



Lisa Cunningham
in court.

AUSTRALIAN DEATH-ROW CASE

MURDER OR

After more than four years in a US prison, South Australian Lisa Cunningham is about to go on trial for the murder of her seven-year-old stepdaughter. With a death sentence looming, she pleads her case to *marie claire*. By Michael Crooks

COVER UP?

RIGHT Sanaa
Cunningham died
at age seven; her
stepmother, Lisa,
in her mugshot.



Having six children made daily life “crazy” for Lisa Cunningham, but at the heart of all the work and racket was joy. Lisa was a mother of two from Mannum, South Australia, when she met American father-of-two Germaine Cunningham in the US. They married in 2015, lived in Phoenix, Arizona, and had two more kids, a boy and a girl.

While Germaine, a detective, worked for the Phoenix Police Department, Lisa, who had moved to the US years before with her first husband, took on the demanding role of homemaker for their bunch of six.

“We had a big house and a big yard, and three rescue dogs – terriers,” said Lisa. “We did everything together: the gardening, washing the car, cooking. It was our big, crazy, beautiful family. I was happy.”

Today, that domestic dream is merely a cherished memory for Lisa, who spends 23 hours a day in a jail cell the size of a bathroom. For more than four years, the Cunninghams have been awaiting trial on charges of the first-degree murder of Germaine’s daughter and Lisa’s stepdaughter, Sanaa, a severely troubled seven-year-old who had been diagnosed with multiple conditions including the mental disorder schizophrenia.

If convicted of the charges, which both Lisa, 48, and Germaine, 43, vehemently deny, they face the death penalty. In Lisa’s case, it would be the first time an Australian was executed in the US since the public lynching of a criminal gang during the California gold rush in the mid-1800s.

“I left Australia knowing that although other countries kill people

for crimes, I’d never have to worry about that,” Lisa told *marie claire* in a video call from her cell. “Because I’m not a criminal.”

Maricopa County authorities disagree. The police and prosecution say the Cunninghams abused and restrained the girl, which led to her death from an infection.

“There were many warning signs with regard to [Sanaa’s] need for medical attention,” said Judge Michael Kemp in 2018. “This was more than a failure to provide care and it led to the child’s death.”

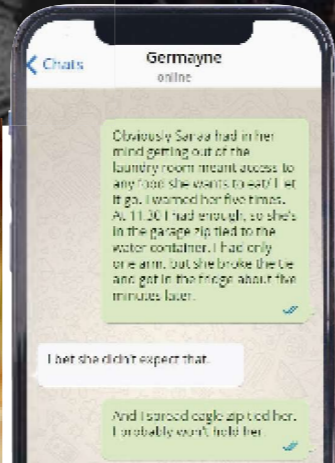
But the couple’s defence team says the Cunninghams tried everything in their power to help their sick child, and that the professional care and advice they received fell tragically short.

“This was a child who had bizarre physical and psychological symptoms,” said Lisa’s lawyer Eric Kessler. “It’s unfair to say they were on notice that she was near death. She was not a normal child.”

Normal or not, Lisa says she and Germaine dearly loved Sanaa and were desperate to help her. Sitting on her bed in a Maricopa County jail in Phoenix, where lunch is not provided unless paid for and breakfast might be a bread roll, a packet of peanut butter and cookies, Lisa corresponded with *marie claire* over several days. Using a prison messaging system (at 25c per message) and video calls, she painted a picture of the “beautiful life” she had before it all went terribly wrong.

The family of eight lived in a four-bedroom home in Goodyear, a Phoenix suburb in Arizona’s Sonoran Desert region. For the Australian, the stifling heat was no bother. “We spent most of our time outside,” she said. “We had an above-ground pool in our yard and a huge pop-up tent for towels and chairs and the dogs. I taught all the kids to swim. For both of us, being parents was the best thing in our lives.”

Weighed against her own troubled youth it was a suburban dream. Lisa spent most of her childhood in Murray Bridge, an hour’s drive south-east of Adelaide. Her dad, a welder, and mum were “wonderful people ... but they drank later on and were alcoholics,”



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Lisa Cunningham is the biological mother of four children and stepmother of two; a family Christmas; with husband Germaine; and one of the disputed text messages.

she said. They divorced when she was 11.

As a teenager, she helped care for her disabled younger sister, and when she was 18 an older brother died of a drug overdose. It led to her leaving home, “mostly to avoid watching my family self-destruct”, she said.

She wound up in Townsville, where she met US airman Russell Anderson. They married in Adelaide, had two children, Cierra and Javien (now adults), and lived wherever Anderson was stationed, including Japan. They eventually settled in Arizona, and Lisa landed a job as a prison guard.

When the marriage broke down, a friend reconnected her with father-of-two Germaine, whom she had met years before when they both worked as guards at Arizona’s Lewis prison. A romance blossomed, followed by two more children.

“She was like a mother hen and all the kids were her little chickens, following her, worshipping her,” said Lisa’s cousin Amanda (*marie claire* is not publishing her surname at her request). “She made videos of the kids that she’d put on YouTube for us, calling them ‘my crazy family’. And she’d take in whatever stray dog was around. She just has a heart.”

Amid that suburban dream, Germaine’s daughter Sanaa proved to be a “little bit more work than the other children”, said Lisa. At first she was an independent, happy child with “endless energy” but everything changed when the girl turned six. She had stomach

problems, developed changes in cognition, had violent tantrums and “didn’t gain weight in proportion to what she was eating”, said Lisa.

