



Display full version

**August 11, 2004**

## Parents Mourn Son's Suicide After Returning From Iraq Duty: "He's a Casualty of War But He'll Never Be Known As That"



We continue our conversation with Kevin and Joyce Lucey, the parents of Jeffrey Lucey, a 23 year-old U.S. soldier who hung himself a year after returning home from military duty in Iraq. [includes rush transcript]

During the Democratic National Convention in Boston, the parents of Jeffrey Lucey, a U.S. soldier who killed himself after returning home from military duty in Iraq, spoke publicly for the first time on Democracy Now!

Lucey signed up for the Marine Reserves straight out of high school. In February 2003, one month before the invasion, he was shipped out to Iraq. He was deployed there for five months, during which he fought in the battle of Nasiriyah. He returned to the U.S. later that year.

A few months after his return, Jeffrey's parents, Kevin and Joyce, began noticing signs of what they later came to know as post-traumatic stress syndrome. In late May 2004, they had Jeffrey involuntarily committed to a military veteran's hospital after he ignored his parents' and sister, Debbie's pleas to seek help. The hospital discharged him after a few days.

Three weeks later on June 22nd, Jeffrey Lucey took his own life. He was 23 years old. His father, Kevin came home to find his son had hung himself with a hose in the cellar of their house. The dog tags of two Iraqi prisoners he said he was forced to shoot unarmed, lay on his bed.

Shortly after his death, Kevin and Joyce Lucey joined us on the program to talk about their son. After the broadcast, we continued our conversation with them.

### **RUSH TRANSCRIPT**

This transcript is available free of charge. However, donations help us provide closed captioning for the deaf and hard of hearing on our TV broadcast. Thank you for your generous contribution.

**Donate** - \$25, \$50, \$100, More...

**AMY GOODMAN:** During the Democratic National Convention, we brought you a couple, the Luceys, who had just lost their son several weeks before. They spoke on Democracy Now! for the first time about Jeffrey Lucey, who committed suicide after returning from Iraq. Jeffrey had signed up for the marine reserves straight out of high school. In February, 2003, one month before the invasion, he was shipped out to Iraq. He was deployed for five months during which time he fought the battle of

Nasiriyah, returned to the U.S. Later that year, his parents, Kevin and Joyce, began noticing their son was seeming to be suffering from something they have come to understand as post traumatic stress syndrome. In late May, 2004, they had Jeffrey involuntarily committed to a military veterans hospital after he ignored his parents and sister Debbie's, pleas to seek help. After a few days the hospital discharged Jeffrey. Three weeks later, on June 22nd, Jeffrey Lucey committed suicide. His father, Kevin, came home to find Jeffrey had hung himself with a hose in the cellar of their house. The dog tags of two Iraqi prisoners that he said he was forced to shoot unarmed, lay on his bed. Jeffrey died at the age of 23. Shortly after his death, is when we first talked to his parents. Today we bring you part two of that conversation. We began by talking about the two prisoners Jeffrey described, that he said he had killed in Iraq.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** My understanding was that there was a higher ranking official who told Jeff, and this is the quote that is etched in my mind, "pull the [bleep] trigger, Lucey." And it was two unarmed Iraqis. He shot them from about five feet away, and he watched them die. It was the first time, well, that he shot anybody. He told me those deaths he knew he did. That's what he said.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** One of them, he--Debbie just told me on the phone that he said he was looking at this boy's eyes and the boy was shaking. He was shaking.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** He told me about how that haunted him. "It's somebody's son, it's somebody's brother, pa. It's somebody's father." Jeff, I think was writing down when he came back, he didn't see dead soldiers. He saw dead people. That was one of the things that I guess concerns somebody. That's where--that was the beginning of the cancer--the Post-Traumatic Stress.

**AMY GOODMAN:** He said he shot them where on their bodies?

**JOYCE LUCEY:** Debbie said one that was five feet, he shot him in the eye. He just had...the eye and the nose were gone.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** And the second one, I believe was in the chest. I thought it was in the throat.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** I'm not sure about that.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** We are not sure where he shot them.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** Jeffrey didn't talk to me, being a mom. In certain kind of...he would try to kind of cover up. He wouldn't say anything right--even letters that he wrote me. He would never say anything that would scare me.

