

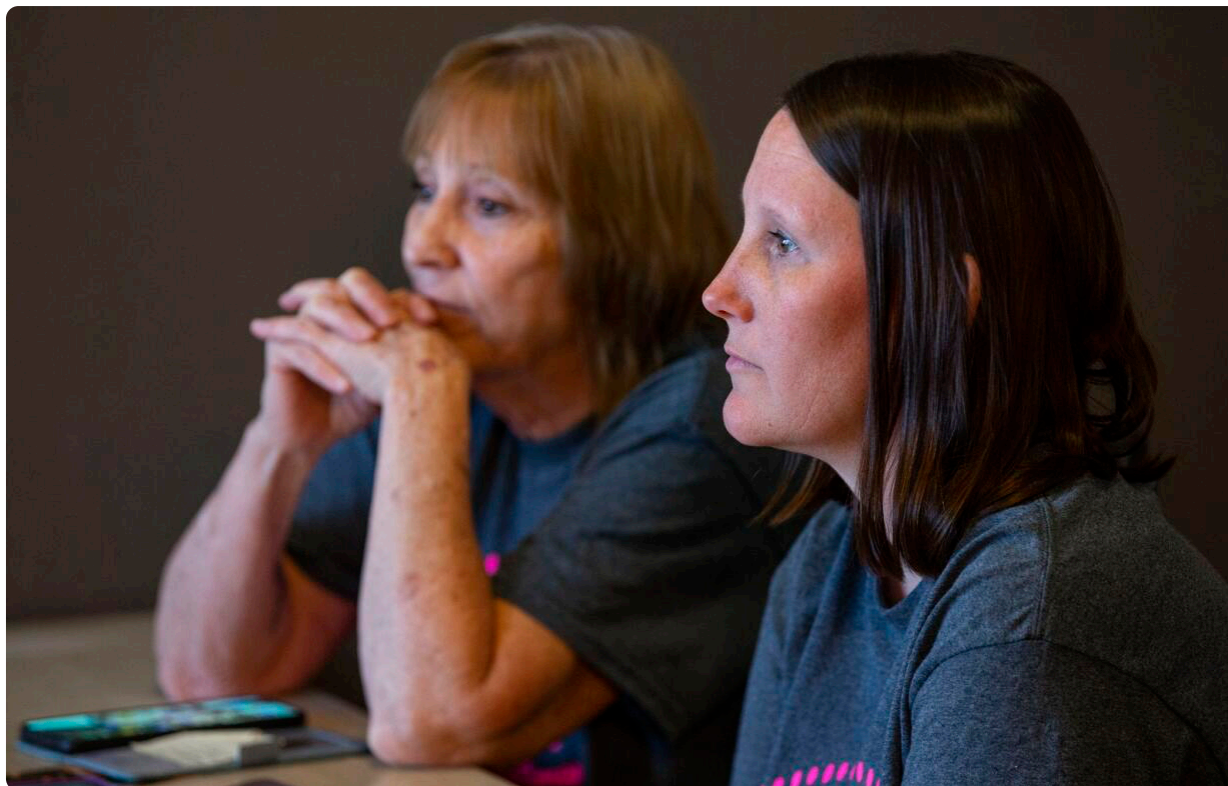
Missing from Cedar Rapids since 2015, 'we just want someone to tell us where he is'

Cedar Rapids investigator narrows down suspects in the cold case



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Josh Wellman's mother, Teresa Walton, and sister, Shawna Hunziker, talk June 5 about the morning Josh went missing in 2015 during an interview at Shawna's home in Vinton. (Savannah Blake/The Gazette)

This is the fourth installment in an occasional [series about cold case investigations](#) in Cedar Rapids and Linn County.

There was nothing unusual that struck Shawna Hunziker about the morning of Nov. 12, 2015, but as her brother got out of her car that day, he said something "weird" — words she still would be thinking about nine years later.

"He said, 'It was really nice to see you today, Shawna,' and I was like "OK,'" Hunziker, sitting at her kitchen table in Vinton, told a Gazette reporter. "I was thinking, why is he being so weird? We see each other all the time."

Hunziker was close to her brother, Josh Wellman, but they didn't express affection like he did that morning. She wonders whether her brother was just being nice — or was worried he might not see her again.

Others always thought she and Wellman, out of five siblings, were twins because they looked so much alike as kids. The two, only 11 months apart, were inseparable.



A photo of Josh Wellman as an adult sits June 5 on the dining room table of his sister, Shawna Hunziker, at her home in Vinton. (Savannah Blake/The Gazette)

Her mother, Teresa Walton, also at Hunziker's kitchen table looking for photos of her son, said those siblings had that "twinning vibe as they were hellions together," riding their bikes and getting into mischief all over Cedar Rapids and later Vinton.

