



PHOTO BY CARI HACHMANN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

A moment of silence is taken during an observance at the base of Rocky Butte to mark the two year anniversary of the death of Yashanee Vaughn, the 14-year-old Portland girl who was murdered by her 16-year-old boyfriend Parrish Bennette Jr. Vaughn's mother (center) bows her head in prayer during last week's ceremony.

When Girls Go Missing

On a mission to stop violence against women

BY CARI HACHMANN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Red balloons drifted into grey skies over the tree-tops at Rocky Butte in memory of Yashanee Vaughn.

Family and friends gathered last week to say a few words and demand justice for the 14-year-old girl who two years ago went missing and was found murdered by her 16-year-old boyfriend Parrish Bennette Jr.

For four months, the teen's family searched for their daughter, only to find bitter closure when defense attorneys later released where their client, Bennette, had dumped the girl's body after he shot her in the head in the bedroom of his northeast Portland home on March 19, 2011.

Though Bennette pleaded guilty to first-degree manslaughter and was sentenced to 18 years in prison, Vaughn's family is still seeking justice for the silence that surrounded the whereabouts of their child.

"How can you know where a body is and not say anything?" said Yashanee's grandmother Reynelda Hayes. "That's cruel and cold." Her family is working to pass a law in the Oregon Legislature that would require attorneys to release information early in the case of a missing person.

When police efforts were not enough, Vaughn's family turned to the National Women's Coalition Against Violence and Exploitation (NWCAGE), a

Vancouver-based non-profit that help families locate missing children as well as inform and educate the public and prevent violence against women.

"There was a beautiful girl with a smile that needed to be found," said the



PHOTO BY CARI HACHMANN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Michelle Bart (left) and her non-profit, National Women's Coalition Against Violence and Exploitation (NWCAGE), helps families locate missing children and works to inform and educate the public about violence against women issues, sex-trafficking and other forms of exploitation.

group's president and co-founder Michelle A. Bart, about the support she and her organization have continually lent Vaughn's family and friends.

Bart said Yashanee's story is a reminder to the dangers faced by women,

particularly teenagers, who fall victim to violence, sex-trafficking, and exploitation. Her story is motivation to continue the campaign to end violence.

Three other families of northwest teens are currently searching for their daughters. Raven Furlong, 17, of Aurora, Co. vanished in February; Kara

young women had profiles on a questionable modeling networking website prior to their disappearances.

"We have no proof that they are related," said Bart. "We are just a non-profit," but the figures are hard to discredit, she said. "When you have so many missing girls throughout the country and all have one common denominator of a website, and not Facebook or Twitter, we all have that, but a modeling site and profiles exploiting themselves, that's a red flag."

According to Bart, there have been 13 to 15 cases across the country linked to the modeling website Model Mayhem, where girls who have posted profiles have gone missing, been found dead or survived to tell their story. The website received an "F" from the Better Business Bureau. She believes a federal investigation is warranted.

While NWCAGE lacks the investigative capabilities of law enforcement or the FBI, they make up for it through their dedication, time and effort. "These three cases have come to us for help because nobody else would listen to them," she said.

The organization is keeping in contact with the girls' families. They are receiving tips, following leads, getting the word out, posting photos and most importantly, not letting the girls leave the public's eye.

"We owe it to these families to do whatever we can do to find out what's

Nichols, 19, of Colorado Springs, missing since October; and Kayla Croft-Payne, 18, missing from Washington State since November.

NWCAGE believes there is a link between the missing girls: The three

continued ▼ on page 16