

Women

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'I was just looking for my daughter'

When Hanna was still missing on Friday, the day of her sister Rosie's wedding reception, Rosie pushed her mother to file the missing persons report. Again, Malinda said she was brushed off by officers. Though they took the report, they told her they were busy because of the holiday weekend and told her Hanna was probably drinking with friends and scared to come home.

People on Facebook had messaged her that Hanna had been seen at the fireworks Wednesday night with Gina Rowland and Garrett Wadda. Both were about 40 at the time, and Hanna had gone to school with the couple's children.

Malinda spotted Rowland's car outside the Lame Deer Trading Post IGA grocery store. She drove Rowland to the Bureau of Indian Affairs police station herself.

According to police reports, officers said they learned through a series of interviews with Rowland and Wadda that the couple had been drinking with Hanna the night of the fireworks. The three of them went to the Jimtown Bar & Casino, just outside the reservation. Later, they stopped at the Cheyenne Depot and finally at the home of Wadda's aunt. The couple told officers they didn't know what happened to Hanna after they went to bed.

Malinda remembers Rowland's interview with police that day being brief. Afterward, at her urging, tribal officers went to look at Hanna's car. Malinda followed them, Rowland riding in the back seat, cooing over Jeremiah. Biting back her anger, Malinda noticed a cut on the other woman's hand.

The search of Hanna's car didn't turn up anything.

Malinda drove to the bar where Hanna had been seen Wednesday night. She asked to see security camera footage. She also obtained footage from the convenience store. One video showed Hanna with Rowland and Wadda buying alcohol and leaving together. In the other, Hanna paid for gas before returning to her car, Rowland in the passenger seat, Wadda in the back.

"I always think that was the police's job, but when a mother loses her daughter, it's natural instinct to do whatever you have to do to find her," Malinda said. "I really didn't know I was doing the police's job; I was just looking for my daughter."

By July 8, five days after Hanna was last seen, tribal officers had notified the FBI. Following a new tip, another search was planned at the Lame Deer rodeo grounds.

Investigators asked Malinda to identify a Nike shoe that was found, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Hanna's sister Rosie had to go look at it.

There was no mistaking the black and white high-top basketball shoe. It was Hanna's.

'Stripped of authority to protect their people'

Activists for missing and murdered Indigenous women, in addition to many scholars, say it's impossible to separate the problem from centuries of suffering inflicted by the settlement of North America.

Native tribes were decimated by diseases introduced by colonizers and impoverished by policies that interned them onto reservations. Later, children were shipped to boarding schools and forced to abandon their language and culture. In the 1950s, a federal relocation program encouraged Native Americans to leave reservations for cities, while simultaneously trying to terminate recognition of tribes, with pledges of support that, like previous promises, weren't fulfilled.

The consequences of generational poverty and all its trappings can be gleaned from a consultant's report on policing in the Navajo Nation, the largest of the 574 federally recognized Indian nations in the U.S.

The report connects poverty to "the effects of colonialism," which it says "are still experienced as drivers of critical problems in the Navajo Nation. Today, gender violence, alcohol and drug abuse, inadequate housing, needs of the mentally ill, availability of firearms, drive demand on the police."

The same conditions apply on many, if not most tribal lands, along with Indigenous communities far removed from reservations, activists say. They lay at the root of the crisis by exposing Indigenous women to disproportionate levels of violence, including domestic abuse and human trafficking.

- Figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show homicide was the third-leading cause of death between 1999 and 2019 among Indigenous females ages 1-34 — even more than cancer, which was the third-leading cause of death among females of all races in that age range. (The two leading causes for both groups were unintentional injury and suicide.)

- A 2016 study prepared for the National Institute of Justice showed that 4 in 5 Indigenous women report having experienced violence in their lifetime.

The numbers, drawn from a National Intimate Violence Survey, also showed that Indigenous women were 2.7 times more likely than white women to have experienced sexual violence in the previous year.

- In 2020, Oregon State Police's report on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women found that of the 1,213 missing person entries, 13 were for Native American or Alaska Native females. 69% of the reported missing Native American women were under the age of 18.

At the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, Warriors of Hope, the Grand Ronde domestic and sexual violence prevention program, works to spread awareness and hold conversations about the tribe's coordinated response to domestic violence, trafficking and sexual violence.

Mary Kathryn Nagle, a lawyer who specializes in tribal law and represents Indigenous families pro bono in missing cases across the country, said her efforts to collect evidence, transcribe interviews with suspects and encourage investigators to interview witnesses in cases of missing or murdered Indigenous women are often ignored.

"They can ignore these cases because what's the consequence of ignoring the death of a Native woman? What happens to you?" she said. "I haven't seen a single person face any consequences for ignoring a homicide of a Native woman or girl."

For more than a hundred years, tribal communities have sought to restore their autonomy over crimes committed on their lands; in the view of many Native advocates, the MMIW movement is an indication that more progress is needed.

Judge BJ Jones, executive director of the Tribal Judicial Institute at the University of North Dakota, said it's unfair to blame tribal police forces when they lack the authority to do more in some cases and often lack the funding to do the job that's expected of them.

