

Finding Blacks gone missing

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(Special to the NNPA from the Washington Informer) — Tamika Huston went missing in the late spring of 2004, disappearing from the Spartanburg, S.C., area. The 24-year-old's remains would be found by police a year later in a wooded area after her boyfriend confessed to her murder.



The faces above are among the hundreds of missing African Americans, which led Derrica Wilson, a Falls Church, VA. Police officer, to launch Black and Missing, Inc. (BAM), a web site for missing people of color.

One year later, Alabama teenager Natalee Holloway disappeared from the Aruban resort town of Oranjestad while on a high school graduation trip with friends. The principal suspect maintains that he left her on a local beach. Her whereabouts remain unknown. The Holloway case received a great degree of media attention during the summer of 2005, with the missing teen's mother, Beth Twitty, becoming a fixture on cable news commentaries as she sought justice for her daughter.

Huston's aunt, Rebekah Howard, mounted a similar campaign for the media spotlight, but would have less fortune in enticing major media outlets to report on her niece's disappearance.

Apart from age and location, there was an immediate difference between the two women that Huston's aunt would later conclude to account for the uneven media coverage: Natalee Holloway was white. Tamika Huston was Black.

The idea that the American news media and the public are more likely to fixate on young, attractive, endangered white women —fitting the literary model of the damsel-in-distress – has been debated for years by critics, scholars and journalists. Proponents of this theory suggest that, for missing people of color, the resources needed for recovery – media coverage to foster public awareness – are usually not as available, if available at all.

“There's absolutely nothing out here,” said Derrica Wilson, a Falls Church, Va., police officer, who lived in Huston's neighborhood while attending the University of South Carolina.

Huston's case and the family's difficulties in obtaining coverage inspired her to start Black and Missing Inc. (BAM), a nonprofit, online service to help families find loved ones that have disappeared. While the service is not discriminatory, it is tailored to draw attention to what Wilson said is a group “severely underserved by the media,” the more than 260,000 African-Americans on file as missing, according to a 2006 report by the National Crime Information Center, a database of the FBI. According to the report, more than 80 percent of missing Blacks are minors.

“We're just trying to provide that equal opportunity,” Wilson said at the service's launch. “You don't see the publicity for [missing people of color].”

BAM's Web site provides numerous search options to find information on missing persons. Families and friends can also upload profiles and pictures of loved ones that have disappeared.

Wilson said too often, parents do not have the necessary materials to assist police in locating missing children during the critical early hours of disappearance. She urges parents to have up-to-date pictures of their children, as well as fingerprints on file – a service she hopes for BAM to provide in the near future.

In many child abduction cases, the perpetrator is known to the child, often a parent or close relative. For this reason, Wilson said teachers should be notified of custody conflicts in the home.

“The communication lines should be very open,” she said.

The community’s involvement in recovering the missing is crucial, according to Wilson.

“Someone knows something out there,” she said, adding that reluctance to cooperate with local police only impedes retrieval efforts. “Get off that not snitching.”

At BAM’s launch, Wilson had words of respect for the missing and their families—framed against a solemn slideshow of dignified graduation profiles and portraits of children with hopeful, smiling eyes. She empathized with the open-ended torture of those waiting for the loved ones to return.

“There’s no closure,” Wilson said. “There’s anticipation that they’ll be knocking on your door.” But she also had a warning for those present that had not experienced such tragedy – to appreciate a safe, secure family.

“You never know if when your loved one walks out that door,” Wilson said, “if that’ll be the last time you see them.”