Walton said Wellman, her oldest, continued to be a "hellion," but had always been a "good kid." He loved to be outside fishing, riding his bike, going to Pleasant Creek Beach near Palo, participating in Scouts and building a soapbox derby car that won one year.



Wellman seemed to have a knack for building. After graduating from Vinton High School, he started working construction jobs and enjoyed concrete and cement work.

Hunziker said her brother was bored in school. He was smart and she didn't think he was challenged enough, she said. Walton agreed: He didn't like school and never mentioned trying to go to college.

Hunziker said he wasn't a planner — he was more spontaneous.



Josh Wellman's mother, Teresa Walton, looks June 5 at family photos from when Josh was a child while at the home of Shawna Hunziker, her daughter, in Vinton. (Savannah Blake/The Gazette)

'Wrong crowd'

Wellman's life took a turn after high school, and he got involved with drugs.

Walton said she didn't know about it in the beginning, but he got into the "wrong crowd." She blamed a friend for getting him started, mostly smoking marijuana at first. But Hunziker said he was doing harder drugs at 19. She didn't know exactly when he started using methamphetamine.

Wellman continued to use drugs off and on over the years, and also maintained construction jobs off and on, they said.

The two are realistic about his drug use but they weren't around it because he shielded them from that part of his life as it became an addiction. To them, he still was the person they loved unconditionally.

Walton admits she was worried all the time. She would get late-night phone calls over the years from her son, calling when he got in trouble and was in jail for drugs. Wellman had a few criminal convictions, all drug-related.

Walton and Hunziker always tried to help him. They committed him one time for rehab, but eventually realized it didn't matter what they did — he had to want to change himself.

"He couldn't beat it," Hunziker said.



Josh Wellman's mother, Teresa Walton, and sister, Shawna Hunziker, sort through photos June 5 of Josh throughout his childhood and adulthood while at Shawna's home in Vinton. (Savannah Blake/The Gazette)

Pink unicorn, backpack left behind

Wellman, 35, was staying with his mother in November 2015 in Cedar Rapids. He was in contact with her or his sister almost every day, and wouldn't be gone for more than one night, Walton said.

At the time, he had an 8-month-old daughter and was back in outpatient treatment through the Area Substance Abuse Council. His girlfriend, the mother of his child, was in a residential treatment facility. Wellman also had another daughter from a previous relationship, who is now 19.

Hunziker said on Nov. 12, 2015, she had taken the day off from work to go with Wellman to visit his 8-month-old, but his visit was canceled for some reason. He also had an ASAC appointment, which is where she and her mother dropped him off that day.

Walton didn't get home from work until 10 p.m. that evening. Her son wasn't there, but a stuffed pink unicorn was sitting in the kitchen. She assumed he got it for his daughter.

Wellman didn't come back to her apartment that night. She and Hunziker became concerned when it turned into four days, with no contact from him.

Walton said her son's backpack, which he always carried with him, was later found in her apartment. The backpack and stuffed animal were left behind, which Walton thought was odd.

She and Hunziker reported him missing to police on Nov. 16, 2015. They didn't think the officers were too serious about the case at first, believing officers looked at Wellman as another "druggie." But they kept pushing.

They both accepted that Wellman likely was dead, since he would have tried to contact them and seen his daughters.



Photos of Josh Wellman are displayed June 5 on the dining room table at Shawna Hunziker's home in Vinton. Wellman has been missing since 2015. (Savannah Blake/The Gazette)

Investigation opens

Cedar Rapids police Investigator Matt Denlinger said because of Wellman's lifestyle, his family didn't have many details about his day-to-day activities or associates.

Walton and Hunziker did tell investigators that a friend of Wellman's told them he had called Wellman about 9:30 p.m. Nov. 12, 2015. Wellman told the friend he was at his mom's apartment with several other people that he wanted to leave Denlinger said.

Denlinger said it was known to police at the time that Wellman was cooking and selling meth.

