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Episode 205: Sunset Mesa
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Debbie Schum: I was coming back from Alaska. I had spent a summer up in Alaska and when I was coming back, it was the middle of the night. And I was in Grand Junction and waiting for a bus to connect to take me further south.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: This was in October of 1989. Debbie Schum didn't want to be at the bus station all night. So, she showed up at the house of an old friend. He wasn't there, but his girlfriend was. Her name was LoraLee Johnson.

Debbie Schum: As I was kind of fumbling around trying to explain who I was, she asked me 'Do you need somewhere to sleep for the night?' And invited me in. And that

was basically exactly how the whole thing started right there. And we became very close friends pretty much immediately. We stayed up and talked and that kind of became the theme of our friendship...that mostly, we talked.

Phoebe Judge: Lora was an artist and would send pieces to Debbie. Debbie says Lora was incredibly funny. Neither of them got along with their families so they often spent Thanksgiving and Christmas together. And then in 2015, Lora told Debbie she'd been diagnosed with bladder cancer. They'd been friends for 25 years.

Debbie Schum: As things progressed, her doctor wanted her to do chemotherapy and radiation, and she asked him 'Well, is it going to help?' And they said 'No.' And she said 'Well, then, why would I do that?' [soft acoustic music]

Phoebe Judge: Her doctor suggested removing her bladder. Lora said 'Absolutely not.'

Debbie Schum: She was not down with that. She did not like the idea at all.

Phoebe Judge: Lora was living alone. She was still in Grand Junction, Colorado.

Debbie Schum: I would go up and help her. Do laundry, do some cleaning, make some meals for her, and put them in the 'frigerator or in the freezer so that she could easily get them, and do some shopping for her.

Phoebe Judge: When Lora could no longer live on her own, they discussed hospice options. Lora didn't want to live in a facility. So Debbie said 'Come live with me.' Hospice doctors and nurses would come to them.

Debbie Schum: When I'm sick I am cranky. But Lora was not. She was all 'please and thank you' and very grateful for everything—everything. Every spoonful of soup that I gave her, everything—every time I arranged the blankets. She was funny too. The hospice doctor asked her 'Is there anything I can bring you?' And she said with a very straight face that she wanted Brad Pitt to come and peel some grapes for her and fan her with peacock feathers. [Phoebe and Debbie laugh] And so, we all decided that we would place an order for three of those. [hopeful piano music] I sang to her. I told her stories. We talked about her grandmother. She was very close with her grandmother who was also an artist. I made up stories about her and her grandmother walking through the forest holding hands. Her last words...were to tell me that she loved me and that she appreciated me taking care of her. Then, the time came where I was sitting in the room, and I heard her breathing change. And I went over to her bed and asked her 'Is it your time now?' And she opened her eyes and looked me straight in the eye. She was unable to speak, and I held her hands...and I talked to her and myself through it.

Phoebe Judge: Lora Johnson died on June 13th, 2017. Before she died, she told Debbie that you wanted to be cremated. She wanted her ashes to be mixed with glitter.

Debbie Schum: And I told her I would do that. What a pretty idea.

Phoebe Judge: The hospice company that had helped take care of Lora recommended a funeral home called Sunset Mesa in Montrose, Colorado. Debbie was the executor of Lora's estate. And so, she was in charge of everything. The next morning, Debbie drove to Montrose where she met with Megan Hess, the owner of Sunset Mesa Funeral Home. Megan Hess told Debbie that the cremation would cost a thousand dollars.

Debbie Schum: I got my credit card out and she told me that she was unable to accept credit cards at the moment, that she was changing merchant service providers. I told her 'Well, I don't have my checkbook with me, and I certainly don't have that much cash on me. I could run to the bank.' And she said 'I need it now, so I can finish. I need it right now, so that I can finish this paperwork. I have to have that before I can finish the paperwork for the death certificate.' That didn't make a lot of sense to me, but I also didn't really question it because I don't know how that works. At that point is when she brought up donation. [minimal guitar music] And she said 'Well, you know, this would be a wonderful gift to science for cancer research. If you're willing to donate her bladder, which is uncompromised by chemotherapy and radiation, this would be just a wonderful gift for cancer research.' And I told her 'Boy, I don't know about that.' And she said 'Well, the cremation would be free if you're willing to do that.' And I said 'Eh, you know what, I need to think about that for a minute. I mean, Lora, her doctor wanted to take her bladder out and she was so opposed to that she died instead.'

Phoebe Judge: And then, her phone rang. It was Lora's sister's ex-husband. Debbie told him it wasn't a good time; she was still at the funeral home.

