



Natasha Vargas-Cooper

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The hugely popular 12-part podcast “Serial” investigated the 1999 murder of teenager Hae Min Lee and the murder conviction the following year of her ex-boyfriend, Adnan Syed, who is currently serving a life sentence. The key witness in the case was Jay Wilds, a former classmate of Lee and Syed at Baltimore’s Woodlawn High School.

During the trial, Jay testified that he helped Syed dispose of Lee’s body. For his role in the crime, he was given two years probation for being an accessory to murder after the fact. Jay declined to be interviewed by “Serial” host and producer, Sarah Koenig. He spoke publicly about the case for first time in an [exclusive interview](#) with *The Intercept*. The first part was published yesterday. Today we’re publishing the second part of this interview.

The [third and final part](#) will be published tomorrow. The following has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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**Did you make the anonymous call to the police to tip them off about Adnan?**

No.

### **Do you know who did?**

I don't know for sure. But there was a grand jury hearing on this case, and I have an idea who might have based on that hearing. I know that during the grand jury there was a spiritual leader of the mosque—I don't know how to pronounce his name. Something with a B [*ed. note: We'll refer to this person as Mr. B.*]. He spoke with the police during the investigation. But when he was called to the grand jury, he pled the fifth [*amendment, against self incrimination through testimony*]. So that whatever he knew about Adnan, he knew that if he said it in court he could also be in trouble. [*Ed. note: The Intercept confirmed with two sources that 'Mr. B.' did plead the fifth during the grand jury testimony.*] I believe that Mr. B. had some information that we don't have, possibly because he was a religious leader at the mosque, and Adnan talked to him like a priest taking a confession [*Ed. note: this is Jay's speculation, we were not able to confirm if Mr. B served in a leadership or spiritual advisor role at the mosque*]. I believe it's possible that he's the person who made the anonymous call to the police saying to check into Adnan.

### **Why do you think that he did that?**

Maybe Adnan lost his shit and confided in the one person he could trust not to tell anyone.

### **Do you think of testifying as brave or cowardly?**

It's necessary for me to sleep at night. I don't know. It keeps going around and around and around, like I'm worried God is going to strike me down. I can't have this in the back of my mind that I'm going to get a lightning bolt or something. I'm going to do whatever it takes to get this down, to make sure at night I can sleep.

### **Did you feel a sense of shame after you told the police about your involvement with burying Hae?**

I felt quite ashamed and embarrassed. My girlfriend's mother learned about it, and spit in my face and called me a murderer. She cussed me out, said how could I let that girl lay out there in the snow for all that time when I knew where she was? I felt ashamed. Damn near got suicidal at one point. I had a lot of feelings, like, I should have done something better or listened better.

**Did testifying in Adnan's trial make you feel better or worse?**

The lawyers and police representing the state made me feel like I did well. Or like I did the right thing. And for a time that made me feel better, but it never felt good—it did feel necessary. What I didn't know was that all this time later it would affect my family.

**What do you think about the people who have listened to "Serial" and have said in public forums like Reddit or Twitter that you should be punished for participating in helping dispose of Hae's body?**

Not all your humanity is gone when you do something wrong. Criminals are criminals, and they do fucked up shit, but that doesn't mean they don't still have some sort of a moral compass. And once you engage in a criminal act –

**Like you did?**

Yeah, like I did. You don't lose your link to humanity.

**What would you have done differently?**

I don't know if me not moving in Adnan's circle of people would have saved her life. Like, I don't know if I sold more weed or less weed that Hae would still be alive. You know what I'm saying? I don't know if there's anything else I could have done. Maybe I could have listened better, and taken what I heard more seriously.

**In 'Serial,' Sarah Koenig references a moment in the trial where Adnan calls you 'pathetic' before you go up to the witness stand. Do you remember that moment?**

I think he mouthed something to me. But no, no, no. But nothing like that would be able to get the better of me.

**When did you first become aware that Sarah Koenig was working on something about this trial?**

Earlier this summer I got some phone calls from people back in Baltimore that a reporter was asking about me and the case. I also got a message around that time from a friend on Facebook saying that some lady is asking about Adnan. But it didn't stick with me, and I didn't look into it much further. But earlier this year I had to go back East and was back in Baltimore, because my grandmother died. When I was there I

heard from a few people that [Koenig] was harassing people at their jobs, making countless phone calls [to people] who kept saying they did not want to speak with her. I was talking to one of my friends, who had just recently gotten over a drug addiction, who she tried to talk to about this case. He told me it was really painful for him, and he didn't want to go back and revisit this crap.