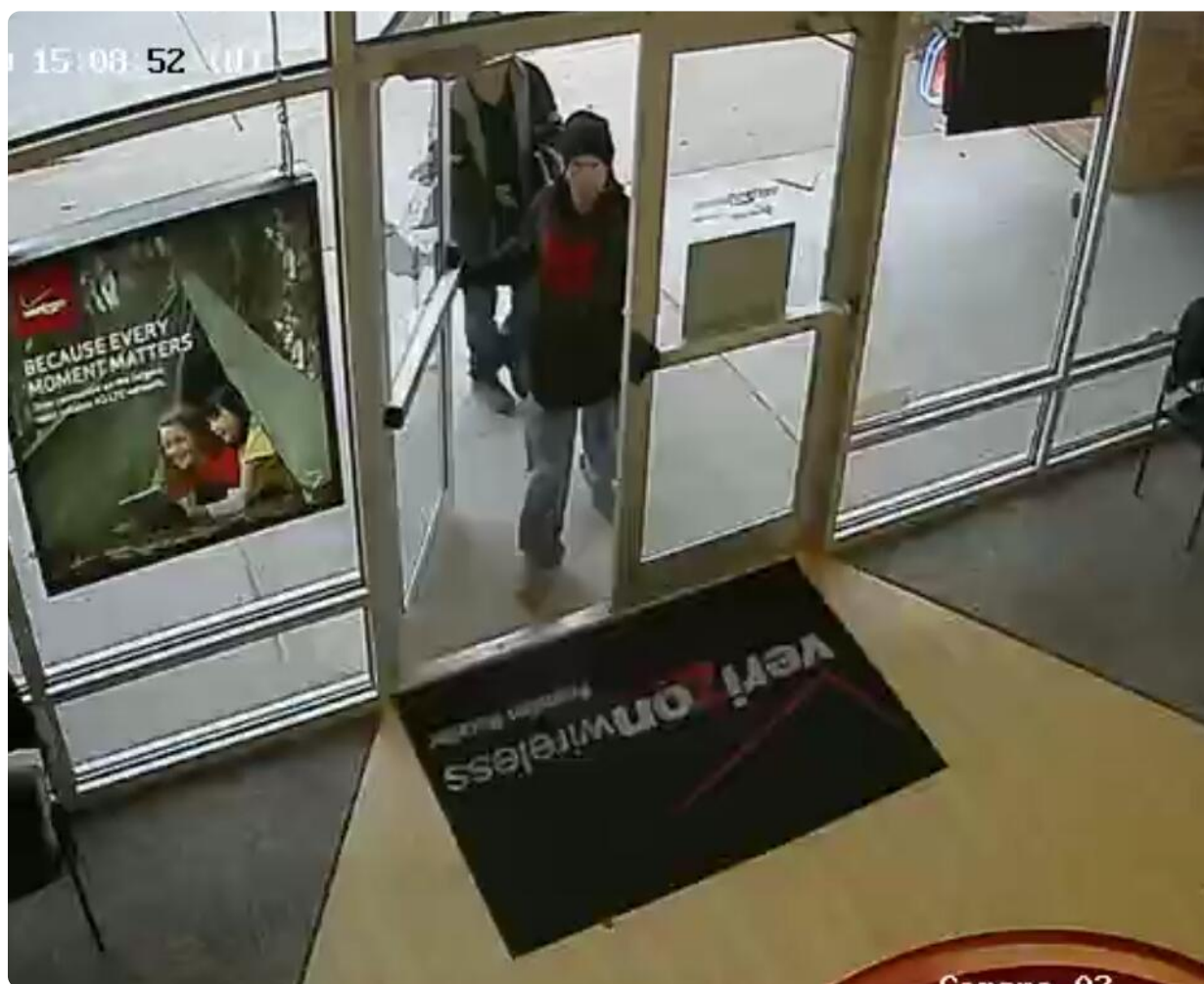
"It was hard for investigators to gauge the appropriate threat level for Josh at this point," Denlinger said. "Sometimes, we have to mirror the family's concern. They said him being gone four days was out of character."

Investigators took steps to obtain Wellman's cellphone records, though they didn't have the phone. The records showed that Wellman stopped making calls just before midnight that Nov. 12. He had several calls from his mom and Hunziker, as well as others, that went to voicemail after that time.

The phone location information did confirm he had been downtown earlier in the day and it showed some of his movements throughout the day, Denlinger said.

The investigators discovered that Wellman had gone with a few people to the Verizon store on Blairs Ferry Road NE in the afternoon on Nov. 12. Investigators obtained store surveillance video, which helped them identify and interview the people with him.

They were eliminated as suspects, but it helped create a rough timeline of his day.



Police found surveillance video of Josh Wellman, 35, of Cedar Rapids, on Nov. 12, 2015, the day he went missing, in the Verizon store at 1100 Blairs Ferry Rd. NE in Cedar Rapids. (Cedar Rapids Police Department)

Investigators learned Wellman was making meth throughout the day, Denlinger said. He received calls from buyers or they were contacting him in person. Everyone authorities talked to said he had his backpack.

