



The Media's Court of Public Opinion, Casey

Anthony

by Keith Long

[Home](#)

[Summer-Fall 2013](#)

[Spring-Summer 2013](#)

[Winter-Spring 2013](#)

[Fall-Winter 2012-2013](#)

[Summer-Fall 2012](#)

[Spring-Summer 2012](#)

[Winter-Spring 2012](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011-12](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

The Casey Anthony trial became the most sensational news story of 2011. The Orlando, Florida court where the trial took place issued 600 press credentials, and Time magazine dubbed it the first social media trial of the century. The 22-year-old single mom was charged with three felonies including first degree murder, aggravated child abuse and manslaughter. When pictures surfaced on the internet showing her at a nightclub in June, 2008, shortly after her two-year-old daughter, Caylee, went missing, the media and public went ballistic. Thirty-one days passed after Caylee's death before police were notified and then it was not mother Casey, but her family that called police and they were pointing fingers at her.

More time passed as thousands all over the country searched for the missing toddler. Finally, in December of that year the remains of the angelic Caylee were found in woods, just blocks from the young mother's home. During that time, images of the young mother partying, and her videotaped jailhouse interviews with parents consumed mainstream news and the social media blogosphere. Casey appeared concerned only about herself. None of the streaming images showed Casey Anthony with any apparent remorse or grief.

Today, her name remains synonymous with, "got away with murder," and it engenders animosity that is just as venomous today as it was during the investigation and trial. She was named the most unpopular person in America in 2011. Another poll in 2012 reinforced the public's collective disdain for her. The Casey Anthony trial was a public spectacle that came close in many respects to resembling the days of the Roman Colosseum, where the public thirsted to see lions devour the captured prize in their arena.

Social media transformed her three month courtroom trial into an arena of its own, and Casey Anthony was their prisoner. The trial's streaming videos and interactive blogs induced a frenzy that left the public demanding to see an embodiment of Caesar give his final "thumbs down" against their prize. Time magazine, one of many mainstream media publications that fed the court of public opinion during the trial said this: "Virtually no one doubts that Anthony was involved in her child's death," then added, "but if you see murder in Casey Anthony's big brown eyes during a live feed of her trial, you can tell all the world how delectable you will find her execution." Blogs exploded with conversations and opinions; cable news commentary announced "breaking news alerts" all blaming the mother, Casey Anthony, for the little girl's disappearance and death.

Florida's Attorney General, Pam Bondi, was interviewed by CBS news before the trial even started: "The evidence is overwhelming. No one else in the world except Casey Anthony could have done this." The Chicago Tribune reported, "Just when you think Casey Anthony cannot nauseate you anymore, try this: she wants more children." It was quite literally impossible to find a single reporter or media commentator, before and now even after her trial, who would say they thought this woman could be innocent.

We did find 12 jurors however who reached that conclusion. The jury was not sympathetic to the defendant. Many jurors cried as they voted to acquit. The prosecution's evidence was so thin they deliberated only 11 hours before finding

her not guilty. So this sets up a very interesting difference of opinion. The jury was sequestered by order of the trial court and reached its decision based on evidence heard within the four walls of the courtroom. The public, on the other hand, had an information environment dominated by one point of view of this case. The media's court of public opinion was sustained by a carnival of pictures, videos, and opinion transmitted through blogs all over the internet. During the hour when the verdict was announced, 325,000 Tweets shouted 140-character screams of incredulity. A bare one per cent supported her acquittal. Tweets like this were the rule: "The jury was inept and lazy. That's why we have a baby killer being set free."

I am an investigative journalist who has become quite familiar with the Casey Anthony case. I can report an important part of my research has been focused on reaching an understanding of the public's perception of this story. I take every opportunity to sample reactions and opinions from waitresses, store clerks, professionals, and especially mothers. The mere mention of this former accused murderer's name stops conversations, interrupts tasks, and always evokes an immediate, visceral, and remarkably consistent reaction from virtually everyone I talk to.

Eyes roll; "Oh, that woman, I hate her. She got away with murder, no one would ignore her baby's disappearance for 31 days like she did." As I said, the opinions are virtually unanimous that Casey Anthony is a horrid person. I inquire of reactions from people I casually meet for a simple reason: my research into the facts of the case has resolved itself into a conviction that the true story of Casey Anthony has yet to be told. The public has no clue what the real Casey Anthony story is about. Of course, she has barely breathed a word on her own behalf since her release, two years ago. So that is understandable.

