months earlier, so Sydney's room was still full of her belongings, and it seems like it would have been a good thing to search. There are rumours and accusations about sex trafficking and prostitution that lead this story down a rabbit hole. One theory about what the motive for murder might have been is that Frankie was working in sex work and allegedly had a trafficker named Domo Thompson, who had a rivalry with Shane and Neo about which women or girls were working for them. The implication there is that Nehemiah was getting into sex trafficking or trying to get into sex trafficking, which is to be clear, all alleged and unconfirmed. Based on the text messages from the fight Neo and Shane had on October eighth, there was some concern about one of them being a snitch to the police about these crimes. It's been reported that Shane Valentine was accused of luring a teen named Morgan, who was the daughter of a Las Vegas judge, into prostitution, and back in twenty sixteen twenty seventeen, they were a group of traffickers who were targeting the children of law enforcement officers as a way to have leverage over the system. The theory there was that an officer would be hesitant to arrest a trafficker if it meant implicating their own daughter in sex work.

Shaun This leads to another caveat to the case, which some people believe really complicated things for ever seeing this case get resolved. According to Judge Melanie Tobiason, her teenage daughter was approached by people connected to a business operating as a front for sex work. The store appeared to be a hip hop clothing store in the Chinatown part of Las Vegas, but it had back rooms where there was pole dancing and sex work happening. The individuals who ran the store, according to Judge Tobiason, were actively recruiting teens into sex work, specifically the daughters of police officers and judges. She began her own investigation into what was going on at the store, collecting license plate numbers and even tailing some of the guys back to their homes. One of these people she accused of being a trafficker was Shane Valentine. Tobiason has stated in interviews that her daughter was planning to work in that clothing shop in Chinatown, and she warned her about the men who frequented that place. Just to be clear, this is a different teen girl than the one Shane Valentine was actually accused of bringing into sex work. It was that was a different daughter of a different judge. But according to Tobiason, allegedly Shane approached her daughter and tried to convince her to become a sex worker. Tobiason believed and stated that many folks in Neo and Sydney Circle of friends were involved in trafficking, and she suspected that neo was working to become a trafficker and that he or Valentine had recruited Sydney into sex work. She said that she reported the clothing store club to the officers working vice in Las Vegas Metro, but they never took action. As a result, she tried to handle it on her own. She called Shane Valentine's lawyer and threatened that if he called her daughter again, she will, quote, take care of it herself. She also stated that she went to Shane's house and kicked in his door. Tobiason would claim that a detective outed her and her daughter as accusing the traffickers while they were interviewing Frankie, Zappa's sister. Tobiason said as a result, she feared for her life and the life of her daughter. And the day after that happened, Sydney and Neo were murdered. So Judge Tobiason believed that she and her daughter were the intended targets of this murder, and that Shane was the killer. She reached out to Connie Land via Facebook message and began sharing the information she had gathered. In turn, she asked Connie to provide text messages from the officers working Sidney and Neo's case, including Detective Grimmett, which included some confidential information. She urged Connie to use burner phones to protect their communications. This was a very tough part of the story to cover because these are all Tobias's accusations. And while it's true that a Las Vegas judge and a few police officers did have daughters recruited into sex work,