Around that time, a neighbour reported to authorities that Sanaa was suffering from neglect. The neighbour said they would see Sanaa alone in the backyard for hours wearing only a nappy, raking rocks and picking up dog faeces with her hands.

“I don’t know how to defend myself against ignorance like that,” said Lisa. “Yes, those things occurred, but not without us already knowing.”

In fact, the court heard that an Arizona Department of Child Services (DCS) officer investigated the matter and cleared the couple. (The DCS investigated two more complaints, including one by Germaine’s mother who had googled Sanaa’s symptoms and believed she was being sexually abused. The allegation was dismissed.)

Meanwhile, Sanaa’s problems were mounting. The girl began self-harming and ate inedible objects including doll’s hair, which was diagnosed as

the eating disorder pica. She wore nappies because she would defecate and urinate uncontrollably.

The couple went to several doctors, each of whom “told us something different”, said Lisa. As the girl approached her seventh birthday in 2016, a psychiatrist reported that Sanaa had said she would “feel better if she killed somebody”. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia and her parents were given a 26-page treatment plan, which later included the antipsychotic drug Risperidone.

“We were all thrown sideways into a storm, with five other kids growing up in the middle of it,” says Lisa. “I remember crying and thinking, ‘What the hell is happening here?’”

On the day she died, February 12, 2017, Sanaa was admitted to hospital weighing 20kg and covered in cuts and bruises. An autopsy found the cause of death to be “complications of sepsis”, stemming from bronchitis,



Lisa in a video call with *marie claire*. ABOVE Sanaa’s biological mother. LEFT Some of the resulting media.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF LISA CUNNINGHAM; GETTY IMAGES; NEWSPIX.

pneumonia, a septic bone-deep cut on her foot and multiple skin ulcerations.

Guided by text messages allegedly sent between the Cunninghams, the state built a case that in the hours leading up to Sanaa’s death, Lisa had found the girl hunched over the side of a playpen drooling and struggling to breathe. She felt cold to touch. According to Goodyear detective Noah Yeo, the texts revealed that Sanaa had been zip-tied inside a Pack ‘n Play playpen, which made it impossible for the sick child “to expel fluids in her lungs”, he told the court, according to the *Phoenix New Times*. (Lisa told *marie claire* they “never” tied her up.)

Further, the prosecution alleges Lisa did not call 911 in the time leading up to her daughter’s death on the Sunday, instead waiting until 1am to inform her husband, who was working late. (Lisa says she called the doctor on the Friday, arranging an appointment for Monday, which is all documented.) Germaine then hurried Sanaa to an emergency clinic, and the girl was eventually airlifted to Phoenix Children’s Hospital, where she went into cardiac arrest and died at 5.30am.

Weeks later, authorities removed the Cunninghams’ dependent children from their care, claiming “they were at imminent risk of injury or death”, says Lisa. “The day they came and took

them, I attempted suicide,” said the mother, who was hospitalised after the attempt. “It was too much with losing Sanaa and then the rest of them.”

By the end of 2017, the DCS concluded Sanaa had died of abuse or neglect and the couple were charged with first-degree murder and multiple counts of felony child abuse. “This was abuse that led to pneumonia that killed Sanaa,” said deputy county attorney Joshua Clark.

Yet Lisa has provided to *marie claire* documents and emails that show the couple continually sought professional medical help for Sanaa.



In August 2018, an Arizona court ruled the couple eligible for the death penalty and remanded them in jail. Their two youngest went into foster care and are now with Germaine’s 70-year-old mother in Florida.

“I haven’t seen my children for four and a half years,” Lisa said. “I’m not allowed to have visitors. I don’t have the option of coping. I just survive.”

Key to the prosecution’s case are the seemingly damning text messages. One from Germaine allegedly alludes to Sanaa being restrained: “I don’t want her to sleep with her hands behind her back, for some people can die like that ...”

Another text from Lisa allegedly reads: “Sanaa pissed in the garage ... So fucking nasty. Fuck it. I will give her nasty ass a Pampers. She can sit in it and get hosed off when I get up.”

Lisa denies the couple exchanged the messages, claiming they’ve been fabricated “to build an alternate narrative” in Sanaa’s death. (The Goodyear Police Department declined *marie claire*’s request for an interview.)

Defence lawyer Eric Kessler suggested there were possible “political” factors behind the charges (Lisa’s defence team declined to speak to us). To that end, Lisa says their arrest came about after they threatened to sue the state over Sanaa’s death, and Germaine’s ex-wife also prepared to lodge a claim for damages.

“At that point the state became interested in charging us,” says Lisa. As for Sanaa’s shocking injuries, “she was a documented and diagnosed self-harmer,” Lisa declares. Yet a pathology report questioned if Sanaa’s wounds were “the result of self-harming behaviours, inflicted injuries or restraint, or a combination of both”.

Such questions will be pored over by a jury in 2023 in a case that will create a stir in Australia should the death penalty come into play. At press time, the trial date for Lisa, who posts updates on a Facebook page, Justice for Lisa Cunningham, was scheduled for February, though it will likely be later in the year, says a source.

Whatever lies ahead, Lisa says she is innocent and that the loss of Sanaa overshadows everything, including the prospect of living on death row. “Losing a child doesn’t ever move out from in front of you,” she said. “It’s stationary like a giant boulder; you live around it.”

If this story raises issues for you, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14.