Soon after the jury's "not guilty" verdict was announced, I had a conversation with Barry Sussman, the Washington Post's former Watergate editor for Woodward and Bernstein. He was then editor for Harvard's Media Watchdog program and he wanted my opinion on what the verdict would have been if the jury had not been sequestered. He described the reporting of this story as a media carnival. Barry invited me to write a centerpiece article for Harvard's Nieman Foundation for Journalism in November, 2011, only a few months after the verdict. My article broke records for reader response on the Harvard website.

Besides Barry, there were two other notable journalists who called out the pack journalism mindset that characterizes coverage of the story to this day. Howard Kurtz, host of CNN's "Reliable Sources" joined CNN's senior legal analyst, Jeff Toobin, in criticizing the media's coverage. Kurtz said, "I refused to join the media frenzy after two-year-old Caylee was killed." Kurtz added that what troubled him most was how the media turned the trial into entertainment. "It was great in terms of ratings, (but) I thought it was appalling in terms of the way it just seemed to take over the American media. The tone of the coverage was Casey Anthony must be guilty."

The defendant's lead defense attorney, Jose Baez, characterized the reporting as "media assassination." Kurtz added, "Let's be honest with ourselves: this is the exploitation of tragedy until it becomes entertainment. And that's why the situation is even worse than the indictment by Anthony's lawyer would suggest." Kurtz admitted that he winced at the onslaught of lawyers and psychologists on cable news channels and in blogs pontificating about the case: "There were legal loudmouths who have gone on TV to convict Casey Anthony ... forgetting there is a difference between someone appearing guilty and the requirement that prosecutors prove guilt in a courtroom. Television has feasted off this case for

three years." Kurtz shared his personal feelings admitting at one point he became so angry it made his blood boil. He was asked about his own Reliable Sources program coverage on CNN: "I stayed away from this." Kurtz refused to cover the story on his very popular CNN Sunday media discussion show. Kurtz's colleague at CNN, Jeff Toobin, shared his personal opinions in his usual, deadpan fashion: "Most of the coverage has been very hostile to Casey Anthony. The news media was very unfair to Casey Anthony."

These two highly regarded journalists, and Harvard's editor, Barry Sussman, are standard bearers who feel a responsibility to call for a return to a quality of journalism that originally inspired them to become journalists. They in turn, have inspired me to look beyond what we all see at the surface in this story. They inspired me to look beneath the surface and to find facts. I determined not to be persuaded by the media carnival we were all witness to, and many of us were part of.

Let me say at the outset, as a reporter, I see what everyone sees in this story. A young mother who knew early on that her daughter had disappeared. She lied to her parents, saying Caylee is with a nanny whom she named Zanny. Then 31 days later, after her own mother called police to arrest her, Casey lied to police, telling them "Zanny the nanny" said she had taken Caylee to teach Casey a lesson. Casey then lied about where the nanny lived, and even where Casey herself worked for the past two years. Police quickly discovered Casey hadn't held a job since shortly after her nearly three-year-old daughter, Caylee, was born. Investigators went to the apartment where Casey told them Zanny the nanny lived, and found it had been vacant for over six months; no one there ever heard of Zenaida Fernandez Gonzalez, the fantasy Zanny. Casey went to parties on weekends during the time Caylee was missing. She got a tattoo on her shoulder, "bella vita." Prosecutors characterized her as a party girl, who was seeking "the beautiful life," someone who wanted to be free from the responsibilities of being a mother to her daughter Caylee. In the court of public opinion it was all over: case closed!

In post trial analysis, I committed myself to follow the lead from those few journalists who called out the media coverage of the Casey Anthony trial. Jeff Toobin advised, "The media's coverage is something we should all discuss." So I now suggest the public and media need to take a breath. The time has come to have that conversation Jeff Toobin, Howard Kurtz and Barry Sussman ask for. I have researched trial evidence, statements of dozens of witnesses, and the family dynamic of the Anthonys living in the little home on Hopespring Drive, in Orlando. What I come away is the personal story of Casey Anthony, outlined here for the first time. My questions for the media, and its court of public opinion are these: Did police arrest the wrong person? Was the jury right when they said Casey Anthony was not guilty? Was Casey's mother, Cindy, involved in a cover up of a crime against her own granddaughter? If she was, who was Cindy protecting, Casey or Cindy's husband, George? I have the answers to these questions: yes, yes, yes, and George!