"There's simply never been an investment in enough officers, enough detectives, enough justice personnel to really deal with (some) crimes," he said, adding, "I think that's why people talk about this jurisdictional quagmire in Indian Country because tribes have really been stripped of their authority to protect their own territory and their own people by Congress."

While the federal government has treaty responsibilities to keep tribal members safe, tribal law enforcement entities, which are overseen by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, are severely understaffed and under-resourced.

In Oregon, not all of the nine tribes had a police department prior to 2021.

The Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians formed its own police force just last year. It had previously received law enforcement assistance on its lands from the Douglas County Sheriff's Office.

In December, the Klamath Tribes named its first police chief. It was the final step to creating its own public safety department.

The reestablishment of the Klamath Tribes' public safety department is representative of ongoing work in the state to strengthen tribal police. Oregon legislators passed Senate Bill 412 in 2011 to expand the authority and responsibility of tribal police. The bill extended protections and certain powers to tribal officers previously denied. Former House Co-Speaker Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay, said in a release at the time that the bill would improve the relationship between tribal police and Oregon law enforcement officers.

New federal laws and actions have also attempted to address the problem.

Savanna's Act — named for Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind, who was killed in 2017 in North Dakota — requires the Department of Justice to enhance training, coordination and data collection in MMIW cases. The Not Invisible Act aims to increase intergovernmental coordination. In 2019, President Donald Trump created Operation Lady Justice, a presidential task force dedicated to missing and murdered Indigenous people.

But experts, advocates and family members say these initiatives don't go far enough. And though the laws are on the books, an October report from the General Accounting Office noted how federal officials failed to meet deadlines imposed by the new laws for things like public education on data gathering, outreach to tribal stakeholders and the development of guidelines for responding to such cases.

"That really shows their level of investment," said Abigail Echo-Hawk, director of the Seattle-based Urban Indian Health Institute. "It's not only disappointing but I don't think that would happen if this was a community of white women."

In 2016, the Urban Indian Health Institute surveyed 71 urban cities across the country to provide a snapshot of the problem because they knew the federal numbers weren't capturing the full picture. There were at least 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls in 2016 according to the National Crime Information Center but only 116 cases were logged through the U.S. Department of Justice's federal missing person database. The report identified 506 cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women

and girls in urban areas.

Of the 506 cases identified by the Urban Indian Health Institute, the highest number of cases were in the Southwest (157), Northern Plains (101), Pacific Northwest (84), Alaska (52) and California (40). Washington had 71 cases. The institute attempted to survey Portland but reported the department never provided any data despite the institute paying the charged fee for the records.

The study further illustrated how incomplete the understanding of the issue is, the report concluded.

"The biggest issue is racial misidentification or not collecting ethnicity," Echo-Hawk said.

She told the story of a missing woman in Washington state who'd been misclassified after investigators looked at a picture and guessed.

"I wish that was an uncommon story, but it's not," she said, explaining her advocacy for police training on racial identity. "They don't see it as an issue. In fact, it's so integral for us to understand the scope of the problem."

Indigenous activists were encouraged by Biden's appointment of Haaland, a member of the Pueblo of Laguna and the first Native American to oversee the Interior Department that includes the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The former New Mexico congresswoman has spoken passionately about missing and murdered Indigenous women.

When she announced in April 2021 the creation of a unit to investigate such cases and coordinate resources among federal agencies and Indian country, supporters hoped it signaled real progress rather than just more bureaucratic maneuvering.

Seeking an update, the USA TODAY Network tried for weeks to secure an interview with Haaland. In an October Q&A with the Washington Post, she had this to say about the unit's progress:

"The new Missing & Murdered Unit is providing leadership and direction for cross-departmental and interagency work involving missing and murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives. The Office of Justice Services recently selected and on-boarded senior positions that are responsible for stakeholder collaboration, continued policy development, overall performance of the unit and direct oversight of field investigations. In addition to building out its personnel, the Department is focused on increasing its infrastructure capacity, and has opened two additional investigative offices dedicated to reviewing unsolved cases in Muskogee, Okla., and Vancouver, Wash."

Stalled Oregon Progress

It has been over a year since the Oregon U.S. Attorney's Office released its first report on murdered and missing Indigenous people in the state. Within the report was a 2021 Action Plan that outlined goals to achieve in 2021.

The goals were to request data from all law enforcement offices that respond to Oregon tribes or tribal offices that would have MMIP data starting last year, develop MMIP Tribal Community Response Plans, create a District of Oregon MMIP working group, increase collaboration and communication with all Oregon law enforcement and address issues identified in the OSP report.

According to the plan, the office also planned to schedule a virtual consultation with each of the federally-recognized tribal governments in the District of Oregon and to meet with all tribal government and law enforcement entities to discuss MMIP issues and further identify MMIP cases within each tribe.

But the pandemic stalled much of the progress, MMIP coordinator Cedar Wilki Gillette said. It also stalled other efforts in the state to address the crisis.