Debbie Schum: And he said 'Okay, well, I just needed to let you know that Lora's sister wants their family Bible and a couple of the paintings that the grandmother did. And I would like to have her van.' And I said 'Woah! Stop. I know that you guys already have a copy of the will in which Lora's sister and brother are purposefully excluded. And I'm at the funeral home right now trying to make arrangements.' And he said 'I'm sorry, I couldn't be there to help.' And I said 'Oh, but you can call me up, and with the list of stuff when you know that—I don't even want to talk to you.' And I hung up on him. At that moment, Megan Hess reached her hand across her desk, looked me straight in the eye and put her hand over the top of mine and said 'I am so sorry. It is just terrible when the greed starts immediately after somebody dies.' And I really—I just felt this overwhelming sense of appreciation for her at that moment for understanding what I was dealing with, with the family that wants stuff less than twelve hours after her death. And she understood, and she was kind. And that made me a lot more amenable to her suggestion. And so, I agreed.

Phoebe Judge: Debbie signed paperwork allowing Sunset Mesa to donate Lora's bladder to cancer research and stating that the rest of Lora's body would be cremated as planned. Megan Hess told Debbie it shouldn't take more than a week to get Lora's ashes back. But then, a week passed with no word from Megan Hess. And then another. Debbie called and couldn't reach anyone. Almost two months went by. Finally, Debbie says she showed up at Sunset Mesa demanding to speak to Megan Hess in person. She says Megan Hess apologized for the delay and explained that the funeral home had been incredibly busy. Debbie asked for Lora's ashes and Megan Hess said she'd be right back. Debbie says she waited for about fifteen minutes. And when Megan Hess returned, she handed Debbie a red and pink gift bag, inside was a small container. Debbie says she was glad to take it home, to have Lora's ashes at home with her. She says she felt relieved that this part was finally totally over. [tense music] But then, in July of 2018, she got a call from the FBI.

I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal.

When the FBI called Debbie, she didn't recognize the number. So, she didn't answer. They left a voicemail.

Debbie Schum: And it was really kind of an innocuous. It wasn't really that alarming. I mean, it was like the FBI is calling, that's alarming, but it wasn't—as a matter of fact, she said 'We don't have any information at this time that your loved one was a victim in this case.' And I was— and I thought, a victim of what? What are they talking about?

Phoebe Judge: When she called them back, an FBI agent asked Debbie if they could meet. The agent asked Debbie to bring Lora's ashes. Two days later Debbie found herself sitting in a small room with FBI Special Agent John Bush.

Debbie Schum: And he asked me to tell him about my experience with Sunset Mesa. And when I got done with my story, he said 'I regret to inform you that none of this happened the way you think it did.' And I said 'What are you talking about?'

Phoebe Judge: The FBI agent told Debbie that not only had Lora's bladder not been donated, but that her whole body had been sold.

Debbie Schum: And then I just—oh my god, it was so hard for me to try—I couldn't even form questions. This is so different than any other kind of a crime. I mean, if the police came and they pounded on my door and told me that a robber had gone up and down the road and broke into everybody's garage and stole their toolbox, you know, I would be angry, but I would understand. I wouldn't say, what's a robber? What's a toolbox? I would understand what was being said. But this, I did not comprehend it. [plucky, tense music] What are you talking about?

Phoebe Judge: The FBI agent told Debbie they've been investigating Sunset Mesa for months. Elena Saavedra Buckley is an editor for *High Country News*. She was living in Gunnison, Colorado at the time and heard about what was going on at Sunset Mesa.

Elena Saavedra Buckley: The FBI had been talking to former employees of Sunset Mesa since October 2017. And they raided the business because they suspected that Megan Hess who owned the business was using her funeral home and the bodies that were coming in to be cremated and selling them through Donor Services, which was a non-profit donor business that she operated under the same roof. And that she was doing so without the consent of the families. And then in turn giving those families fake cremains instead of the ashes of their loved one.

Phoebe Judge: Megan Hess became the owner of Sunset Mesa funeral home in 2011. Her mother, Shirley Koch, helped retrieve and prepare bodies. And her father, Alan Koch, ran the crematory. Megan Hess also owned a business called Donor Services which she ran from inside her funeral home. She told a reporter that it was an important public service. She said, quote, 'It's for the good of the world. And I like to help people.'

[to Elena]

What type of services did they provide?

