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Tamika Huston's family: Help is key to police search

24-year-old disappeared in 2004; man later confessed to brutally murdering her

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Where could she be? What should we do?

For 15 months, family and friends of Tamika Huston asked themselves the first question, and through a long, slow and painful process, they answered the second.

Huston's loved ones learned important lessons they are willing to share with others in hopes of yielding a happy outcome they didn't find. On Wednesday, the fifth anniversary of her disappearance and death, they launched www.tamikahuston.org, a Web site for the nonprofit Tamika Huston Foundation for the Missing.

Rebkah Howard, Huston's aunt and executive director of the foundation, said Friday that a missing person should be reported immediately, and that the family should forge a good relationship with law enforcement and be persistent.

"Families have to learn to become advocates for the missing person," Howard said. "They have to bang the drum when others might not."

Authorities think Huston died May 27, 2004. Christopher Hampton, an acquaintance made by Huston a short time before her disappearance, eventually confessed in 2005 to killing Huston with a hot iron in 2004. Hampton led authorities to a spot where Huston's remains were located, then he pleaded guilty to murder in 2006.



Tamika Huston

He received a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

Hampton's confession and sentence, along with the recovery of Huston's body, brought 15 months of wondering and worrying to a close, but it couldn't bring back the vibrant person with a wonderful singing voice and a heart to help others. Howard, who is only 7 years older than Huston would be, recalled her niece making her stop the car to get food for a homeless person they had just passed.

"I knew her legacy had to be so much more than the circumstances of her death," Howard said. "This will be her way of making a mark on the world -- helping others."

Huston frequently traveled. Although her big family often kept in touch with phone calls, about two weeks passed before they realized something might be wrong.

The indicator of trouble was that her dog, Macy, had been left in bad conditions. The gap cost the family and investigators valuable time.

Because of the 24-year-old's love of travel, they feared she could be far from her Freemont School Apartments home. They passionately tried to bring her case to the attention of national cable TV shows that focused on missing white women who became household names, but they had little success.

Howard said the family was disappointed by the lack of attention, but they didn't begrudge the other victims or their families.

Howard said she's not taking anything away from the heartbreaking aspects of the widely publicized cases but wants more names of missing people to be highlighted, and she's seen "small steps" of progress, citing exposure of the case of LaToyia Figueroa, who went missing from the Philadelphia area in 2005. Figueroa's remains were found a month later.

A total of 778,161 missing-persons cases were entered into the National Crime Information Center in 2008, according to a report by the FBI. Of those, 745,088 had been cleared or canceled by investigators nationwide by the time of the report.

Public Information Officer Tony Ivey of the Spartanburg County Sheriff's Office said that agency's forensics unit has handled all missing-persons cases.

Ivey said that unit, led by Sgt. Deanna Burgess, has 13 active cases, and six of those are 16-year-olds reported missing since March who are likely runaways. Ivey said 3,232 cases have been cleared by the sheriff's office since 1993 through a multistep process that starts with a missing-person report, followed by entry in NCIC for qualifying cases and assignment to an investigator, who examines several issues.

"Once the person is located, depending on their age, they are either reunited with

their family or the family is notified that the person has been located and is safe," Ivey said.

Huston's family worked with Spartanburg Public Safety on their exhaustive search.

"We really became an ally of the investigators," Howard said. "Families that take an adversarial position to law enforcement are being completely counterproductive."

Spartanburg Public Safety has a policy detailing guidelines for cases of missing adults and children and factors that might elevate risk levels. Capt. Randy Hardy said quickly reporting a missing person is "paramount" to the investigation. He said police try to learn whether any behavior abnormalities are present.

The department has had 13 missing people reported since January, but none of those cases are active. That number doesn't include about 100 runaways who have been reported since January.

Runaways, Ivey and Hardy said, often are found at the homes of their boyfriends or girlfriends or even at another relative's house.

Howard said her background in public relations gave her an idea of how to get the word out, but it was still a challenge. She said the foundation will help families that are "completely and utterly lost" with what to do. Families needing that help should contact the foundation through the Web site.

"I knew there was a need for this," Howard said. "I'm so happy it's finally coming to fruition.

"If you speak to anyone who knew Tamika, they will tell you she had this spirit of helping others," Howard said.
