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Shaniya Davis Found Dead: North Carolina Searchers Find 5-Year-Old-Girl's Body

By. Mike Baker

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SANFORD, N.C. — For a week, authorities feverishly searched for a 5-year-old girl across central North Carolina, only to find her body Monday off a rural road following accusations the girl's mother offered her for sex.

The investigation into the disappearance of Shaniya Davis yielded the arrest of her mother and two other men, though one man was later released. Searchers found Shaniya dumped into the woods 30 miles from her hometown of Fayetteville. Hundreds of volunteers hoping to find her alive left the site of the search dejected, unable to bring Shaniya home to an emotional father, her 7-year-old brother and the dolls she loved to play with.

"I still feel kind of sick to my stomach," said Angela Jackson, 27, from nearby Sanford, who has a two-month-old daughter but searched for consecutive days.

Particularly disturbing were the accusations lodged against Shaniya's mother, 25-year-old Antoinette Davis. Police charged Davis with human trafficking and felony child abuse, saying Shaniya was offered for prostitution.

Davis was calm and quiet during a court appearance. She provided one-word answers to the judge's questions. She requested a court-appointed attorney and did not enter a plea.

Her sister, Brenda Davis, 20, said she does not believe the charges.

"I don't believe she could hurt her children," said Brenda Davis, who spoke with her sister at the jail Sunday. Davis' aunt, Yvonne Mitchell, said the mother had two jobs and would never harm the child.

Authorities also charged Mario Andrette McNeill, 29, with kidnapping after they said surveillance footage from a Sanford hotel showed him carrying Shaniya. Authorities said McNeill admitted taking the girl, though his attorney said he will plead not guilty.

Fayetteville police spokeswoman Theresa Chance declined to talk about additional charges. She also wouldn't comment on a cause of death or the condition of Shaniya's body, except to say that state investigators planned to retrieve it about 100 feet off the road.

"Detectives have been running off adrenaline to find this little girl and to bring her home alive," Chance said. "You have a lot of people in shock right now."

Davis reported Shaniya missing from a mobile home park Tuesday. Authorities first arrested Clarence Coe, but charges against him were dropped a day later when investigators tracked down McNeill after receiving a tip from a hotel employee.

Additional information led investigators to a search site near Sanford on Sunday. They continued searching Monday, scouring miles of landscape, roads, ravines and fields on four-wheelers and with helicopters.

"We were hoping that someone could carry her home," said Syd Severe, 42, who came from Raleigh to help with the search. "It's just sick."

A cluster of emergency vehicles and law enforcement gathered where Shaniya's body was found. Authorities blocked access to the road, a rural area popular with hunters that is less than a mile from a lakeside community.

On Monday night, dozens of people attended a vigil at a Baptist church about two miles from where the body was found.

"We have kids and it just hit so close to home. It's unbelievable how somebody can just do something that horrible to something so precious," said organizer Crystal Godfrey, who lives a few miles from where the body was found.

Shaniya's father, Bradley Lockhart, said he raised his daughter for several years but last month decided to let her stay with her mother. He had pleaded for her safe return.

Lockhart told The Associated Press on Saturday that he and Davis never argued about him raising Shaniya, and Cumberland County courts had no record of a custody dispute. He described his relationship with Davis as a "one-night stand" and said he did not know McNeill.

Davis struggled financially over the years, but she recently got a job and her own place, so Lockhart said he decided to give her a chance with their daughter.

"I should've never let her go over there," he said Saturday night. A friend at Lockhart's home Monday afternoon said Lockhart did not want to speak with reporters.

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