

# ROGERS

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former Nelson County Sheriff's Detective Jon Snow brought Houck in for questioning. Snow asked Houck about a phone call he had received late the night of June 3, when Houck said he and Rogers were returning from the family farm.

"That's someone who works for me," Houck explained, as he dialed the number for Snow and put Lawson on speaker phone.

After some initial chit-chat, Houck asked Lawson what he had called him about. Lawson replied he had called to ask about some numbers for some rental houses. Lawson said Houck had told him he would have Crystal call him.

The exchange struck Snow as strange.

"If she's in the truck next to you when he called, why would you need to call her about getting numbers for rental properties?" Snow asked.

"She was not going to deal with stuff that late," Houck told Snow.

Houck told the detective that Rogers had returned with him to their home, where he went to bed and she stayed up late. When he woke the next morning, she and her car were gone.

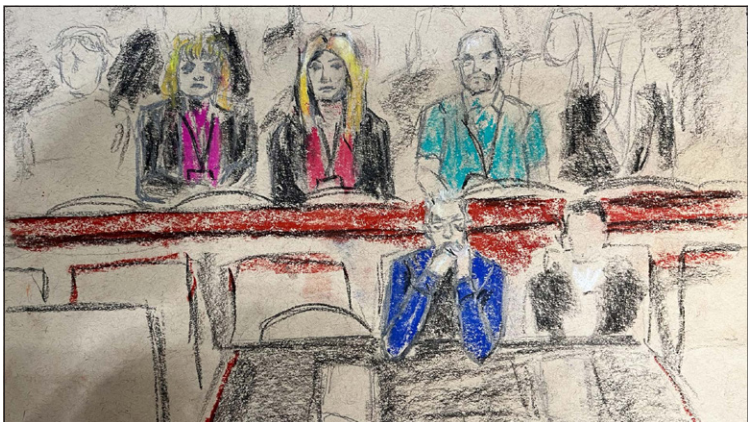
That car was discovered by Rogers' family on July 5 abandoned on the side of the Bluegrass Parkway with a flat tire, her purse and phone still inside.

But according to Snow in that July 8 interview, bloodhounds could find no trace of her scent around the car.

"I can't explain that," Snow said.

"I agree with you," Houck replied.

"Unless she was never in the car," Snow said.



SYDNEY YOUNG/Special to The Standard

**A courtroom sketch shows Sherry Ballard and members of her family at the opening of the trial for Steven Lawson, who is accused of conspiracy to murder in the disappearance and presumed death of Ballard's daughter, Crystal Rogers. Nelson Circuit Judge Charles Simms ruled before the trial that no cameras or other electronic equipment would be permitted in the courtroom at Warren Circuit Court in Bowling Green.**

"I can't answer that," Houck said. "I do not know."

## LAWSON'S NAME RE-EMERGES, INVESTIGATORS DIG DEEP

What is known about the Rogers investigation and Lawson's alleged involvement has come in fits and starts. How closely investigators were looking at Lawson in the early stages of the investigation and how he came to become a prominent part of the case are unclear. After that initial interview in July 2015 became public in October of that year, his name largely receded from publicity of the case until December 2023.

Lawson was subpoenaed to appear before a Nelson County grand jury on May 10, 2023. He was indicted two weeks later for tampering with physical evidence, but his name did not surface publicly at that time because grand jury proceedings are secret and the indictment was sealed by the judge. It was after this first indictment, according to documents, that Lawson began talking at length to investiga-

tors.

A court document filed by Houck's attorneys in March 2024 — when both men were scheduled to be tried jointly (Steven Lawson's trial was later separated) — estimated Lawson had given 20 hours of statements, interviews and testimony to investigators over the course of nine occasions, including:

- September 2015: Testimony to a Nelson County grand jury
- Aug. 6, 2020: A five-hour FBI interview
- June 8, 2023: a six-plus hour interview with Kentucky State Police
- June 14, 2023: Testimony to a Nelson County grand jury
- June 14, 2023: A three-plus hour interview with KSP
- June 19, 2023: A 30-minute interview with KSP
- Aug. 22, 2023: Four-plus hours again with KSP
- Sept. 13, 2023: Two-and-a-half hours with KSP
- Sept. 20, 2023: Testimony to a Nelson County grand jury

While grand jury testimony and police interviews are not open to public inspection



SYDNEY YOUNG/Special to The Standard

**A courtroom sketch from Tuesday depicts Steven Lawson, center, flanked by his attorneys Darren Wolff and Zack Buckler. Lawson is on trial in Warren Circuit Court over his alleged role in the 2015 disappearance and presumed death of Crystal Rogers. Nelson Circuit Court Judge Charles Simms, who is presiding over the trial, has ruled no cameras or electronic devices were permitted in the courtroom during the trial.**

before trial, excerpts included in the court filings indicate prosecutors offered Lawson immunity from charges if he was "100% honest" with them. On several occasions, according to the excerpts filed by Houck's attorneys, investigators doubted Lawson was telling the whole truth, in one instance saying he had only been "70-80% truthful."