### **Tell me about the day she arrived at your house.**

There was a knock on my door in late August or early September, I can't remember exactly when, but I remember I was changing my clothes. As soon as I opened that door I knew that it was her, the woman who was harassing my friends in Baltimore.

### **Was she alone?**

No, it was her and another woman ['Serial' producer Julie Snyder]. She said that she was a reporter from New York, and that she worked on a show called 'This American Life.' And I knew there was only one thing that anyone would want to come and talk to me about as a reporter, you know?

### **She said you invited her in.**

I did, and I asked her straightforward, 'Where did the story come from? How did you come about it?' And she said she was a reporter at the time of the trial and knew about Cristina Gutierrez [Adnan's lawyer who was disbarred in 2001]. So I continued questioning her, and it was clear there were key people who weren't talking to her. Like Hae's family, the detectives, and other people who ducked and dodged lawyers and cops so they wouldn't come to testify. I told Sarah that the only one who deserves any type of closure from any of this is her mom. If [Hae's mother] had some unanswered questions, and she needs to know what happened here, then I'd say, 'I'll walk [you] through all that.' That's the only person I'm going through all that shit for.

### **Did she ever say she was doing a podcast?**

No, she said she was doing a radio show. They pitched it to me as an NPR radio show. I could also tell that she was uncomfortable talking to me. Her lips were quivering, and I just felt like she was lying. They were in the love seat over there [points across the room], and their body language was just making me really uncomfortable. It was confusing because they also pitched this story to me as a documentary, and they

wanted to put me on video. By this time my wife was getting real upset. Our kids were crying. My wife knows about my involvement in this case. Because I eventually cooperated with the police and testified, I know that there are people back home who would consider me a snitch and would hurt me. So, for the most part, we've been really protective about our privacy. My wife would regularly Google my name to make sure none of my personal information would show up. So when these two women show up at my door it sent my wife into a panic. And when we asked them how they got our address, Koenig said something like, 'Sadly, it wasn't hard to find.'

### **Was the name 'Serial' ever used?**

No. Not to my recollection. She kept saying 'This American Life,' 'the radio,' and 'a documentary.' There was no talk of 'Serial' or a podcast. Then I asked her outright, 'Are you an advocate for Adnan?' She said 'No,' that she wasn't his advocate. But she said that she had talked to Adnan, and she wanted to get more information about the case. She said there was new evidence, and I said there's no new evidence that's gonna change what I saw: I saw Hae dead in the trunk of the car. If Adnan wants to take the stand now and explain that away, let him. But there's no evidence that's gonna change what I saw. I don't know how she was murdered, I don't know exactly how she got put in that trunk, and I told the cops that. If Koenig wants to get into how that all happened she can go there. But that doesn't change what I saw. And that's the only time I commented directly on the case to her.

### **Did you ask her to leave at any point?**

Yes. My wife took all our kids upstairs. And I think she started Googling Sarah and the other producer. I was downstairs and asked them if they had any business cards that said who they were. They said didn't have any on them, and that she had to go out to her car and get one. When she came back with a card that didn't even have her name on it, she apologized for bombarding us, and said that she felt bad that it made us uncomfortable, and that she was really sorry. I asked them to leave at this point because they were upsetting my wife and kids. But she said she was going to be around for another two days, and hopefully they could schedule another time to talk with me, and it wouldn't be in our house. She kept saying, 'It's going to be in your interest to talk to me,' and that just started to feel like a threat, like if I didn't talk to her it was going to be bad news for me.

## When did you hear from her again?

She sent me an email the next day [a copy of this email was provided to The Intercept]

From: "Sarah Koenig" <Sarah>

Date: Aug 9, 2014 6:11 AM

Subject: Yesterday

To: <Jay>

Cc:

Hello Jay,

I promise I won't use this email address to badger you. But I did want to thank you so much for talking to us yesterday and for letting us into your house. I know it wasn't an easy visit for you or your family. Both Julie and I felt pretty terrible that we caused such upheaval. We didn't want or mean for that to happen, but I completely understand why it did. I thought it would be important for you to meet me in person, so you could get a sense of who I am and what my intentions are. But I also recognize what a jarring intrusion it was, and I'm sorry about that.

