

# SA mum could face execution in America

# Child murder count in death of Sanaa, 7

# Murraylands family in disbelief at charges

# US lawyers reveal victim's funeral feud

# I really, truly believe

**BEN HARVY, ANDREW HOUGH  
MITCH MOTT  
IN MANNUM  
SEAN HOLSTEGE  
IN PHOENIX, ARIZONA**

A FORMER Adelaide woman facing the death penalty in the US over accusations she murdered her seven-year-old stepdaughter could spend two years behind bars before her case goes to trial.

Mother of four Lisa Marie Cunningham, 43, and her American husband, former detective Gernayne, 39, are each charged with the first-degree murder and abuse of his daughter Sanaa.

The couple, who deny the charges and insist they sought help from various doctors to protect Sanaa from harm, remain in custody at Phoenix's Maricopa County Jail as they await trial, which is not expected until at least July 2020.

But Arizona prosecutors are formally seeking the death penalty over the mentally ill girl's alleged murder in February last year, leaving Mrs Cunningham's South Australian-based family in disbelief.

They have told the *Sunday Mail* they believe Mrs Cunningham is innocent.

"She is a really nice girl," said cousin Julie. "What I know I could not honestly see her doing something like that. I really and truly believe she is innocent. She was too nice a girl."

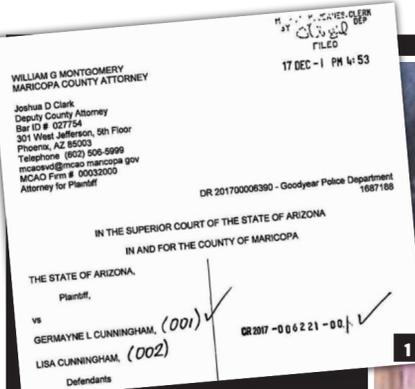
Mrs Cunningham's US lawyers recently visited the state, where they briefed the family on the case's harrowing details.

Diplomats are providing help to Mrs Cunningham, who was born in Adelaide and led a transient life in Australia - including stints in Far North Queensland - before moving to the US as a teenager in the late 1980s, when she met first husband, an American serviceman.

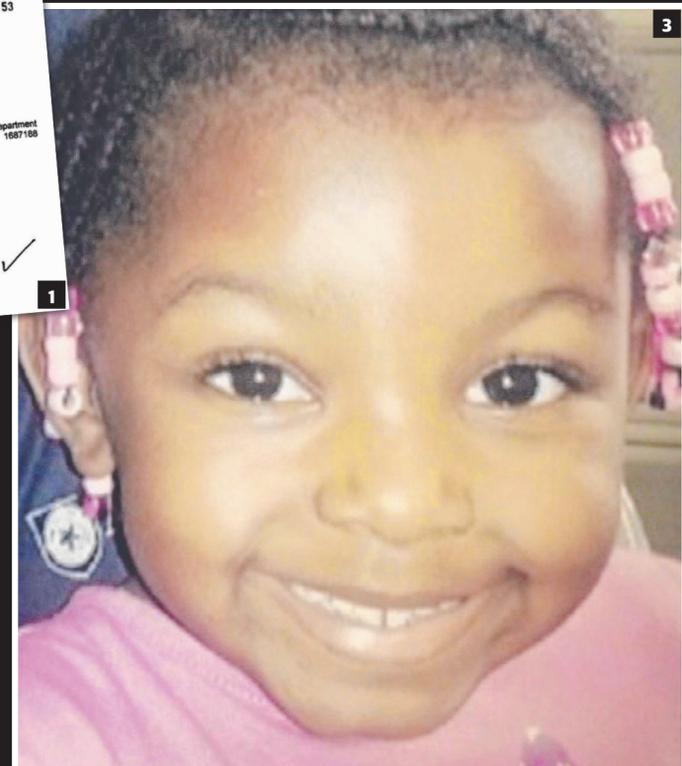
Mrs Cunningham, whose parents have died, tried to take her life two weeks before she formally pleaded not guilty to 11 charges relating to the death of Sanaa.

In January, a US grand jury ordered the couple stand trial on one count each of murder and 10 counts each of child abuse.

But in an unusual decision, the couple was on bail until last week when Maricopa County Superior



1. Court documents showing the indictment of Lisa and Gernayne Cunningham. 2. The accused couple. 3. Alleged murder victim seven-year-old Sanaa Cunningham. 4. The Cunningham family's residence in a comfortable suburb of Phoenix. 5. Lisa Cunningham's uncle Rob Topsfield, 70, says his niece "couldn't hurt a fly". 6. Former detective Gernayne Cunningham was a 12-year veteran of the local police force. 7. Sanaa's birth mother Sylvia Norwood.



Court judge Michael Kemp remanded them in custody. The couple is being held at Maricopa County Jail. Mrs Cunningham is on floor one, house C, pod one, cell 14 while Mr Cunningham is on floor T, house 24, pod A, cell 20.

Ruling their actions were "more than reckless behaviour", he accepted prosecution arguments that fresh, undisclosed evidence "justifies their execution".

Mrs Cunningham is the first Australian woman to ever face the death penalty in the US. An Australian man was hanged in California in the 1850s gold rush era.