**AMY GOODMAN:** When did he tell you even the bits and pieces he told you about this? Was it a double shooting at the same time, the two of them together?

**KEVIN LUCEY:** That's the impression that he had given me. That was the impression he had given me. And that haunted him. I guess it was immediately after the shooting. He got their dog tags, and that's when he kept their dog tags with him, and...

**AMY GOODMAN:** Did you know he was wearing them?

**KEVIN LUCEY:** I didn't know. God, he had been back. I found out in May. He had already been back home since last July, and I found out in May about the dog tags.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** His girlfriend told his sister.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** And that really concerned me, and I went and talked to Jeff, and said, do you think that you should? Because I said...you know, they're a constant reminder of something that was horrible. And he wanted to honor their memory. He didn't wear them as trophies. And he was very--in fact, his therapist--we were paying privately for a therapist to work with him, and his therapist also said that. Mark, he told me, he never wore those as trophies. He wore them as a symbol of honor to those men.

**AMY GOODMAN:** What did he actually tell you about the killing, and when did he tell you? Was it late at night?

**JOYCE LUCEY:** mm hmm.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Where would you be sitting when he told you?

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Well, when he was telling me about that, I was sitting at the computer. I was trying to do notes. And he would come in and out of the living room. And he was in his bedroom because he became more isolated and became more reclusive to his bedroom, and that night he came out, and he was drinking. He was trying to get me to drink with him. And then he started talking about there was things that I could never understand. And that was his repeated phrase all the time, "Dad, you just can't understand. You'll never be able to understand." I was very happy he connected with Mark Nickerson, his therapist. Because--I don't know if Mark was ever a veteran--but at least he would go over and see Mark. We would drive him over. We had to disable his car. It got to that point that we were really concerned. And Mark, you know, made mention of that, and you know it was funny because he had made mention of that to me about the same time.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Made mention of what?

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Of how people could never understand how he did--how he murdered people. He knew it was war, but then I remember that night that he told me, he would take his fist and it was funny, because I saw Jim Massey do this. Would take his fist and hit it real hard into his hand and grind it, and he would look off in a daze-like. He says, "you will never understand." And then he proceeded to tell me about the shooting. He said there were other things that he didn't want us to know about. He wrote to my brother, who was a Vietnam vet, and I need to sit down with my brother and see if he feels comfortable enough to see if he shared any more in the letters that he was sending back and forth to him.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Where does your brother live?

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Easthampton, Massachusetts. So--but he's on vacation right now. So, that's why we're having...but he may not be able to feel comfortable with it, because my brother, he was in Vietnam in the war, and he was a Lurp...

**AMY GOODMAN:** He was a what?

**KEVIN LUCEY:** A Lurp, but I guess it's like a recon or special operations in Vietnam. He got wounded.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Did a bunch of his fellow soldiers come out to the funeral?

**JOYCE LUCEY:** Marines? Yes, they came out.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Tremendous number.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** Yes.

**AMY GOODMAN:** How many?

**JOYCE LUCEY:** They were very good.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** Well, he only had...I don't know how many he had in his unit maybe...I don't know. Maybe 30 of them came out.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** 30 or 40.

**AMY GOODMAN:** What was the unit?

**JOYCE LUCEY:** The 6th Motor Transport...

**KEVIN LUCEY:** ...in New Haven, Connecticut. The officer came up to me and said each one of the men was a volunteer, so among the pall bearers we had three volunteer to be pall bearers as well as friends of Jeff in his life.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** These boys were very upset. They were crying.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** They were sobbing.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** It was just...

**JOYCE LUCEY:** You mean, you really see they're all connected. They didn't...they couldn't believe it. They couldn't believe that...that they didn't think Jeff would ever think of something like that. He just didn't give them any indication.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** They didn't know he was suffering. But, you know—

**JOYCE LUCEY:** No.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** It was funny and both of us said it to each other, as the Marines were coming through, and they were sobbing, it dawned on me, they weren't Marines. They were just young boys. Gosh. Horrible way to realize it. Horrible.

