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Memo: Anyone wishing to donate to a reward fund being collected by the family of Laura Van Wyhe may send donations to: Marion County State Bank, 800 Main St., Pella 50219 or to Jackie DeJong, 4328 Lily Ave., Alton 51003.

Correction: (CLARIFICATION, 5/2/97, NOTE: This correction did not appear in the paper. Leanne Thomas of Iowa City has full custody of Samson and Donald Knight of Bonaparte, Iowa has weekend visitation rights.)

Relatives of Iowa City woman start reward fund

They hope it can elicit clues to her death 6 months ago

Lynn M. Tefft Gazette Johnson County Bureau

IOWA CITY - A few weeks before her death, Laura Van Wyhe had been teaching her 14-month-old son, Samson, how to play hide-and-seek. After her death Oct. 26, Samson searched their Iowa City home for her, believing she was playing a game with him.

"He'd go through the house, ripping back shower curtains and opening closet doors," said Van Wyhe's stepfather, John Thomas. "He wasn't having fun anymore."

Van Wyhe was found barely alive along a northeast Missouri highway and died a few hours later in an Illinois hospital. The months since her death have been painful, sad and frustrating for her relatives and friends.

Questions surrounding her death remain unanswered. No arrests have been made. To help jump-start the investigation, family members are putting together a reward fund.

Missouri authorities continue to investigate Van Wyhe's death as a homicide. They are working on new leads produced by the results of lab tests. But they are no closer to an arrest than they were a few months ago, said Trooper Bruce Clemonds of the Missouri State Patrol, who has helped lead the investigation.

Family members hope offering a reward will elicit new information. Van Wyhe's maternal grandmother, Betty Jonker of Hampton, Minn., has been leading a letter-writing drive to raise funds.

A truck driver found Van Wyhe, 21, along Highway 136 just west of Kahoka, Mo., around 2 a.m. Oct. 26. She died at 4:40 a.m. in a hospital in nearby Quincy, Ill.

Van Wyhe was found barefoot and carrying baby items, though her son was found at the Kahoka home where she was spending the night. Authorities have said they do not believe Van Wyhe was injured at the site where she was found.

A coroner's jury determined in December that Van Wyhe, who had worked as a child-care provider in her Iowa City home, died of brain trauma, massive blood loss and blunt force trauma to the legs. The jury classified the death as non-accidental.

Fund raising and daily conversations with authorities help keep the family busy as they deal with their grief, Thomas said.

Everyone is feeling a tremendous amount of pressure, with the stress of not knowing what happened," he said.

The family of Donald Knight, Samson's father, is feeling similar strain.

"It's a very difficult time, trying to adjust to the loss of a fantastic, dynamic member of our family," said Knight's mother, Rebecca Reynolds-Knight of Bonaparte, a Democrat in the Iowa House of Representatives. She represents Jefferson County and parts of Van Buren and Wapello counties.

Van Wyhe had visited Reynolds-Knight's home for a birthday party Oct. 25, the night before she died. She said Van Wyhe went to spend the night with Tony and Sarah Bergman in nearby Kahoka because there weren't enough beds for everyone in Bonaparte. Sarah Bergman is Reynolds-Knight's daughter.

"It was a family affair - Molly (Tony and Sarah Bergman's daughter), Laura and Sam were camping out in the living room," she said. "That's the last time anyone saw her."

Knight's family and Van Wyhe's family say they do not have a close relationship. Thomas said the families are striving to keep their relationship civil for the sake of Samson, of whom they share custody.

Van Wyhe's mother, Leanne Thomas, has Samson five days a week at her Iowa City home.

John Thomas, Leanne's husband, said Van Wyhe's sister Sarah, 23, had started a new job in San Francisco six weeks before Van Wyhe's death. She immediately quit the job and returned to Iowa to help her mother with her catering business.

John Thomas continues to live in Spokane, Wash., where he had taken a job shortly before Van Wyhe's death, because he can't find a job in his profession in Iowa. Meanwhile, his wife remains in Iowa City.

"Our lives are on hold," John Thomas said.

It is the same for her family, Reynolds-Knight said. As they try to provide a loving home for Samson, she said, family members are trying to cope with a hole left in the family.

"Not a day goes by that we don't think of this and wonder, 'Will this be the day that we get that last piece of the puzzle?'" she said.

Clemonds of the Missouri State Patrol expressed frustration that Tony and Sarah Bergman have not submitted to lie detector tests.

But Reynolds-Knight disputed the notion that the Bergmans are being uncooperative.

"We understand in a case like this, the authorities have to look at the family as suspects and have to push in ways that are often painful," she said. "But (the Bergmans) have been forthcoming on this."

The Bergmans declined comment to The Gazette, citing an unpleasant experience with another newspaper.

Thomas said he believes the investigation has been slowed because Missouri authorities have encountered difficulty trying to investigate in Iowa.

He has written to the governors of Iowa and Missouri, asking them to help move the investigation forward.

Clemonds denied there are problems with jurisdiction. The investigation is now centered on southeast Iowa, he said, and Iowa authorities have been cooperative.

Jonker, Van Wyhe's grandmother, said she and her sisters in Iowa and Michigan hope to collect enough money to offer a reward next month.

"It's hard to look at (Van Wyhe's) son and realize she'll never see him grow," she said. "It's very difficult to know she's been denied that pleasure."

Illustration: PHOTO

Laura Van Wyhe Barely alive when found along road

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