The first step to reach an understanding of Casey Anthony was obvious to me. I started with a fundamental question: What kind of a mother to Caylee was Casey Anthony? The answer came quickly and it left no doubt whatsoever. The top missing persons detective in the Orange County sheriff's department led the investigation of Caylee's disappearance. His name was Yuri Melich. He also testified as a primary witness for the prosecution during her trial. Melich and other detectives interviewed all of Casey's friends who knew her from the fourth grade until the day she was arrested. Melich focused on what her friends could say about Casey's behavior after Caylee was born, August 9, 2005. When the

news broke of Casey's arrest, Casey's former friends abandoned her and distanced themselves from her. No one wanted to be associated with their former friend, Casey Anthony. So I looked at the multiple police interviews of these friends as an important source of information to confirm the kind of mother Casey was with Caylee. After all, none of her old friends wanted to defend this person who had been arrested and who was suddenly the prime suspect in the murder of her own daughter. Her friends were not immune to the community pressure blaming Casey. They were also aware that Casey was making headlines on news broadcasts, cable commentaries, and blogs all over the country. So I found it something more than surprising, and at the same time, significant, that all of her friends described Casey as an ideal mother.

Detective Melich's interview of Casey's friend, Melina Calabrese, was typical. As a close friend of Casey, Melina knew her well. She worked with Casey at Universal Studios and was close to her constantly from the first day Caylee was born. Melich asked Melina what kind of mother she knew Casey to be. Melich said, "Casey's relationship with Caylee from the time that you remember, how would you describe that relationship?"

Melina: "I had hoped for it to be mine. She and Caylee were adorable. I almost hoped for it you know because she was very good with Caylee. She gave Caylee almost everything a little girl could want. You know, Casey was very good with her. She just never raised her voice. Always you know, I never saw her touch her in a negative way. To this day, I hope my own mother-daughter bond is going to be like that. And it almost seemed easy."

All of the many police interviews of Casey's friends, associates, people she worked with, and her relatives, strongly reinforced Melina's statement to police: Casey was an ideal mother. No one could criticize or diminish Casey as a mother to Caylee. So it occurred to me, the criticisms of Casey's behavior as a mother to Caylee, all centered around her behavior after Caylee died, and especially the absence of grief Casey displayed after her daughter's death. How could a loving and doting mother not show and share her grief for the death of her beloved child?

For an investigative journalist, that begs the next important question: could Casey's bizarre behavior, lies, imaginary characters, and her inability to grieve, actually provide the missing insight into the mystery behind this young woman's story? That intriguing possibility led me to the next phase of my reporting. I began with a belief that whatever Casey's involvement may have been, the death of her two-year-old daughter, Caylee, was a traumatic experience. A consistent description from all her friends was that Casey and Caylee were literally inseparable. Casey cared for her constantly and loved her deeply. Her former fiance's father and a minister, Richard Grund, said it was obvious that Caylee gave Casey meaning in her life. So Caylee's death had to play a significant role in Casey's behavior. I believed the mystery of Caylee's death could be solved by understanding why Casey Anthony lied to police, why she made up a story about a fictitious Zanny the nanny? Also, I wanted to be able to report, how did Caylee die?

To answer these questions definitively, I sought out authorities in forensic psychiatry and studied case histories. I needed to know if Casey's behavior fit psychiatric models of post traumatic stress. I talked to experts in child trauma and family abuse. My research was always strictly anonymous. I was careful to not introduce polarization (or bias) into any discussion by mentioning her name, Casey Anthony into my conversations. I talked to PhD's, both psychologists and psychiatrists in order to get basic, generic answers to my questions. I described

for them behavior similar to Casey's without mentioning her name. I wanted to test Casey Anthony's version of the events surrounding Caylee's death.

Casey Anthony laid out a detailed record of what she says happened the day Caylee died in interviews with three independent, court appointed experts -- two psychologists and one forensic psychiatrist -- all specialists in trauma and stress induced behavior. The record from two of these interviews was published after the trial at the order of the judge, Belvin Perry. The prosecution closely deposed both experts. During these intimate interviews, Casey talked extensively with these forensic experts about what happened the day Caylee died. She said her father woke her up from sleep holding Caylee's lifeless body, dripping wet from the backyard swimming pool and blaming her for the death. George ordered her to not say anything to her mother, Cindy. George then took Caylee's lifeless body away, telling Casey, "daddy will take care of things."