**AMY GOODMAN:** The dog tags. Tell us how you found them?

**KEVIN LUCEY:** On June 22nd? When I was going through the house looking for Jeff, so we could connect, because we were supposed to go out to a steakhouse...I went to his bedroom and I saw the dog tags on top of his bed. And...it...didn't connect. I mean, we were tired, you know, we had been averaging a few hours of sleep a night because Jeff would get up at night, and he would be restless. But...and then I didn't see them afterwards. So I believe that the State Police and the investigation have them as evidence, as they have his suicide letters.

**AMY GOODMAN:** What did he say in the suicide letter?

**KEVIN LUCEY:** It was hard for me to remember. I'm the only one that read them. I was holding Jeff's body, I was cradling him as I'm trying to read the letters...and he stated that he hoped that we would understand. He wanted to apologize...for... everything he did. He didn't want us to hurt.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** He said he had a good childhood.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Yeah. Yeah. He had a great childhood

**JOYCE LUCEY:** We have part of one that was on a folder that apparently he must have been starting somewhere earlier, and I found it behind the TV in his room. And I said to him, I said, is this what he was writing? He looked, and he said that's like the beginning of what's on the letter that he read downstairs. That's what it says, "Mom and Dad please forgive me. I beg...I'm begging your forgiveness." I think I already said..."I'm weak."

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Oh, yeah.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** I'm weak. I can't go on life like this.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** The pain is too great.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** The pain is too great. He told me once, he used to listen to this CD, "Shinedown I think it's called..."

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Yeah, Shinedown...

**JOYCE LUCEY:** There's a song on it, "Looking down the barrel of a 45." Well he had me listen to that as we were walking down to a brook near our house. I was listening to the words. It's very, very scary. I looked at him, because it just seems like he's thinking of suicide. Because it says, I'm looking down the barrel...and saying something to the effect of "where is the young man? He's falling to pieces," or I—I can't remember the words, exactly, but when he was—when I'm listening to it, said, this is like my son. He's thinking this, and he doesn't know where the young man is anymore and he's falling apart.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** In about a week, Joyce reminded me, about a week before...week-and-a-half beforehand, here about 11:00 at night I have this 23-year-old marine asking me if he could curl up in my lap like he used to when he was a little boy. Thank God I did. Thank God I did.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** The therapist said he was regressing, looking for a safe place.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** And he...we must have looked comical.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** My daughter was there. She told me that...she says, "Mom, you will not believe what Jeff did tonight." I said, "what?" "He wanted to sit on Dad's lap. I couldn't believe it, Mom." It scared me. It scared me.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** He curled up just like he used to curl up beforehand. We were able to give comfort. One of the things that I have to...people come up to Joyce and I and say how we're so strong. And I say, bull [ bleep ] because one of the things...how

many families went through this with Desert Storm with this and all of the other wars, and I...I read newspapers. I'm a news fanatic. And you know, I never thought about the human cost. I never thought about--I would read statistics and I would say, god, that's, that's horrible, but that was it. And now it's thrown us into a huge chaotic thing, and we told--I think I told--I don't know who I told, Joyce and I want to be able to sit down with parents and tell them, if you suspect, don't rationalize it away like we did, saying he was just having a bad day. Be aggressive.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** Be aggressive...

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Be aggressive. If anybody says that well, this is what it is, he will be okay, bull [ bleep ] don't believe it. You have to go with your gut on this.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Well, you did. You had him...

**JOYCE LUCEY:** It wasn't good enough. We didn't do enough.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Did they ever say to you the words post traumatic stress disorder?

**JOYCE LUCEY:** At the V.A.? When my husband called and spoke to the patient advocate, she said he had classic symptoms. When we spoke to the nurse on the floor who had been to Vietnam, yes. Everything—but they did not...

**KEVIN LUCEY:** No official diagnosis.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** ...use it as a diagnosis, because they said we cannot assess him for this until he gets dried out, and my thing is, after he was committed, he was dried out by Tuesday. Then they should have assessed him.

**AMY GOODMAN:** But how do you get dried out if you're suffering in this way.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** That was his medication. The alcohol was his medication.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** That's how he slept.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** He passed out. He would drink until he passed out.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** This used to scare me, he used to scare me...because I would say, my god, I could tell he had been drinking a lot because of the way he was breathing. You know, and...

