

Parents of missing children won't give up hope

Event connects families with groups, resources to help locate loved ones

Cindy George, Houston Chronicle | June 9, 2017 | Updated: June 10, 2017 8:38 p.m.



MISSING
HELP BRING ME HOME
NCMEC: 1292976

Shelby Rodriguez
Extra Photo

Missing Since: **Mar 19, 2017**
Missing From: **Sugar Land, TX**
DOB: **Sep 5, 1999**
Age Now: **17**
Sex: **Female**
Race: **Hispanic**
Hair Color: **Black**
Eye Color: **Brown**
Height: **5'2"**
Weight: **125 lbs**

Both photos shown are of Shelby. She was last seen at home on March 19, 2017. Shelby's ears are pierced. She wears glasses. Shelby may be in need of medical attention.

DON'T HESITATE!
ANYONE HAVING INFORMATION SHOULD CONTACT

CALL 911 or
1-800-843-5678 (1-800-THE-LOST®)
Fort Bend County Sheriff's Office (Texas) 1-281-341-4665



MISSING
HELP BRING ME HOME
NCMEC: 1295932

Sonny Costello

Missing Since: **May 2, 2017**
Missing From: **Houston, TX**
DOB: **Jun 2, 2000**
Age Now: **17**
Sex: **Male**
Race: **Hispanic**
Hair Color: **Black**
Eye Color: **Brown**
Height: **5'6"**
Weight: **140 lbs**

Sonny was last seen on May 2, 2017. He may still be in the local area or he may travel to Dallas, Texas.

DON'T HESITATE!
ANYONE HAVING INFORMATION SHOULD CONTACT

CALL 911 or
1-800-843-5678 (1-800-THE-LOST®)
Houston Police Department (Texas) 1-713-884-3131



MISSING
HELP BRING ME HOME
NCMEC: 1278519

Sydney Lewis

Missing Since: **Sep 6, 2016**
Missing From: **Houston, TX**
DOB: **Jul 28, 1999**
Age Now: **17**
Sex: **Female**
Race: **White**
Hair Color: **Red**
Eye Color: **Blue**
Height: **5'1"**
Weight: **120 lbs**

Only Photo Available

Sydney was last seen on September 6, 2016.

DON'T HESITATE!
ANYONE HAVING INFORMATION SHOULD CONTACT

CALL 911 or
1-800-843-5678 (1-800-THE-LOST®)
Houston Police Department (Texas) 1-713-884-3131

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children recent posters of Houston-area children as of June 9, 2017.

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

Fourteen-year-old Jennifer Lee Willis first disappeared after she was punished for talking to strangers in an online chat room.

Her family filed a missing persons report with the Houston Police Department, noting she "never returned after school" on April 18. They found her, alive and well, the next day in their Hiram Clarke neighborhood.

Then, in May, she vanished again. Now, a month later, she still hasn't come back home.

The constant worry and lost sleep has emotionally drained family members, but they cling to their faith and pray for her safe return.

"Until Jennifer is back in here, life is at a standstill," her father, Lee Allen Willis, said recently. "You try to be productive, but you just get by."

The Willis family is not alone in their vigil. Two-thirds of the 566 lost and missing people reported to HPD in April were children, according to a Chronicle review of missing persons reports. The month's cases included 157 missing juveniles, 231 runaway minors and 178 missing adults.

They included a boy who slipped away from a Child Protective Services caseworker by saying he needed to go the bathroom, girls who left with their boyfriends, kids skipping school and one boy who allegedly stole his father's pistol as he left.

"When they run away, it's a little more difficult because you're playing a cat-and-mouse game," said Senior Police Officer Darrin Buse. "With the amount we get, it's very time-consuming."

More Information

How to report a missing person

To report a missing person in Houston, call the Houston Police Department at 832-394-1840. Police say parents do not need to wait 24 hours before reporting a missing child. Be prepared to provide a photo and any other documentation that could be helpful.

Many of those children were located in short order, though Houston police don't maintain an active list of individual cases.

Some never return home, lost to the streets. Others end up in the morgue.

The thousands of lost and missing people in the Houston area - and the dozens of unidentified bodies at the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences morgue - persuaded officials two years ago to reach out to the community.

"Missing in Harris County Day" was founded in 2015 to help relatives connect with resources and organizations that could help them locate a loved one.

The public event, in its third year, is set for 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday at the Houston Food Bank Conference Center, 535 Portwall. The program includes resources for people with missing children and for potentially abducted or exploited relatives, as well as guidance for keeping those with dementia safe.

Relatives are asked to bring photos of the missing person, two close family members from the mother's side for voluntary DNA submissions and any relevant documents, including dental records, X-rays or police reports. Families are encouraged to wear memorial shirts or buttons or bring posters that celebrate the missing person.

