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Man charged with murder in Tamika Huston case

By Mark Memmott, USA TODAY

Police in Spartanburg, S.C., said Friday they've arrested a man for the murder of Tamika Huston, the 24-year-old African-American who became a symbol for critics of the national media's apparent lack of interest in missing adults unless they're young, attractive, white women.



Huston's disappearance became a rallying point for critics who decried media attention to other cases.

Family photo

Under arrest: Christopher Hampton, 25, an acquaintance of Huston's who was released from federal prison Friday. He had been in prison for an unrelated crime.

Hampton was not incarcerated when Huston disappeared in May 2004. At that time, Spartanburg Director of Public Safety Tony Fisher said Friday, Hampton was living in an apartment where a significant amount of Huston's blood was later found.

Huston is presumed dead because of the large amount of blood discovered in the apartment. Fisher said "forensic evidence" has given his department what it needs to charge Hampton with murder, but he would not comment further during a news conference in Spartanburg.

The arrest may also have led to the discovery of Huston's body Friday. The *Spartanburg Herald-Journal* reported Saturday that at some point in the day Friday police were led by Hampton to some woods in the area where human remains were found. The newspaper said authorities hope to positively identify the remains, which may be Huston's, by Monday.

While the cases of Laci Peterson, Lori Hocking, Natalee Holloway and other young white women dominated cable news networks, Huston got almost no national attention for nearly a year after she went missing. When her case finally got significant coverage, the stories were mostly about the national media's lack of interest, compared to cases involving young white women. (**Related:** [Groups spotlight others missing](#))

The stories also noted that young white women are by no means the "typical" missing persons: Slightly more than half of missing adults are men and nearly 30% are black, even though blacks account for just 13% of the U.S. population. The FBI has nearly 50,000 active cases involving missing adults.

Those stories — on National Public Radio and in USA TODAY — and sharply critical commentaries by Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson, galvanized debate within the national media about coverage of missing persons. CBS' *Early Show*, NBC's *Dateline*, CNN Headline News' Nancy Grace and washingtonpost.com are among media that have addressed the topic.

In their defense, network executives such as MSNBC Vice President Mark Efron said race and gender were not the driving factors behind their choice of stories. (**Related:** ['Dateline' visits missing-persons coverage](#))

Huston's aunt, Rebkah Howard, is spokeswoman for the missing woman's family. She said Friday the family feels some relief after Hampton's arrest but feels "as if we're only halfway there. We still don't know where Tamika is and we know it will be a lengthy process before he's ever convicted."

The last confirmed sighting of Huston was May 27, 2004 in Spartanburg. Family and friends became concerned several days later when they realized she hadn't been to her apartment for some time. Huston's dog, Macy, had given birth to puppies in the apartment and it was clear no one had been there for the births or to care for the animals.

Immediately after reporting Huston's disappearance to Spartanburg police, her family began trying to call attention to her case. Howard, who is a public relations professional in Miami, alerted newspapers and TV stations in South Carolina. The family handed out fliers and held candlelight vigils. A reward fund was created. The efforts paid off: Local media did stories about Huston's disappearance. By mid-June 2004, her case was atop the local media's agenda.

Then Howard contacted national media. They had given heavy coverage to the disappearance of Peterson, from Modesto, Calif., in 2002-2003. Peterson's husband Scott was convicted of her murder earlier this year and was sentenced to death. Laci Peterson was 27.

Howard talked to all four TV networks and major newspapers, including USA TODAY. Fox News Channel's *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren* briefly noted Huston's disappearance last August. But no other national media outlets were interested.

At the same time, however, most national news media were devoting airtime and newsprint to the July 19, 2004, disappearance of Hacking, 27, of Salt Lake City. Her husband later pled guilty to her murder and was sentenced to between six years and life in prison.

Huston's full story wasn't told nationally until March this year, on the Fox network's *America's Most Wanted*. Then in May and June, National Public Radio and USA TODAY did reports about Huston and the lack of media interest in her disappearance compared to the intense coverage of "runaway bride" Jennifer Wilbanks and missing Alabama teen Holloway. She disappeared in Aruba on May 30.

Bloggers also championed Huston's case, as they have that of LaToyia Figueroa. A 24-year-old black and Hispanic woman from Philadelphia, she has been missing since July 18. She has a 7-year-old daughter and was five months pregnant when she disappeared.

Two weeks ago, when police searched a park near her home, Figueroa's case got substantial coverage on cable news networks. Since then, however, national media have not paid much attention.

One case of a missing man has recently caught the cable news networks' attention. George Smith, the "missing groom," disappeared in early July from a cruise ship while on his honeymoon in the Mediterranean. But other than Smith, national media have paid little attention to missing men.

Howard, Huston's aunt, is convinced that national media attention can make a big difference to solving a missing person's case.

"I have a huge amount of respect for the Spartanburg Public Safety Department and they devoted an enormous amount of time to Tamika's case," she said. "But I know the national media attention we finally got only helped. It brought new leads and it did keep a fire lit under the police."

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