I also wanted to thank you for taking the time to think it over. I get that it's a big decision. Of course we'd be more than happy to have coffee or a drink with you and [Jay's wife] today (Saturday) or tomorrow, to answer your questions and to try our best to ease any fears you might have. Again, I'm not out to vilify anyone – no one's talking about revenge or retribution here. That's not what this is about. I'm not on anyone's side. I'm a reporter, and I'm trying to figure this case out. I know you and your wife were concerned that we found you. Alas, it wasn't difficult at all. So I can't protect you from that, obviously. But I can do my best to make you hard to identify in the story, so that if someone googled your name, for instance, my story wouldn't come up. I'm not using your last name, and I won't say where you live – or anything about your family.

When you ask what's the benefit to you, it's a little hard for me to answer, because it's kind of a personal question specific to you, and I don't know you enough to know the answer. But what I can tell you with confidence is that I think in the end, you'll feel better with the end result if you're an active voice in the

story – rather than someone who's being talked *about*, you get to do the talking.

I think the simplest pitch I can make to you is: You have a story about what happened to you, and you should be the one to tell it.

That's why I came to [location redacted], to ask you to tell your story. You're in the documentary either way, so it just seems more respectful and fair to you to let you tell what happened, rather than having me piece it together from whatever I can glean from the record. On paper, in the trial transcript, you're two-dimensional. But in real life, of course you're more than just a state's witness. You're a person who went through a traumatic thing. To hear you call yourself a "scoundrel with scruples" – that made me want to understand who you were then, and who you are now. And also, even just meeting you yesterday for that short time, hearing you talk so forcefully about what you saw, and about Adnan's guilt – for both Julie and me, that was powerful and clarifying. No one else knows what you know about this whole case, and so even just the few things you said – it's exactly what I've been waiting to hear. . . .

### **What did you imagine was going to happen if you didn't talk to her?**

I thought since I didn't cooperate with her she would just make a little blurb about me in the story and then she would move on to whatever this 'new evidence' was or whatever Adnan had to tell her. I didn't think I would be demonized.

### **Have you ever listened to the podcast?**

I've never been able to listen to the podcast. My wife reads the transcripts and tells me about them. The first time I started to get really scared and feel jeopardized by 'Serial' was in the middle of the night, one night maybe around the second or third week of the show. One of my buddies from Baltimore calls me and says, 'Hey, man they got your voice across the radio and shit, man, talking about shit that happened a while ago. They're saying your name and shit. They've got you plastered across the Internet.'

**Suppose Koenig came here and said up front that, based on her conversations with Adnan, revealing the evidence in the case, and talking to other people, that she believed that there was a good chance that Adnan is likely innocent. If she told you that up**

**front, and was completely transparent about what she thought about this case, would you have felt more comfortable talking to her?**

No. I would have told her the same thing: There's nothing that's gonna change the fact that this guy drove up in front of my grandmother's house, popped the trunk, and had his dead girlfriend in the trunk. Anything that's going to make him innocent doesn't involve me. Hae was dead before she got to my house. Anything that makes Adnan innocent doesn't involve me. There is a specific point where I became involved in this. What happened before that, I don't know. Maybe Adnan had something to tell her, something magical that happens that changes all the facts in the case. But she can talk to him about that. I didn't have anything to add. There's no point in me participating in that conversation.

**If you're telling the truth, then what harm would it be to talk to Koenig?**

I am telling the truth, and look what happens when I didn't talk to her. Look how she's demonized me. And I feel like if I did talk to her, it would have given her twice as much ammo to twist my words. She came to my house and frightened me and my wife. Then [Julie Snyder] came out and said that I had 'animal rage.'

**Would you have talked to another reporter?**

Before this podcast thing happened, no. Only if Hae's family wanted me to so they could have some sort of peace. I don't want to talk about this for entertainment purposes.

**Why did you decide to talk to me?**

I'm trying to clear my name. I'm worried for the safety of my family. I think the truth is important, and I'm trying to tell it—not for entertainment value.

**In what ways has your life changed?**

Do you ever read Reddit? Have you read the subReddit about this case and about me?

**Yes.**

Everything's changed.

## COMING NEXT: **PART 3: The collateral damage of an extremely popular podcast.**

*Matt Tinoco and Alleen Brown provided research for this interview.*

*Photo Illustration: Koenig: Meredith Heuer; Jay Wilds: Natasha Vargas-Cooper; Syed: Imgur*

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