Elena Saavedra Buckley: Well, Sunset Mesa provided burial services and cremation services. But through Donor Services they allowed customers to donate parts of their body to research or science. When Reuters initially investigated Sunset Mesa in 2017, and even earlier than that, they found that it was the only business in the country that they could find that had both of those services under one roof.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: Megan Hess's Donor Services business was perfectly legal — in theory. There's no federal law that prohibits so-called "body brokering" as long as the body is to be used for research or education. This is different from donating organs, for transplant, which is highly, highly regulated. You can't sell organs for transplant. For example, you can't sell a kidney to someone who needs it. Regulations strictly forbid it. You can, however, sell a head to a dental conference or torso to a surgical training company. This is what Megan Hess was doing. And it's hardly regulated at all.

Elena Saavedra Buckley: These bodies and limbs that are used for research, for testing surgical tools, for medical classes, including classes at dental schools, and plastic surgery schools, that's a pretty under-the-radar business.

Phoebe Judge: Sometimes the bodies are used for what's called plastination which is when plastics are used to preserve a body. You may have seen a plastinated body in a

museum. The exhibition “Body Worlds” debuted in Tokyo in 1995 and has been touring the world ever since. And now, there are similar exhibitions all over. Legal scholars have suggested that more oversight of non-transplant donation is necessary. In the United States, legislators have proposed a federal registration and tracking system. But efforts to improve transparency assume that the body broker will tell the truth. [minimal, unsettling music] Megan Hess is accused of misleading her clients, going against their wishes, and brokering deals without consent.

Elena Saavedra Buckley: She was allegedly selling bodies that their families thought would be cremated and given back to them.

Phoebe Judge: Reuters reported on Megan Hess's business in 2018 and interviewed a former Sunset Mesa employee named Jennifer Henderson. Henderson told Reuters that Megan Hess would brag about how lucrative selling bodies was. In one month, she claimed she made about \$40,000. According to a Donor Services pricelist from 2013, a human foot sold for \$125, a knee was 250, and a pelvis with upper legs cost 1200. Megan Hess did a lot of business by email using her Hotmail address. She claimed she had a PhD in Mortuary Science, which is a degree that doesn't exist. Another former employee told Reuters that Megan's mother, Shirley Koch, would pull teeth from corpses to extract gold fillings. The employee said that Shirley showed off her collection and commented that she had already sold enough gold to take the whole family to Disneyland. We reached out to Megan Hess and her family. They didn't respond to our request for an interview.

[to Elena]

So, how would it work? I mean, you'd bring your loved one's body in to be cremated, I guess, [Elena affirms] and how would donation come about? What were some of the scenarios?

Elena Saavedra Buckley: It seemed like the pattern usually went like this...

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: Elena Saavedra Buckley.

Elena Saavedra Buckley: You would come in with your loved one looking for a cremation, and in some cases, Megan Hess would say that if you agreed to donate an organ, whether it was your loved one's bladder, their eyes, their skin, the cremation would be discounted or even free in some cases, as happened to Debbie. But in other cases, people never agreed to donate at all. And they would leave thinking that the cremation was going to go as planned and when they received their ashes, which for some people happened mysteriously late, or there were some problems. In other cases,

it went completely fine. They would think that everything went well. And it wasn't until months, or in some cases years later that they a got phone call from an FBI victim specialist and were told that they might want to bring those cremains into their outpost.

Phoebe Judge: Which was exactly what had happened to Debbie Schum. When she met with Special Agent John Bush, he told her that whatever was in the small container Megan Hess had given her, it was not Lora's ashes. He didn't know exactly where Lora's body was, but he could tell Debbie what time Lora's body had been sold and what her donor number was. Then, Debbie says Agent Bush asked her if she had heard of something called plastination. He said he couldn't say much more because the investigation was ongoing. The FBI wasn't yet sure about the scope of the case. As people in the area heard about the scandal, they wanted to know if they'd been affected.

Melissa Connor: And the FBI only analyzed x number of cases. [low, unsettling music] They realized that there were going to be tens if not hundreds of families who wished their cremations tested.

Phoebe Judge: Melissa Connor is the director of the Forensic Investigation Research Station at Colorado Mesa University.

Melissa Connor: And so, they reached out to see if we would be willing to do some of the cases that we're not going to be part of the court case, that we're actually not part of the investigation.

Phoebe Judge: Melissa Connor and her team tested 128 samples of remains returned to families from Sunset Mesa Funeral Home. Families were wondering if they had ashes at all or things that resembled ash, like unmixed concrete, grout, or even cat litter. But when Melissa Connor's team analyzed the samples, they *did* find bone.

