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A life too short, a mystery for too long

By Lori Kurtzman

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Police couldn't identify the burned body, not right away. The condition made even simple distinctions impossible.

Man or woman? a television reporter asked.

"It is real hard to tell," Lt. Chris Ruehmer told the camera. "It is real hard to tell."

But two miles away, a grandmother stared at her television and knew in her heart what police would later confirm through dental records.

The body was that of the girl she'd reported missing May 4, 2006, five days earlier. It was Casonya "Sharee" Crawford, the feisty, ambitious 14-year-old who slipped away one night, walked down the road and met a fate too horrible to comprehend.

That burned body belonged to a girl who wore SpongeBob pajamas to bed.

It is real hard to tell.

Inside a three-story house up steep little Juergens Avenue in Avondale, Patricia Crawford fell to her knees and screamed.

The sun shines through the trees at Vine Street Hill Cemetery. The ground of Lot 25 is covered in acorns, the grass damp with dew.

Crawford looks frail standing there, a thin, 52-year-old woman wrapped up in a large coat, her hands clasped at her waist. She's quiet as she stares down at a slab of polished granite.

"In God's Care," the gravestone reads. Oct. 26, 1991 - May 4, 2006.

Sharee would have been 16 today.

"In God's care," Crawford sniffs. "It wasn't time for her to be in his care."

Sharee's slaying has not been solved.

Police didn't return three calls about the investigation and the coroner's office wouldn't release her autopsy report while the case remains open.

The May 9, 2006, incident report from when she was found contains only this note: "Victim died as a result of homicidal violence."

Unknown, also, is whether Sharee's death is linked to the death of 45-year-old Mary Jo Newton, whose body was found a month later in Avondale, also burned beyond recognition.

The questions haunt Crawford.

Nearly a year and a half after Sharee's murder, Crawford, who was the girl's grandmother and guardian, hasn't begun to heal. She's lost 25 pounds. She forgets to eat. She guzzles White Castle coffee and her mind reels with theories of who might have done this, and why.

Her frustration with detectives continues to grow. She has her list of suspects and thinks the answer is right in front of them.

Above all, she can't believe that whoever did this is still out there.

"It's hell on me," she says. "I'm so heartbroken, and it's hard for this pain to even begin to be mended."

'Out of character'

Crawford last saw her granddaughter on May 3, 2006.

Sharee had taken a bath and slipped on the new SpongeBob pajamas Crawford had bought her. Crawford was watching the 10 p.m. news and asked Sharee to make sure the front door was locked.

Sharee crept out instead. She'd changed clothes and headed to a friend's house. One of Crawford's grandsons saw the teen walking down the street and called out to his grandmother.

"I said, 'Tell her to come back,' " Crawford remembers. "I'm so upset. Normally, I'd jump in the car and chase her."

Sharee kept walking. She'd sneaked out before.

Sometimes she'd stay with her mother, Crawford's daughter, Tanika. Sometimes she'd end up hanging out with friends. Who knows where she went that night, how she ended up in a pile of tires, one around her neck, in the wooded dead-end of Blair Avenue in Avondale.

Crawford couldn't reach Sharee the next morning. Her cell phone just rang.

Text messages, even from her father, went unanswered. Crawford called Hoffman School at 8 a.m. She's not here yet, the teacher said.

Crawford called again at 9. Still no Sharee.

"I knew then. I already knew," Crawford says. "This was so out of character."

She filed a police report at 1:35 p.m. May 4.

Missing was a 14-year-old black female, height 5-foot-9, weight 150, on the depression medication Wellbutrin. "Med complx, shoulder length micro-braids," the report read. Sharee had just gotten those braids done. They'd cost \$200.

Days ticked by. No Sharee. Her voicemail filled up.

Crawford knew something was wrong. She didn't know just how wrong.

"I just can't believe it went down like that," she says.

The TV brought the news May 9. A decomposed body discovered by city workers just before 1 p.m. Crawford called police.

Is that my granddaughter?

They told her they didn't know.

Fifteen minutes later, detectives were at the door, asking for dental records.

'Every bit of strength'

In the days after her death, pieces of Sharee continued to pop up in the lives of those she knew. A friend hung onto a weeks-old text message from Sharee: "No matter how many ups and downs we have, I'm gon always be here."

Crawford developed the film in the girl's camera and there was the last known picture of Sharee: A sassy kid in white sneakers and a denim skirt, one hand on her hip, one leaning against a telephone pole. She's wearing glasses and her hair is pulled back and she is smiling like she is really something.

That was Sharee, Crawford says.

"You couldn't tell her she wasn't all of that," she says.

Sharee was a loud knock on the front door, so loud you could recognize it just from the knuckles on the wood. She was a basketball player who wanted to be a doctor and had a way of dancing around the house, shaking and jiggling that made her grandmother shake

her head and say "that's too much." She was the life of the house, Crawford's best friend, a kid who'd sometimes sneak out of the house but would always come back.

Now, she is a memory. A gravesite with a fake purple flower near the headstone.

Crawford visits her several times a week and feels silly talking to a patch of land. "It seems like it takes every bit of strength I have to come up here," she says. "But I gotta come."

There's one more thing Sharee was, Crawford says.

A loud scream. Crawford knows that when Sharee went down, she didn't go quietly. She hopes that whoever killed her granddaughter still hears those shouts in his head, that the screams only get louder, that someday they become unbearable.