**KEVIN LUCEY:** And then as we were telling Patricia, you know, when he was in there, I know that they had to do special observation. I know they had to restrict him because his potential for suicide or to harm somebody. But the thing is, Jeff told us—"I was treated like a prisoner. Here I am a veteran, they won't let me have cigarettes." They wouldn't let him go to church. They wouldn't let him go to memorial services.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** He had to stay alone with somebody on the unit while the other vets went.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Kevin and Joyce Lucey. We'll come back to their description of how they lost their son, Jeffrey, after we play you this song, "45," at the break by

Shinedown. The song Joyce described her son playing for her that had lyrics: "In these times of doing what you're told, You keep these feelings, no one knows What ever happened to the young man's heart Swallowed by pain, as he slowly fell apart And I'm staring down the barrel of a .45, Swimming through the ashes of another life." This is Shinedown's "45."

**AMY GOODMAN:** "45" by Shinedown here an Democracy Now! As we continue with the story of Jeffrey Lucey who committed suicide after returning from Iraq. Talking to his parents, Kevin and Joyce.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** The weekend prior to the weekend before he died was a Friday night, and he climbed out his window without our knowledge and apparently there were some neighbors down the street, some girls that were—their car must have been right outside. He got in the car with them and asked them to drive him down to a store, which is close to our house.

**AMY GOODMAN:** He climbed out of the house. What was he wearing?

**JOYCE LUCEY:** Out the window. When he came back. When they brought him back and I saw him get out of the car, my heart fell. He was in his—

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Full cammies.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** His green cammies. And he had his boots on. He had his hat. He had—

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Two k-bars.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** Two k-bars.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Those are knives?

**JOYCE LUCEY:** Yes. And he had a pellet gun.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** But that looked exactly like a real gun.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** It's been disabled. You can buy—you bought it for Christmas for him. He had a pellet gun on him. So where his mind was, where he thought he was, I don't know.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** We don't know whether he wanted to do a suicide by proxy where police—you know, because if the police officer saw that gun—

**JOYCE LUCEY:** It would have been—

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Yeah. So many things have gone through our mind. June 1 he was discharged from the V.A. June 3, he landed between two trees and totaled our car. Now, he believed that the V.A. told him to take four clonopine twice a day. Well, clonopine, I don't know nothing about medications, but he was sober when he asked for the car. He left, but within an hour, he claims he doesn't remember, he landed between two trees. We don't know if, especially after hearing the other story this morning, whether it could have been a suicide attempt. Everything goes through your mind.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** He was sliding so fast. It was one event after another. You didn't get a chance to catch your breath about what happened yesterday, and we were just in something else today.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** We were in total crisis, even though that sounds foolish. It was like, what do I do? I would go to work, and I would tell my co-therapists. About two or three of them actually walked with me through all of this.

**AMY GOODMAN:** You're a therapist?

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Yes. Yeah. I work with sex offenders. Over in Connecticut. And that's another thing, I couldn't even save my own son.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** Too close and like I said, we didn't know what to do. We really didn't. That's why, if other families are going to go through this, they need to know where to go, who can give them some help, and it's got to be intensive. You can't just treat somebody like Jeff who was in crisis, you can't treat him on an outpatient basis.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** The V.A. has to develop a new system to respond to the veteran. I mean, the week before his death, he didn't drink. He stopped drinking. Monday night, he is sitting on the floor. He actually started crying saying, "I need help." I was sitting on the couch. Joyce was standing next, and then Joyce called the V.A. next day and said, can we get him to the program, a three-week residential program up in Vermont? And he said, right now he wants help. They didn't have a system to be able to respond to that.