as we said, and that Frankie, who is actually the stepdaughter of a cop, was a sex worker. We really don't know if or how this relates to the murders at all. Tobias in more or less accused Metro Vice, the Da and others of a cover up or of never really investigating Valentine or that Chinatown club. And she said she had to take matters into her own hands to protect her daughter during that time frame. Twenty sixteen twenty seventeen. There was an FBI investigation into Las Vegas Metro, a large scandal that involved officers taking bribes, working with traffickers and even having sex with sex workers. We don't want to get too far into this. Perhaps we will cover the FBI investigation in a later episode. But as we said at the start of the episode, we want to try and keep the focus on Sydney and Neo. Judge Tobias's actions were reported to the Nevada Commission on Judicial Discipline. A formal complaint of judicial misconduct was brought against her, alleging that she had used her position as a judge for personal gain. She pressured the cops to take action against Valentine, and then she herself had approached and threatened him. It stated in the documents related to the complaint that Connie Land was the one who first alerted the commission about the judge's behavior. Tobiasen decided to resign rather than have an ethics investigation continue and go through a hearing. She told the press that then Sheriff Joe Lombardo, now governor, and Clark County D.A. Steve Wolfson had negotiated her resignation with her, but those two declined to comment on the matter. Her resignation was effective May seven, twenty twenty one, and she agreed to never pursue a judgeship again. Connie considered this an admission of guilt. That was her easy way of getting away from having to answer some very difficult questions that would have been asked in a hearing, Connie said. Both Connie and Tobiassen made statements to the press that their friendship was over. Sadly, Melanie Tobiassen died by suicide in January of twenty twenty three, survived by her two kids, her husband and her parents. She was fifty five years old. Doug Papa, who has done a lot of investigation and conducted and published numerous interviews in this case, has written that Judge Tobiassen said that Connie said that Detective Grimmett told her that Frankie Shane and Domo Thompson were involved in the murder of Sidney and Nehemiah. I agree with Doug here that if that were true, why has nobody been charged? Doug wrote that almost three years after the murders, and I'm asking that same question ten years later.

John We're going to get into this in the swing shift. But we feel that this case has a lot of theories, but not a lot of facts. We're going to pause here for a quick break. Reporter Doug Papa believes that Metro did the wrong thing by showing their hand on Crime Watch Daily, by sharing their theories of the case and the DNA evidence that there were so many sources of DNA in the apartment. So it would be hard to pinpoint a single person. That's more of an argument a defense attorney would make, and it's coming straight out of the mouth of the lead detective here. There are also issues here, of course, with Judge Tobias's involvement, which may have tainted any indictment. The friend who first found Sidney and Neo called nine hundred eleven. He posted about what happened on social media before the police even got to the apartment. Police said that friends and family members had gotten to the apartment before they did, which makes them call into question whether others had entered the apartment also. All of these things have made this harder to solve and harder to get a conviction. Unfortunately and sadly, Connie also died by suicide in August of twenty twenty two at age fifty three. She had fiercely sought justice for Sidney and Neo, but passed away before any conviction could be made in the case. Sidney was laid to rest in the cemetery at Palm Memorial Park. The details of Nehemiah's funeral and resting place are unknown, but we know that he was dearly loved by his mom and his brothers and sister.

Shaun His friend Jordan Ramirez, who thought of Nehemiah as a brother, said he had the ability to make you smile and laugh even if you were in the worst mood, you couldn't be around him and not smile. Neo always had your back on and off the basketball court, said Justin Burks, a former teammate. He was a great friend and another friend of Ne-yo's, Nick Quintana, who played baseball for the University of Arizona. He shared that he would write Ne-yo's initials in the dirt at every game as a form of tribute, and he said that he plays for him. Sydney's dad, Steve, is still hopeful that this case will be solved. John and I had the opportunity to speak with him briefly before we started working on this story, and he said that he hopes that someone will finally come forward with information. He's said before to the press that he's sure there's someone out there that knows what happened, and he doesn't know why they're not coming forward. But he said, we just need to keep this alive. We need to find justice for Sydney and for Ne-Yo, and we need to find and hold those people responsible.

John If you have any information related to the murder of Sydney Land and Nehemiah Kaufman, contact the homicide section at Metro Police at seven hundred and two eight two eight three five two one. Or of course,

you can remain anonymous by contacting Crime Stoppers at seven oh two three eight five five five five five or by visiting Crimestoppers of TV.com. We are going to continue our conversation in this week's Swing Shift episode. You can subscribe at podcasts, subscribe and get access to our bonus episode every week, where we go into detail about what went into making the episode and discuss our theories and outstanding questions. If you subscribe, you also get ad free episodes, merch and help support the costs that go into making the podcast, which is always appreciated. As always, thank you for listening. And remember, what happens here happens everywhere.