"Mostly, people cooperated because there was no fear of prosecution," Denlinger said. "The investigators just wanted information to find Josh."

By mid-December 2015, some meth users were getting arrested and wanted to talk to make a deal with police, Denlinger said. Some would offer tidbits of what they heard about Wellman's disappearance. Some of the information indicated Wellman had been killed and that his body was disposed of, but the accounts lacked details.

At this point, there was only a "handful" of people who were suspects, Denlinger said. Wellman could have been harmed because it was known he was a "prolific" meth cook who may have been a threat to others. Or because his girlfriend was a "thief" and she could have stolen from the wrong people.

By 2019, the original Cedar Rapids investigators retired and the department's Cold Case Unit, which includes Denlinger, took over the case. The three-member unit met with the family and discussed ideas how to move forward in what became a homicide case.



Josh Wellman's sister, Shawna Hunziker, wears a shirt in honor of her still missing brother June 5 at her home in Vinton. (Savannah Blake/The Gazette)

Walton and Hunziker started a "Justice for Josh Wellman" Facebook page that has generated information about the case, as well as for others, Denlinger noted. Both woman have been active in the missing persons community, and participate in events around the state to bring awareness about Wellman's case and many others.

There were 335 missing persons in the state as of June 11, according to the Iowa Missing Person Information Clearinghouse.

Many of the early interviews in the Wellman case were conducted again and investigators began doing extensive background checks on the lead suspects, Denlinger said. Police developed potential locations for crime scenes.

During the investigation, investigators received many scenarios of what happened to Wellman's body. "From Hollywood-type of things, which you knew nobody would go to those lengths, to laughable stories that couldn't possibly happen," Denlinger said.

Denlinger said police searched about a dozen locations, using search and rescue personnel, advanced crime scene technology and cadaver or human remains dogs.

Most of the places were farmland, state and county parks in Linn, Johnson, Jones and Tama counties, Denlinger said. There also were some locations in Cedar Rapids.

One site searched was a campsite where possible suspects had temporarily lived. The search turned up only meth pipes buried in the ground.



A Cedar Rapids police photo in the cold case investigation into Josh Wellman, 35, who was reported missing Nov. 16, 2015. Police were investigating a campsite in rural Benton County they thought may have been connected to the case. (Cedar Rapids Police Department)

More recently, Denlinger has been utilizing the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System — [NamUs](#). This database helps investigators match long-term missing persons with unidentified remains and provides a free service to law enforcement agencies in the collecting of DNA from family members of missing persons.

Denlinger said he is in the process of adding Wellman's profile to the database and there are five other cases, including that of [Erin Pospisil](#), a Cedar Rapids teen who went missing in 2001, that qualify for this service.

Suspects

Denlinger said suspects in Wellman's case know who they are because he has made that known. His focus has been on two or three people he believes are directly involved.

He and the other cold case investigators made a "surprise" visit to one, who he said was more nervous than he has ever seen. The individual's leg was shaking "uncontrollably" and he smoked more cigarettes than he's seen during a short interview.

"You leave those interviews, knowing you're on the right track," Denlinger said. "Some of these people have genuine fear."



A photo of a young Josh Wellman with his father sits on the dining room table June 5 at Shawna Hunziker's home in Vinton. (Savannah Blake/The Gazette)

Denlinger wouldn't reveal the suspects. He said he doesn't have enough evidence at this point to make an arrest, but said he won't give up.

Family plea

Walton and Hunziker have heard all the stories about how their loved one was killed.

"We've heard things no family member should," Walton said. "Awful, awful things."

After Wellman went missing, both of them made calls to people found in an old phone of his and others they had heard of, looking for any credible information. Any time they hear anything, they send it to

Denlinger.

Walton received an email about her son's case during The Gazette interview. She didn't think it sounded too credible, but sent it to Denlinger.



Josh Wellman's mother, Teresa Walton, and sister, Shawna Hunziker, sort June 5 through photos of Josh throughout his childhood and adulthood at Shawna's home in Vinton. (Savannah Blake/The Gazette)

Hunziker said doing the missing persons events and sharing information about her brother to bring awareness helps sometimes, but they need more.

"I know he's gone, but sometimes, I'm waiting for him to knock on my door," Hunziker said. "We just want someone to tell us where he is. Just give us a clue, so we can have closure. We have no grave to grieve."

Information?

If you have information about Josh Wellman's 2015 disappearance — or any other unsolved Cedar Rapids murder — call Investigator Matt Denlinger at the Cedar Rapids Police Department, (319) 286-5442.

Comments: (319) 398-8318; trish.mehaffey@thegazette.com



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