In December 2023, negotiations having apparently fallen apart, Lawson was indicted on a more serious charge of complicity to commit murder.

## LAWSON'S ATTORNEY SAYS INVOLVEMENT MINIMAL; PROSECUTOR DISAGREES

Shortly after Lawson was indicted and arrested on the complicity charge, his attorney at the time said Lawson's involvement consisted only of giving his son, Joseph, a ride after Joseph was driving Rogers' car the night of July 3, 2015, and had a flat on the Bluegrass Parkway.

"It was driven out there by Joey. Joey Lawson. He had a flat tire at that mile marker and my client received a phone call, went out and got him,

brought him back," Ted Lavit told WHAS News in December 2023. (Lavit had served as Steven Lawson's attorney until last summer, when Lawson fired him.)

But prosecutors say Lawson's connections ran deeper than that.

"It became apparent that Lawson had a larger involvement in Crystal Rogers' murder than he was willing to admit," Shane Young, the special prosecutor appointed to the case, wrote in May 2024 court filing.

There are few public details as to what extent prosecutors believe Lawson played in Rogers' disappearance. This week could provide answers to that question, and many others, as opening arguments begin.

**Editor's Note:** Jury selection in the Steven Lawson trial began Tuesday, and results were still unavailable as of press time for this edition. Follow along with trial coverage on [kystandard.com](http://kystandard.com), where we will be providing daily updates. Former Kentucky Standard editor Forrest Berkshire is assisting the paper with coverage of the case.



KATELYN NORRIS/The Kentucky Standard

**Thomas Nelson graduate Brandy Coomes walks off stage with her diploma during Friday's ceremony.**



PETER W. ZUBATY/The Kentucky Standard

**Brayden Mouser received a hug from an administrator, and the biggest round of applause of the night after receiving his diploma from Nelson County High School Friday. Mouser has been waging a battle with an inoperable brain tumor for much of his senior year, and underwent his fourth and final round of chemotherapy the day before Mother's Day.**

# NELSON

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hundreds of graduates celebrating their four years of accomplishments.

This year's valedictorian for NCHS was Anthony Merta and Yasmine Norvang was salutatorian. Thomas Nelson honored two valedictorians: Gavin Vittitow, who attended Gatton Academy, and Cade Benningfield. The school's salutatorian was Landon Alvey.

At both ceremonies, students wore their accomplishments in a flurry of colorful cords.

Thomas Nelson seniors had grey cords for students who were college or career ready, gold, orange and white to represent those with academic status summa cum laude, magna cum laude and cum laude, respectively.

NCHS grads had medallions to represent their academic honors, while students who obtained their associate degree wore a gold stole. Other students wore red, white and blue cords for their transition ready status, white cords for Governor's Scholar Program, silver cords for Governor School for the Art and a multicolored cord for the Art Seal of Excellence.



KATELYN NORRIS/The Kentucky Standard

**Students decorated their caps during Friday's ceremony at Thomas Nelson High School celebrating their graduation.**

Vittitow encouraged his classmates to remember the people who got them where they are today during his speech Friday night. He said none of them made it to stage alone, they were standing on the shoulders of teachers, parents, friends and peers who allowed them to grow and challenged throughout their four years.

"Every moment, every lesson, every conversation has added something to our story," he said. "And that story continues. Wherever you go next, keep learning, keep connecting and

keep building the person you're meant to be."

Merta, NCHS' valedictorian, recognized his teachers, administrators and counselors who do what they do every day to help students succeed. He said he knows he caused his counselors lots of strife when it came to updating classes and his transcript. His peers and friends played a pivotal role in making his four years interesting.

But he encouraged others to practice gratitude to those held them as they journeyed through NCHS.

"I also invite you all to

give thanks to those who have gotten you here," Merta said. "We've all had somebody that needed to feed us and teach us and post embarrassing photos of us on Facebook. ... This is where our paths spilt. Come next fall, you'll find some of us in college and trade school."

Thomas Nelson's second valedictorian, Benningfield, said his peers and classmates have so much life ahead of them. They are the future engineers, teachers, doctors and more that will give back to the community that gave so much to



PETER W. ZUBATY/The Kentucky Standard

**Nelson County High School seniors enter the gymnasium for the beginning of Friday night's commencement ceremony.**

them.

"We can also use our experiences to continue to better ourselves and the community that we reside in," he said. "... I hope that each of you will continue this tradition as you venture out into new communities, at col-

lege or in the workplace. Looking at the bright futures ahead of us, I think it is important for us to reflect on some of our achievements and the legacy that we are leaving behind. I believe that our legacy is one of resilience and positivity ... we will still rise to the occasion."