Melissa Connor: And of course they had questions about whether just because they had been returned bone, was it still their decedent. And that is beyond the science that we have today to try and get DNA out of commercially cremated remains.

[to Melissa]

Phoebe Judge: So, it could have been anyone's bones?

Melissa Connor: Could have been *anything's* bones.

Phoebe Judge: It could be dog bones.

Melissa Connor: Exactly.

[to Danielle]

When did you first realize something was wrong?

Danielle McCarthy: Almost immediately. Like, I knew something wasn't right with the size of container I was given. I just remember thinking, something's not right.

[as narrator]

Phoebe Judge: This is Danielle McCarthy. Her husband, David McCarthy, died from a heart attack in June of 2017. David was a veteran. His stated wish was to donate some of his organs to medical research and then to be cremated and interred at Fort Logan National Cemetery, just outside Denver. The morning David died, Danielle called Sunset Mesa Funeral Home. Megan Hess came to collect David's body. Danielle signed paperwork consenting to donate her husband's organs to medical research through Donor Services.

Danielle McCarthy: Unfortunately, at that time being very naive and very ignorant of what that term “medical research” means in this context—that's so ambiguous and so not clearly defined—that I regret, honestly, having signed that piece of paper. And allowing her to do that because that would ultimately lead to her selling him without my consent.

Phoebe Judge: When she went to pick up her husband's ashes, she says they came in a container the size of a box your cell phone would come in. She took it home and put it on her desk.

Danielle McCarthy: And would just look at it and just go, okay, that's David. That's my husband. But there was always just something in the back of my head that just kind of said, *mmm*, something's not right. But I couldn't have told you what it was at the time. I just had an inkling that something wasn't right.

Phoebe Judge: And then, she got a call from the FBI. It was John Bush, the same agent Debbie had spoken to.

Danielle McCarthy: And he asked me, he goes, if I was able to get the majority of David's body *parts*—plural—back, would you want them?

Phoebe Judge: According to Danielle, the FBI told her that they had found David's body in Detroit and that they'd found it there a Chicago company called the Innoved Institute. Danielle looked at Innoved's website. It said they provided “medical education and training”. [low, melancholy music] They specialize in something called “Lab-in-a-Box”. And the website says they can, quote, “Supply all your equipment and material needs, as much as you need, when you need it, where you need it.” Danielle says that

the FBI told her that after their investigation is over, they'll make sure that David's body is returned to her.

Danielle McCarthy: We have closure. We know David's body is safe. We know where David's body is at. And while we don't have a timeframe necessarily of when we'll be receiving his body back properly cremated, and then being able to inter him...there is already a sense of closure in this because I know he's safe.

Elena Saavedra Buckley: Colorado turns out to probably be one of the states where if you wanted to operate a funeral home that sold bodies, it might be the easiest place to do it. It's the only state that doesn't license its funeral home and crematorium operators. And until after the Sunset Mesa case, there was absolutely no regulations about body brokering and especially no regulations about people who wanted to operate a funeral home alongside a donor service or a body brokering operation.

Phoebe Judge: In February of 2018, Colorado's Department of Regulatory Agencies, also known as DORA, filed a complaint against Megan Hess.

Elena Saavedra Buckley: Megan Hess in response to that complaint denied everything. One quote that I really remember from that response is that "You don't become the number one funeral home in town by doing a bad job." But after she responded, DORA went ahead and asked her to surrender her business license and she complied. And the business shut down.

Phoebe Judge: In May of 2018, the governor of Colorado signed the state's first law regulating certain elements of the body brokering industry, making it illegal to own more than 10% of interest in a funeral home if you also own interest in a body brokering company. Body brokers now have to be licensed with the state and keep better records of what they're transporting.

Phoebe Judge: The FBI wouldn't speak with us about Sunset Mesa on the record, except to say the investigation is active and ongoing. Debbie Schum, who's friend Lora Johnson, who has not yet been found, is following that investigation closely. She now runs a Facebook group called 'Sunset Mesa Victims Group.' There are more than 300 members. They've had meetups. Debbie says it's been the silver lining of the whole experience: connecting with other people. They share information about how to search for their missing loved ones. One way people search is to look through medical supply catalogs.

Debbie Schum: These companies have catalogs online where you can look at pictures of the plastinated bodies that are for sale. And I do know that some people found their dad in one of those catalogs. [somber music] I couldn't believe it. Can you imagine? They found their dad in one of those catalogs. So, I began to look through all of the

catalogs. Maybe I'll find Lora. When I think about Lora instead of just thinking I miss my friend, I think, where is her body? See, people ask me that, what do I have to make me think of my friend Lora? But everything makes me think of Sunset Mesa. They're inextricably intertwined now. And I cannot think about one without thinking about the other.