The program has resulted so far in the identification of 12 people who died and the location of one living person, according to an institute spokeswoman.

Among those identified was Nidia Rodriguez, the 24-year-old mother of a young son who disappeared on New Year's Eve 2014. Her relatives attended the Missing in Harris County Day in April 2015 and submitted DNA samples.

Through a DNA profile obtained from the University of North Texas' Center for Human Identification last year, investigators were able to link the family samples to the unidentified remains of a young woman discovered in north Houston in August 2015.

The family DNA samples solved the case.

DNA from a second family in 2015 resolved the cold case of Reuben Hernandez, a father in his 30s who disappeared in the 1990s. He had been buried without identification and was exhumed to confirm his identity.

Mosaic of clues

Of the hundreds of unidentified bodies found in Harris County since the 1950s, dozens of open cases remain, according to forensic anthropologist Sharon Derrick, who leads identification efforts at the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences and was among the founders of Missing in Harris County Day.

One particularly intriguing cold case is the body of a teen recovered off Walters Road in north Houston in 2012.

Derrick created a profile based on the remains, which were found in a black garbage bag. The girl was petite, between 4-foot-7 and 5-foot-3. She could have been as young as 14 or as old as 17.

She is believed to be from mixed black and white ancestry but also could be Hispanic. Her clothing included a blue-green Smurfette shirt, a black push-up bra and pink thong panties. The teen had wavy hair dyed deep brown with purple streaks.

Her cause of death could not be determined.

"She was dressed in some relatively adult undergarments, which makes me think about trafficking," Derrick said.

The teen also had dental care at one time, evidenced by tiny molar fillings, but her teeth had begun rotting from unaddressed cavities. The mosaic of clues leads Derrick to believe the teen "was being used in some way."

Today, the young woman would be 19 to 22.

Two high-profile cases this year have drawn attention to missing teens.

In mid-February, the body of a young girl was found dumped on a southwest Houston curb, dead from multiple gunshot wounds.

She later was identified as Genesis Cornejo-Alvarado, a 15-year-old Jersey Village youth who disappeared in January. Her case made national headlines after police revealed she appeared to have been killed by members of the MS-13 Salvadoran gang in a Satanic ritual.

In April, a 15-year-old repeat runaway was fatally struck by a van after escaping CPS care.

Daphne Jackson had been included on local and national missing child alerts after being reported missing in August to Houston police. Her death marked the first time a child had died while sleeping overnight in a CPS office because of the lack of available foster care placements.

Lt. Manuel Cruz, who supervises HPD's 15-officer missing persons unit, urges parents not to wait 24 hours before making a report on a child.

"We want to make sure the public understands they can call immediately and report their loved one missing," he said. "On the Hispanic community side, we don't care what their legal status is. We'll look for anybody. ... It doesn't mean they're going to be arrested. It just means that we're trying to find them."

Family members should provide a recent, clear photo to aid police, along with any other details that could be helpful, such as tattoos, clothing, jewelry and any other distinguishing characteristics.

'She'll be back'

Jennifer Willis remains classified as a runaway, but her parents believe she may have been abducted or lured from the home.

She didn't take her coveted cash - a \$5 bill and quarters on her dresser - or her medication.

Her parents realized she was missing early on May 5, as her two younger sisters were getting ready for school.

Jennifer has mental health and behavioral diagnoses that affect her classwork, maturity and decision-making skills, her parents said.

Her medications were changed a few days before she disappeared.

"She's easy to be influenced," said her mother, Dedra Sykes.

"Especially when she's not on her meds," her father chimed in. "That's the thing that's troubling to me."

The 48-year-old boxer-turned-personal trainer created his own "Amber Alert" text to circulate after he didn't receive the cooperation he expected from police.

HPD spokesman John Cannon said the investigation into Jennifer's disappearance continues, but police believe the teen may be sneaking into the house to shower or eat when her parents and siblings are away.

Cloud technology has given the family hope that she is still alive. Thanks to joint social media accounts, a few photos of Jennifer uploaded since May 5 have shown up on family phones and tablets. She looks thinner, is wearing makeup and has a more adult hairstyle - a long weave or wig with blond highlights. In one photo, she is wearing her mother's shirt and shorts.

Jennifer's parents asked police to investigate the digital fingerprints that identify the devices used to make the posts and provide the approximate location from which they were sent. The latest post, on May 19, was uploaded from the neighborhood.

The teen's grandmother and namesake, 66-year-old Jennifer Lee Willis, said she was alarmed to find photos of her granddaughter on her phone. The teen had apparently taken selfies in a nightgown at the grandmother's Pasadena home.

Family members want Jennifer to know she's not in trouble and would be welcomed home. Her little sisters, Symora, 9, and Mysiah, 4, say they miss her.

"She'll be back here," her mother said. "I'm going to see my baby again."