After reviewing and researching these depositions, I needed to know the answer to a simple, and seemingly incongruous question. Does Casey's inability to grieve, denial of her child's death, and need to protect her father who was responsible for her daughter's death ever occur in other women who experience the traumatic, sudden death of their young child? Has bizarre behavior like Casey's, such as denial, lack of grief, and lying ever been observed in the experience of these trauma specialists?

I asked psychologists and psychiatrists to describe reactions of a hypothetical young mother who was living in a severely dysfunctional home environment with her parents, and who then experiences the sudden, accidental death of her child, at the hands of her father. I asked them to consider such behavior assuming

the father denies involvement in the death of her child, and tells the mother of the dead child to keep quiet about it. I included post trauma behavior such as denial, lying, and inability to grieve.

I wanted to know what kind of behavior forensic specialists would expect from a mother whose child died traumatically at the hands of her father, assuming she was raised in a severely dysfunctional family environment. The consensus reply was summarized by one well known PhD psychologist, Dr. William DeFoore, who has 30 years experience in counseling victims of trauma. He said, "In such a case as you describe, I would say that the young woman is caught in a trauma bond with her father." He went on to say that he would expect the daughter to deny the father's role in her daughter's death. I asked him to explain what he meant by this term, "trauma bond." He said, "In a trauma bond, the child is attached to the abusive, neglectful, abandoning parent because of her need for love and her subconscious belief that she will get love from her parent (father, in this case). Subconsciously, the young woman you describe is hoping for the love she never got--or only got on a minimal level."

At this point I measured the psychologist's description of "trauma bond" against Casey Anthony's behavior. Casey greeted her father in jail during his visits lovingly, saying, "you are the greatest father and grandfather in the world." Yet we know George had a seriously dysfunctional and dishonest relationship with Casey. We also know that Casey alleged George molested her beginning at age 8. So this explanation of a trauma bond could authoritatively explain the behavior of Casey, "after" Caylee's death.

It is quite obvious that not every woman whose child dies suddenly and traumatically at the hands of their father would go on to deny the death, and protect their father by inventing imaginary nannies and false explanations for the

daughter's disappearance. The presumption in these remarks by the psychologist is that a young woman who behaves pathologically must at some level be living in a pathological family environment prior to the loss of her child. In other words, such reactions can occur when the young mother was already severely traumatized by her family environment, such as through incest and molestation by a close family member, like her father.

I then introduced the abuse element of Casey's version to the psychologist, again, without mentioning names. I said, suppose the woman we have been talking about grew up in a relationship where incest and abuse occurred at a young age. Then at age 19, the abused woman had her own child. Consider a scenario where her child accidentally died because of some action by the father. But the father denied both his abuse of his daughter and any role in her baby's death; I asked, how would you expect that woman to react?

Dr. DeFoore said something remarkable: "To acknowledge that her father not only abused her but is also responsible for the death of her child would destroy the possibility of her getting the love she wants. She has created a fantasy father, so that she can go on loving him. Her illusion of a fantasy father would be destroyed if she faced who he really is and what he has done."

The thousand pound elephant in the room throughout the entire backdrop of the Casey Anthony story of course is the Anthonys pathological family environment in their home on Hopespring Drive. The media blamed everything on Casey. The absence of grief, her lies, her imaginary job, all of her behavior created the

denial and dysfunction so apparent in Cindy and George Anthony's behavior. However now it was beginning to appear that once again, the court of public opinion has it backwards. There is expert opinion that Cindy and George could have been responsible for the dysfunctional behavior that Casey suffered from, and not the other way around. In fact, I found all of this is well established in the psychiatric literature that abusive family environments can generate bizarre behavior in children who experience trauma such as the death of a child.