**AMY GOODMAN:** They said no?

**JOYCE LUCEY:** They didn't say no. She referred us to the vets in Springfield.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** The vet center.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** Yeah, the vet center in Springfield, and said that they were very good there, and they could talk to him.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** And we never knew of the vet center's existence until then, even though he had been discharged June 1. And then we—

**JOYCE LUCEY:** I spoke to David at the vet center. I told them, I said, you know, Jeff is—he's slowly dying here. And then I told them, I said, my son is dying. And I said we don't know what to do. They said, he needs to go into a program, not talk to people. He needs to be in, you know, where somebody can be with him.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Jeff went through June 5, see June 1 he was discharged. June 3, the car accident, and then June 5 was he was supposed to have graduated college with his sister. And regretfully, all this exploded in mid May, the week before his final exams so he never went to take his final exams. And his therapist, we were paying for, called up the teachers and told them. The teachers were great. They said, we'll give him until September. And then he woke up that morning he was really good. And you know, as a parent you want to reward all of the—so, he said, can we please drive—can he please drive himself there? And I said, well graduation is at 10:00. Liquor stores don't open up until 10:00. He was so impaired by the time he got to the graduation. And this fire official from Holy Oak, she was fantastic. She walked him in, found us. I walked him out in trying to—and the rage started coming again.



But then he demanded, he said, look, I want to see my sister graduate, so he went up there. We have a picture of him. He broke into the crowd, hugged his sister, and then she went and got her diploma. We tried that day, that evening, to get him back into the V.A. I guess he wasn't bad enough.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** He was too intelligent. He knew that if he stepped in their doors, they would have him. But if he talked to them on the outside—

**KEVIN LUCEY:** That doesn't make sense.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** He was okay.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** It doesn't make sense.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** And that's what they said. They said, he was too intelligent.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** He wouldn't walk into a building, but I don't see—I don't understand the federal government or what their policies are.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** You know in thinking now, I said, my father went with him. My father should have went in the building and pretend that he fell. Jeffrey would have ran right in there and they would have had him in the building. That would have been there. So I told my daughters. I said we have to be smarter than Jeff.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** So the week before, he was involuntarily committed. Next weekend we brought him up there. We called, I told them what was going on. And then I called an emergency crisis center, civilian, for the lack of a better word. They said they couldn't help because he was under the influence of a substance.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** Alcohol.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** So—

**JOYCE LUCEY:** They couldn't help him.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Even the civil didn't respond to him. And he refused to have me go. He thought I had pull. That was part of the paranoia, but because I didn't really get him in the week beforehand, but because I was there and he with a involuntarily committed, he didn't want me in the car. So, his grandfather plead with him, his sisters pleaded with him, and somebody allegedly according to Debbie said, "Have you thrown your rope away, Jeff?"

**JOYCE LUCEY:** And Jeff just went like this.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Who said that?

**JOYCE LUCEY:** One of the staff at the V.A. that knew him from the previous weekend. Said to Jeff, "Did you throw your rope away," in front of whoever was interviewing, and Jeff just went like this, Debbie said. It was almost like giving an opening to—that there is a—but it was never taken far enough. And like legally, I'm sure they couldn't take him. That's what needs to be changed. Now, he was on the ground. He had family there. And that really, really know him and my mother, she was at home. She was crying. I mean, she—I mean, just seeing Jeff like that that day was just—it was frightening.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And that was how many days before?

**JOYCE LUCEY:** The weekend—

**KEVIN LUCEY:** He was discharged June 1. This was June 5. Four days later.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** He died on June 22nd.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** Yeah. He died 18 days—

**JOYCE LUCEY:** Like I said, it was getting progressively worse. We were spiraling down. It's just unbelievable how fast it went. Once it started, it just went.

**KEVIN LUCEY:** He's a casualty of the war and he will never be known as that. And Joyce and I have said there are so many, there has to be thousands of Jeffs.

**JOYCE LUCEY:** Of Jeffs out there. The walking wounded. Maybe they don't say something this month or maybe three months from now or a year from now, they will exhibit it in other ways, maybe. I don't know.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Joyce and Kevin Lucey, describing the last weeks of their son's life, Jeffrey Lucey, who served in Iraq, fought in the battle of Nasiriyah, came home, and on June 22nd took his own life. This is Democracy Now!



The original content of this program is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License. Please attribute legal copies of this work to [democracynow.org](http://democracynow.org). Some of the work(s) that this program incorporates, however, may be separately licensed. For further information or additional permissions, contact us.