Her case has triggered local poli-

tical turmoil and could create potential diplomatic headaches for the Australian Government, which is opposed to the death penalty.

The highly conservative state of Arizona has suffered a child abuse crisis in recent years, prompting a high level Government taskforce to address it.

Mrs Cunningham's family, who have long established ties to Murray Bridge and Mannum, described her as a popular student who was good at basketball and drawing.

Her Mannum school mates are also rallying.

Mrs Cunningham's uncle, Rob Topsfield, told the *Sunday Mail*, his

niece "wouldn't hurt a fly". He said he could not believe the accusations that had been levelled against her.

"This time the Americans got it wrong," Mr Topsfield, 70, said.

"I'm really angry with the American judicial system at the moment."

Mr Topsfield, who is undergoing cancer treatment, said he was devastated he could not go to Phoenix to support his niece.

"I feel terrible I can't go over, as much as I would like to," he said.

"I feel really strongly about this, she wouldn't hurt a fly."

Ms Cunningham became a chaplain while in Phoenix and worked as a prison chaplain and social worker

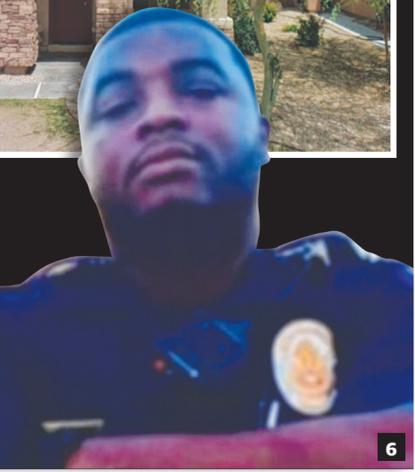
for numerous years. Mr Topsfield, from Caurnamont, said that, from an early age, Mrs Cunningham had been a caring, compassionate person.

"While they were living in Queensland, her mother had some mental health issues and Lisa started making breakfast and taking care of her two older brothers," Mr Topsfield said.

Mr Topsfield said Mrs Cunningham had some tragedy in her life after losing both her grandmother and her mother in a short period during her last visit to Australia.

Court documents reveal multiple problems and allegations including unsubstantiated claims Sanaa was

# that Lisa is innocent



*Sunday Mail* how his client was glad to see the couple behind bars as their freedom was "way outside the normal" in similar cases.

"Since it has been going they have been literally been out of the streets, free," he said.

"Normally folks that are charged with homicide, particularly of a child ... we're glad they're in custody."

Mr Smith said his client was still grieving the loss of her second daughter and that it took 24 hours before she was notified about Sanaa's death.

"Parents don't expect to have to bury their children," he said.

"One can only imagine the hopes and dreams and potential that you see in your children coming through their growing years all cut short because of carelessness and in some instances intentional harm that has been inflicted on such a young soul. (Sanaa) was a wonderful young

girl. She was a loving, intelligent, very affectionate child. Just a remarkable young child (who) had a bright future ahead of her."

Mr Smith, also a local pastor, said two funerals were held for Sanaa and that there was obvious tension between both families.

"We went to the graveyard together and literally one family sat on one side, the other family sat on another side," he said. "To see that lifeless child laying there (was horrible)."

Mr Smith said he expected the court case to be to be a "long, drawn-out process" and that it was "nowhere near the end of the road".

Child protection authorities first investigated the Australian housewife and her second husband - a former robbery squad detective for the

past 12 years who resigned over the case - in March 2016.

Sanaa, who the family report suffered from schizophrenia and other mental health problems that caused her to lash out, denied to investigators that she or her siblings were abused or neglected.

But the court heard graphic evidence about her short life, which uncovered during police investigations.

An autopsy concluded she died from "complications of sepsis" from "acute bronchitis". She also suffered a foot abscess, multiple skin ulcerations and an unspecified schizo-

phrenia spectrum disorder. The local medical examiner ruled the manner of death was undetermined and how the injuries happened remained a mystery.

In a statement issued in December last year, an Arizona Department of Child Safety spokesman said

officials "mourn" her death.

He also paid tribute to the Good-year Police Department and the Maricopa County Attorney-General's Office "10-month pursuit of justice for Sanaa".

"The facts surrounding this case were highly complex and required thoughtful compilation," the spokesman said.

Arizona has executed 37 inmates, none of them women, since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976.

Criminals are either gassed or given a lethal injection. But it has not been applied since the botched execution of a double-murderer in 2014. Lawyers for the married couple declined to comment. The case returns to court next month when the couple will attempt to have the murder charge dismissed.

sexually abused by an unknown person. But key parts of the case remain secret after a local judge ordered evidence to remain sealed while the parties and their lawyers are prevented from speaking by a gagging order.

The Cunningham's US-based family yesterday appealed to the Federal Government to help fund

their legal battle, which could be worth as much as \$500,000 under a special criminal fund for Australians facing the death penalty overseas.

Prosecutors allege the pair, who lived in the desert city's middle class western suburbs, abused Sanaa, whom he had with former wife Sylvia Norwood, 38.

Court documents further allege Mrs Cunningham discussed the case with key witnesses, in breach of her bail conditions, which she denies.

It is understood Ms Cunningham's daughter Cierra has been in court supporting her mother during the legal proceedings. Ms Norwood's lawyer Quacy Smith told the

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