Elena Saavedra Buckley: I think what a lot of the alleged victims are trying to do is to figure out how to integrate this uncertainty into their life. That's something Debbie and I have talked about—the sense of being certain that there will be more uncertainty, and living with these kind of two worlds of grief, one that she's trying to preserve that's just for her friend Lora, and then one that is messier and attached to all the questions that the Sunset Mesa case brings up.

Debbie Schum: I really, really miss my friend. And this wrecks that.

Phoebe Judge: We first aired this episode in January of 2020. In March of 2020, Megan Hess and Shirley Koch were arrested and both charged with six counts of mail fraud and three counts of illegal transportation of hazardous materials. Authorities believe that they stole the bodies or body parts of over 500 victims. This past July, Megan Hess and Shirley Koch agreed to a plea deal in which they'd each plead guilty to one count of mail fraud in return for the remaining charges being dropped. At her plea hearing, Megan Hess said “The families believe I went beyond the scope of the consent.” She said she was taking responsibility and trying to make an effort to make it right. Megan Hess and Shirley Koch Sentencing took place earlier this month on January 3rd. Debbie Schum, who now goes by her maiden name, Debbie Schultz, told us in a message that the hearing lasted nine hours. She and 25 others gave victim impact statements. Debbie told the judge via video call “This is not ever going to be repaired.” Danielle McCarthy was there in the courtroom. [minimal, atmospheric tones]

[over the phone]

Danielle McCarthy: Surreal is one of the feelings that kept happening all day. Kind of had to keep reminding myself where I was, what I was doing, and why we were here. Difficult, difficult at best to sit in a room knowing that these two individuals dismembered my husband. Emotional, just from the standpoint of my own experience, but then also being witness and hearing other victims share their stories. So the emotions are still extremely high. They're still extremely confusing. They're still extremely overwhelming.

Phoebe Judge: Judge Christine Arguello told the court it was the most emotionally draining case she'd ever handled, and that the nature of the crime put her in uncharted waters. She said the sentencing guidelines for mail fraud didn't address the moral and ethical violations and, quote, “At face value, this is a financial crime, a mail fraud case. Though it didn't financially ruin anyone, it caused great emotional trauma.”

Danielle McCarthy: And then she also stated that there is no case law out there for this particular type of case. This is a precedent setting case in that aspect.

Phoebe Judge: Judge Arguello talked about her own experience with the death of a loved one, when her husband of 45 years died, and she talked about the grief that followed. She asked for a moment of silence in honor of the deceased. She then sentenced Megan Hess to 20 years in prison, the maximum sentence for mail fraud. She sentenced Shirley Koch to 15 years.

Elena Saavedra Buckley: When the sentencing decision was given, there were sobs and hugging and even laughing in the court.

Phoebe Judge: Elena Saavedra Buckley.

Elena Saavedra Buckley: These victims had been waiting for a really long time and had been asking for the maximum sentence to be brought down on Megan and Shirley. And I think as satisfying as this can be, it was for those families.

Phoebe Judge: Judge Christina Arguello asked if Megan Hess wanted to say anything. She shook her head. Shirley Koch did address the court and said, "I acknowledge my guilt and take responsibility for my actions. I'm very sorry for the harm I caused you and your families." Debbie told us the sentencing was a bittersweet relief. Since we last spoke. She's learned that her friend Lora's body also ended up at Innoved, the same place Danielle McCarthy's husband was found. Debbie says it's unclear if Lora's body is still there or not. [soft, sentimental music]

Elena Saavedra Buckley: I know that something that makes this tough and that probably prevents there from being full closure for the victims at any point in the future, is that a lot of these bodies, over 500 corpses were involved in this case, and a lot of them are not going to be recovered, or really ever determined, in terms of their final destination once they were sold by Sunset Mesa to institutions, which much of the time didn't understand that they were getting bodies that had been sold without consent. They kind of fell into a black hole. And I think the families, while there may be some catharsis in seeing Megan and Shirley go to prison, are not going to be able to recover their loved one's bodies and get them cremated as they were meant to. They'll just have to live with the fact that they're floating somewhere in the world undetermined.

Phoebe Judge: Danielle McCarthy had been told her husband's body would be returned to her eventually once the FBI had completed their investigation. She says about a month ago she finally got word that they're beginning the process of sending David.

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I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal. [music fades out]

END OF EPISODE.