The Missing and Murdered Native American Women Work Group, established as a part of House Bill 2625, began a listening and understanding tour in December 2019. The group was only able to host five listening sessions before the COVID-19 pandemic paused events. There was no event at the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and Tribal Council member Lisa Leno said they have also been unable to meet with the U.S. Attorney's Office in response to the report.

"We're hoping that as things start opening up that they will be able to have that conversation sooner than later," Leno added.

The Oregon U.S. Attorney's Office was able to launch its District of Oregon MMIP working group, Gillette said. Invitations were sent to tribal, state and federal representatives and the group has begun to meet this year. The purpose will be to "increase multi-agency communication and collaboration in support and response to Oregon-connected MMIP cases," Gillette said. A law-enforcement subgroup will also be established within the main working group, she added.

Part of the action plan was to work on tribal community response plans with the tribes and that work began in January 2021 with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, Gillette said. Law enforcement, victim services, the public and the media are working on a long-term action plan that is culturally customized based on how Warm Springs wants to approach missing persons.

Multiple requests for an interview with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs went unanswered.

"Now that we've worked on this pilot project, we are so excited to see what the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs plan will look like and how it will reflect their perspective on what should be done for MMIP," Gillette said.

Harvey, with the Grand Ronde, said coordination needs to be improved within the state.

"It's pretty habitual that tribal people will go from one reservation to another because they have family and friends (there)," she said. "If there's a tribal person that comes up missing, how do we let our northwest tribes know?"

"Until we have some type of coordinated effort amongst our tribes ... our tribes aren't going to be necessarily always aware right off the bat that 'Oh, Warm Springs has someone missing' or 'Oh, Klamath has someone missing,'" Harvey added.

That level of coordination is not happening at the moment. Washington this year was the first in the nation to create a statewide alert system for missing Indigenous people, similar to the Amber Alerts or silver alerts.

'We did the best we could'

The night of July 8, Malinda gathered her extended family for a "callback ceremony." They laid out Hanna's clothes on the floor, singing and praying to return her spirit to her body.

"I always thought she was alive somewhere," she recalled. "I flatly refused to believe that she was deceased. You know, it's a mother's worst nightmare."

After midnight, an officer came to the house. According to police reports, Hanna's body was found at the rodeo grounds in Lame Deer positioned face down, her pants unzipped, her underwear pushed down and her shirt and bra pushed up. Her body was too badly decomposed to determine whether a sexual assault had occurred or what caused her death.

No arrests were made. Rowland and Wadda had left Montana for the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming.

In the end, the case was solved not by investigative work but by a drunken confession. In January 2014, six months after Hanna's disappearance, Rowland went drinking with her former sister-in-law and told her what happened. That woman called the FBI, and Malinda soon got word that Rowland and Wadda had been arrested on murder charges.

"It was probably one of the happiest, happy-sad, days of my life," Malinda recalled.

Police reports spelled out what Rowland told her sister-in-law. She and Wadda had been drinking with Hanna that night in a trailer. Rowland said she woke up to screaming and found Wadda forcing himself on Hanna while she screamed that she was being raped. Rowland said Hanna hit her when she tried to help. Rowland and Wadda beat Hanna until she was unconscious. Rowland dragged Hanna's body outside, and Wadda drove her to the rodeo grounds.

In October 2014, Rowland pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and was sentenced to 22 years in prison. Authorities told Malinda they had insufficient evidence to prove the rape that Rowland alleged. Wadda pleaded guilty to accessory after the fact, admitting he moved Hanna's body. He was sentenced in 2015 to 10 years in prison. He was released from federal prison in January.

Malinda said he's back in Lame Deer. People send her photos when they see him. She wishes they wouldn't.

"There was no evidence, so it was her word against his," Malinda said. "When we were doing our own search, we literally lost a lot of evidence because we weren't professionals. We didn't know what we were doing. ... We lost a lot of forensic evidence, fingerprints, shoe prints, stuff like that."

In May 2019, then-Montana Gov. Steve Bullock signed Hanna's Act. The law authorized the state Department of Justice to assist in all missing persons cases and created a missing persons specialist. Oregon State Legislature passed House Bill 2625 that same year. The bill directed Oregon State Police to conduct a study focused on increasing and improving the reporting, investigation and response to cases involving MMIW.

Other recent attempts at legislation have failed in Oregon. Although House Bill 4102 had support from the Oregon State Police to establish a full-time tribal liaison in OSP, the bill never made it out of committee. The bill would have also required officers in the state to have training specifically for MMIP investigations.

Hanna's birthday, May 5, is now a national day of awareness for missing and murdered Indigenous people.

Hanna's grave sits on a hill near her mother's house. Her tombstone is dark gray and shaped like a big heart. Jeremiah, her son, is now a shy 9-year-old. His laugh reminds Malinda of Hanna, but his growth remains a symbol of time passing without her.

Though Jeremiah knows Malinda, now 51, is his grandmother, he calls her mom.

"I'm the only one he's ever known," Malinda said.

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