

## REMEMBERING RAVEN - A YEAR AFTER HER UNSOLVED BRUTAL SLAYING, HER FAMILY WORKS TO FIND PEACE

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It's nearly sundown in this southwest Detroit neighborhood. Children shriek as they play outside on a warm summer evening. Mothers sweep their porches and stoops, pausing to chastise their young ones for riding their bikes too far.

Brenda **Jeffries**, one of the moms, busies herself another way. She gathers boxes of white votive and utility candles before crossing her narrow street to a vacant lot.

Waiting for her there is a memorial, a poster-size picture of her dead daughter, **Raven**, smiling amid stuffed animals, flowers, toys and the trinkets any 7-year-old girl would love. One by one, **Jeffries** places the candles in holders and lights them.

Sometimes her tears flow freely. Other times she's hardened, relying on her steely resolve to keep her daughter's memory alive - and her desire to see **Raven**'s killer caught.

**Jeffries** also yearns to turn this spot - where **Raven** disappeared - into a playground or park, a safe place for kids with trees and a pond, a reminder that "this is God's world."

"I'm not going to let no one forget, and this is what I know to do right here, to let everybody know that I haven't went nowhere and my little girl hasn't went nowhere and to let these monsters know that I'm not going nowhere," **Jeffries**, 42, said. "They're going to be caught soon."

It was a year ago Saturday that **Raven Jeffries**, a chubby-cheeked 7-year-old about to enter second grade at Priest Elementary School, vanished from near her home on the 6500 block of McDonald Avenue near Lonyo in a corner of the city not far from Dearborn. She'd been riding her bike and playing with other neighborhood kids when her older brother noticed she'd vanished.

Three days later, after a frantic search by police, family, friends and strangers, a child's body was found in a field in Romulus, burned beyond recognition. Ten days after her disappearance, police confirmed that the dead child was **Raven**.

There have been no arrests. Romulus police took over the case from Detroit investigators because the body was discovered there. Investigators are awaiting results of some Michigan State Police forensics testing of evidence collected under search warrants. They hope it will yield more clues about the killer.

But the case has been slow to develop, to the distress of **Raven**'s relatives - who believe they know who killed **Raven** - and investigators. Romulus Police Lt. John Leacher said "in the not too distant future" more information could become available. He would not comment on specifics, saying it could jeopardize the investigation.

"I have 20 years of law enforcement, and I've seen homicides of varying magnitude and intensity ... but this case here with **Raven** tops all of that," Leacher said this week. "I don't know that I've ever seen a more horrific homicide. It's still something that I think about probably just about every day. It gets frustrating for us, because we want to bring some resolution to the family, and we'd like to get the person off the streets that did this to her."

### Mommy loves **Raven**

**Jeffries** still smiles when she watches and listens to cell phone recordings her daughter made the day before she disappeared. **Raven** is singing joyfully - no particular song, just a mishmash of humming and sounds.

At times, **Jeffries** finds peace while working on **Raven**'s memorial. She grew sunflowers from seeds and planted them there, along with hostas and tricolor violas. She's painting a large statue of Jesus' mother, Mary, to add to the memorial and installed donated solar lights for those times when money runs too thin to buy candles.

But the sadness is never far away. **Jeffries** still washes and folds her dead daughter's clothing at least once a week. She talks to her and wakes expecting to see the little girl in her bed, sleepily muttering, "Hi, Momma." **Jeffries** still tells people that she has three girls and three boys, though **Raven**, her youngest, is gone. She often sees **Raven** in the eyes of dozens of neighborhood kids.

"Every little thing I do for her means so much to me because this is my way of letting my daughter know that Mommy is still here and that Mommy loves her," **Jeffries** said. "I really don't believe that she's actually gone. In a lot of ways, I feel like someone has taken her and they just won't give her back. And when I do sit here and try to accept it, it's very, very painful. It's very painful."

### Crime touches children

**Jeffries** blames herself for **Raven**'s death. Despite initial reports that she had walked to a nearby store to buy supplies to barbecue the day **Raven** disappeared, **Jeffries** now acknowledges that she had taken a Tylenol for back pain and fallen asleep. **Raven**'s brother David Hosler, now 20, was supposed to be watching the girl but had gone inside for a moment. She was gone when he returned.

"It makes me angry that this case is still going on," Hosler said. "I've done watched other cases on TV of people in the suburbs. To me, I feel that they're putting us in a different category: Poor ghetto child disappears. If we were living in the suburbs this case would have been solved a long time ago."

Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy said the dedication of Romulus investigators to find **Raven** 's killer is unmatched. "There aren't a group of people on this Earth who want to solve this case more," she said.

**Raven** 's friends visit her memorial often. One is still in counseling and refuses to sleep in his own bed. He has nightmares that he'll be abducted and often tells his mother that he thinks he sees the vehicle **Raven** left in.

Another neighbor, Juan Ruinoso, 10, said he tries to remember the good times with **Raven** , playing cards and video games and with toy soldiers. He remembers that he taught her how to ride a bike.

"She didn't know what to do at first," said Juan, who is entering fifth grade at Bedford Elementary School. "She was shaking. I told her to don't be scared and to look at my cousin do it."

Beside the neighborhood memorial, **Raven** 's memory also remains alive on Internet blogs, her Web site, My Space page and online books, many of which ask people to submit tips about her killing.

While many in the neighborhood have tried to move on - kids mostly play freely now after months of careful watching by parents - **Jeffries** doesn't believe she'll ever heal, though an arrest would give her a sense of peace, if not closure.

"I know a couple people has gave me hugs before and said as time goes on it will get easier," she said. "Well, I'm here to tell you it hasn't gotten easier. It has gotten worse. The loneliness gets worser. It really does.

"I feel very alone. Depressed and alone," she said, crying.

"I can see that, just within a blink of eye, one minute your child is here and the next minute they're not.

"And I'm still in a state of shock, really truly, I'm still in a state of shock. Because I don't believe that she's gone. ... I don't know why anybody would hurt a little girl that was so innocent. She didn't do anything to no one."

## SIDEBARS

### Crime's chronology

Aug. 4, 2006: **Raven Jeffries** , 7, disappears from her southwest Detroit neighborhood. An Amber Alert is issued.

Aug. 5: Family and neighbors flood the area with flyers. Police search door-to-door and with dogs.

Aug. 7: A man finds a child's burned body in a field in Romulus. Detroit police question people from **Raven** 's neighborhood, family members and friends. Many take polygraphs.

Aug. 8: Family members and friends hold vigil for **Raven** 's safe return. The Michigan State Police forensics laboratory in Northville asks for **Raven** 's dental records and hair samples to compare with those from the body.

Aug. 14: Police confirm the remains are those of **Raven** .

Aug. 21: More than 200 people attend **Raven** 's funeral.

Nov. 2006: **Raven** 's mother sets up a memorial Web site, [www.ravenmariejeffries.com](http://www.ravenmariejeffries.com). Police say they've questioned more than 30 people in the search for a suspect.

Since her death: Nearly nightly, family members light memorial candles for **Raven** at the spot where she was last seen. No arrest has been made.

## SUZETTE HACKNEY

### Where to find help

Experts advise families who have lost a child by violence or another way to share their thoughts and emotions with people they trust. Grief educator Carol Staudacher writes about the subject on [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com). Find her essays by searching for her last name. Browse under the Comfort & Support heading for more advice. Here are other sources of help:

\*American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org). Click on Facts for Families and search for the words death and grief.

\*National Association of School Psychologists: [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org). Search for death and grief.

\*Johns Hopkins Children's Center lists books and videos: [www.hopkinschildrens.org](http://www.hopkinschildrens.org). Find it by searching under death.

\*Cincinnati-based National Parents of Murdered Children has a metro Detroit chapter that meets at 6:30 p.m. on the second Thursday of the month at St. David's Episcopal Church, 16200 W. Twelve Mile, between Southfield and Greenfield roads, in Southfield. The next meeting is Aug. 9. The group also operates a hotline at 248-360-9692.

In **Raven** 's memory

A candlelight vigil for **Raven Jeffries** is planned for Saturday at sundown in the 6500 block of McDonald, Detroit. Anyone with information about the killing should call Romulus police at 734-941-8400.

At freep.com: Hear her mom and brother.

Contact SUZETTE HACKNEY at 313-222-6614 or shackney@freepress.com.

ILLUSTRATION: Map Detroit Free Press;Photo

CAPTION: Brenda **Jeffries** , 42, of Detroit lights candles to place around the memorial she built in the lot where her 7-year-old daughter **Raven Marie Jeffries** was last seen. **Jeffries** says she has lots of plans for the site but says she needs to secure everything so people don't steal or vandalize contents of the shrine.

KIMBERLY P. MITCHELL / Detroit Free Press

**Raven** 's brother David Hosler was watching her when she disappeared. He says the case is treated differently because it didn't happen in one of Detroit's suburbs. "To me, I feel that they're putting us in a different category: Poor ghetto child disappears."

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