Cindy Anthony was a registered nurse who held a \$1000 week management job at healthcare giant, Gentiva. She trained as a pediatric nurse. Yet with Casey seven months pregnant, sporting a huge baby bump and a belly button turned inside out, Cindy denied to everyone that Casey was pregnant. Casey's brother, Lee, asked his mother, "What is going on with Casey?" Cindy said to her 23-year-old son, "Let it go, Lee." Cindy's brother Rick, said, "What gives Cindy. You are a nurse for gosh sakes, everyone can see she is pregnant." Cindy told Rick he was wrong, "Casey is not pregnant." Cindy's colleagues at Gentiva saw Casey come by to see Cindy at work often and they asked Cindy about it. Cindy always denied her daughter's pregnancy to them. Cindy, though a professional nurse, never scheduled Casey for an Ob/Gyn exam.

Finally, just few weeks before Caylee was born, Cindy had to admit Casey was about to deliver. Cindy went to the delivery room and arranged to have the nurses hand Caylee to Cindy first, before Casey held her. At delivery, George curiously positioned himself at the foot of his daughter's bed, almost it seemed, as a voyeur. The question occurs often in my research: did Cindy and George worry that George was Caylee's father? I have answered that question in the affirmative.

George brought serious baggage to his marriage with Cindy. His first wife told Dr. Drew, the TV psychiatrist, that George was a genetic liar. George's anger management issues surfaced shortly after his marriage to Cindy when he threw

his own father through a plate glass window, nearly killing him. George secretly stole \$30,000 from Cindy's Gentiva retirement account, and then lost it all gambling. Of course he lied to Cindy (and the FBI) claiming for awhile he had been scammed by a Nigerian email ruse. George had an affair with a search volunteer while Caylee was still missing, and confessed to his involvement in Caylee's death during a private moment with her. Even the prosecutor, Jeff Ashton described George's misstatements as "George just being George."

George was by any measure, a horrible father to Casey. Hours after Caylee's body was discovered, George was called in for questioning by police. His first words to police were, "I am not changing my story." Police immediately searched the Anthony home again. George was frightened. He tried to commit suicide. In his suicide note, left just after Caylee was found, George apologized to wife Cindy and son Lee for his mistakes, but he could not bring himself to say anything to Casey.

All of the denial and dysfunction by the parents in the Anthony family, has been written off by the media and blogs as without a doubt, Casey's fault. One blogger said, "Casey Anthony represents the epitome of heartbreak that parenting adult children can bring. Herein lies one of the biggest problems I see for parents of adult children: They refuse to see the truth about their children."

My reporting disputes the media's court of public opinion on this critical point of who should be considered responsible for the pathological family environment Casey grew up in. There is no doubt, the abusive Anthony parents produced the behavior we witnessed in Casey Anthony.

The classic family dynamic for families with a father who molests one of their own children is well known. If the abuse is not reported and the victim does not receive support to face these crimes against her, both the abuser (father) and the non abusing parent (mother) typically deny the abuse ever happened; they blame the victim. The abused child cannot talk about her abuse. That is a description of the Anthony family dynamic in spades. Additionally, I could not find a single case history where an abused daughter grows up to have a child of her own, and then suffers the traumatic death of that beautiful child at the hands of her abusive father. So the combination of such horrible experiences suffered by Casey Anthony seems to be unprecedented.

The behavior of Casey Anthony, once the family dynamics are no longer denied and ignored, emerges as a textbook case history for a victim's reaction to unimaginable and horrible events at the hands of her own father, who she was trying to love. In the event, the media's court of public opinion has committed a serious injustice to this young woman. CNN's Jeff Toobin is right: "The news media owes an apology to Casey Anthony."

Keith Long is recognized for his cutting edge and insightful analysis of contemporary issues facing diverse communities in the information age. He was invited (without a literary agent) directly by editors at Prima Books (Random House) to write their centerpiece book on the genesis of web 2.0, the interactive social media central to our contemporary culture. His book won endorsements from major opinion leaders in the field. He later wrote Op-Eds for the Financial Times newspaper (London). He was invited to write a focus article on media coverage of the Casey Anthony trial for Harvard's Nieman Foundation for Journalism. The *Washington Post's* former Watergate editor for reporters, Woodward & Bernstein, Barry Sussman is Long's editor at Harvard. Their collaboration garnered the most reader response in the history of Harvard's website for media watchdog journalism. He had his own radio series in Orlando, FL. He works currently as a writer for a prominent trial consultant. Long brings a research journalist's discipline to the issues of most importance to our contemporary culture. Keith answers questions the media forgot to ask.

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