

'Missing' cases often unresolved

Jackson's 39 files last year among hundreds statewide

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As the search for missing Kosciusko businesswoman Vickie Ellington continues, families and friends of more than 500 other missing people in Mississippi can share in the hope that their loved ones, too, will be found unharmed.

Since Jan. 1, 2010, 524 people have been reported missing by various jurisdictions in Mississippi to the FBI's National Crime Information Center.

In Jackson, the city Police Department had 39 active missing persons cases last year.

"These people come from different backgrounds, they're young, they're old," Jackson police spokeswoman Colendula Green said.

While common sense dictates people simply don't disappear, sometimes that can appear to be the case.

Police have had no clues explaining the disappearance of Hanan Forawi, 44, a Jackson State University doctoral student.

Forawi has been missing since 2006. She was known to be hard-working and resourceful, Green said, but some people believe she may have just cracked under the pressure and walked away.

"She was a very intelligent lady," Green said, referring to her reputation as a good student.

Forawi's brother came to America in 2009, bent on finding out what had happened to his sister. Green said he was trying to make sure she had not, for some reason, been deported.

"But he didn't believe she had," Green said.

Virginia Ratliff of Brookhaven also has been missing without a trace since February 2008.

Ratliff, 83, disappeared en route to see her husband at the VA Hospital in Jackson. Authorities have searched all over the state in vehicles, on foot, and even with a specialized air photography service.

Ratliff's brother, Caby Byrne, said the family is "pretty realistic" about the chances she is still alive. But they have questions that might never be answered, such as whether Ratliff was a victim of foul play.

"I'm all for those remote possibilities that out there somewhere, she may have just been lost and wandered," Byrne said. "But the car is always the big factor - Where's the car?"

Her family members say they just hope one day they'll have some closure.

When Ratliff's husband, Charles "Ploochie" Ratliff, died, the family held a memorial celebration for both.

"Even that was a kind of a step that helps you with the reality of what you're dealing with," Byrne said.

The case of another elderly woman was a reminder of Ratliff's. Ethel Winstead Simpson, 81, of Clinton, was missing for about a week in September when her body was found on the property of a hog farmer outside of Edwards.

Simpson's big heart had gotten her into trouble, officials said, when she befriended 39-year-old James Cobb Hutto of Jasper, Ala. She was last seen at a Vicksburg casino with Hutto. Authorities say Hutto beat her, dumped her body and headed out of state in her car. He allegedly killed an aunt in Alabama and attempted to kill another man shortly thereafter, officials said.

Kelly Ann Irwin's disappearance also had an unhappy ending. Irwin, 44, who was last seen walking down a road near her home in December. She was discovered face down in a creek. Walthall County Coroner Shannon Hartzog said it looked like she had been dead about 19 days. Officials said while Erwin appear to have drowned, she had bruising consistent with either a beating or a fall. The case is being investigated as a homicide. No suspects have been named so far.

"We certainly hope it doesn't turn out that it is actually foul play," said District Attorney Dee Bates. "But we have to explore every possibility."

Then there's the case of Sherrell Harris Shaw, 32, of Jackson, reported missing by her family Dec. 7. A passer-by found her body in Jan. 10 in a wooded area on South Drive near Dixon Road. She had been shot in the chest.

Officials still do not have a suspect in her case.

Some stories turn out much better than others like that of Jack Nixon, 83, who went missing on the way to the grocery store in Meadville one Sunday. Nixon was found a few days later in Florida, disoriented, but otherwise healthy. Police believe he simply suffered a bout of dementia and then could not figure out how to get back to where he was going.

"That was the most stressful 36 hours I've ever lived while Jack was gone, and it's so complicated," Nixon's stepson, Ken Stroud, said.

Since his stepfather came home, Stroud said he views missing persons cases in a new light. "It seems that overwhelmingly these cases do turn out bad, I guess I knew that, and I know now more than before," he said. "At the time I knew it could go bad quickly if we didn't find him immediately, though."

In Ellington's case, Department of Public Safety Public Affairs Director Jon Kalahar said authorities are chasing every lead because there still is no evidence to suggest that she has met with foul play.

"You never know which piece of evidence or phone number will be the lead you need," he said. Ellington's car has been combed for evidence by the state crime lab. Her cell phone records have been pulled. Family members and others have been interviewed.

Teams searched Ellington's property in Attala County, where she lives on about 100 acres with her 8-year-old grandson, Kalahar said. That search is strictly to cover the bases, however.

"They didn't want to come back and say, 'We should have looked here first,'" he said. "They're going to look in every possible spot, and leave no stone unturned."

Ellington, owner of Kosciusko Fitness and Tanning, was reported missing around 8 p.m. on Jan. 27. Her vehicle was found in the Walmart parking lot on Mississippi 25 about 1 p.m. that day. She reportedly had told friends she was going to meet someone in Louisville.

Kalahar said when Ellington did not meet an employee she was supposed to catch up with that evening, the employee contacted the Attala County Sheriff's Department.

Officials from the Sheriff's Department did not return phone calls seeking comment.

The Jackson Police Department had 39 active missing persons cases in 2010. The names and the dates they were reported missing include:

- Ragan Olney, 12-26-10

- Willie James Young, 10-30-10

- Ronald Johnson, 12-26-10

- Ronald Bowie, 12-14-10

- Tineshia Millsap, 12-18-10

- Tony Jenkins, 12-18-10

- Bruce Taylor, 12-16-10

- Keisha Davis, 12-13-10

- Alberta Albert, 12-7-10

- Toyia Bailey, 10-26-10

- Alexander Washington, 12-3-10

- Patrick Grogan, 12-4-10

- Emma Thomas, 12-1-10

- Micky Barnett, 10-30-10

- Rebekah Singh, 10-24-10

- John Wright, 10-20-10

- George Williams, 10-23-10
- Jack Marton, 10-1-10
- Ricky Shoemaker, 10-2-10
- Sherry Anderson, 6-1-10
- Diana Stofflet, 9-22-10
- Kimberly Keys, 5-1-10
- Erica Bailey, unknown
- Hanan Forawi, 2-2006
- Madonna Goins, 8-24-10
- Fai Chain, 9-3-10
- Latasha Raymo, 8-15-10
- David Bradley, 7-29-10
- Irene Gilmore, 7-31-10
- Walter Tate, 7-23-10
- Latasha Hutton, 7-7-10
- Masi Griffin, 6-8-10
- Olphara Griffin, 5-22-10
- Richard Sarles 5-1-10
- Shameka Jackson, 4-17-10
- Carl Shorter, 3-30-10
- Leslie Deakle, 3-6-10
- Terrence Golden, 3-4-10

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