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'Finally able to bring Alexis home': After 7 years, missing Nelson County teen's remains found

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In this Aug. 29, 2013 file photo, Laura Murphy shows one of the last photos taken of her daughter, Alexis, on her cell phone. Nelson County Times file photo

LOVINGSTON — Alexis Murphy has finally been found.

Authorities on Wednesday announced the remains of Alexis, who went missing seven years ago at age 17, were found in Nelson County in December.

Alexis went missing Aug. 3, 2013 after visiting a gas station in Lovingston. Randy Allen Taylor, 55, was found guilty of murder and abduction in the disappearance of Alexis in May 2014; he's serving two life sentences.

"We were finally able to bring Alexis home," Nelson County Sheriff David Hill said Wednesday. "It just means the world to us."

The remains were located Dec. 3 on private property near Stagebridge Road, along U.S. 29 in Lovingston. The Nelson County Sheriff's Office received positive identification of the remains as Alexis' on Feb. 5, the sheriff's office said on social media on Wednesday afternoon.

Stagebridge Road intersects with U.S. 29 roughly three and a half miles from the Lovingston gas station where she went missing.

On Wednesday, new balloons adorned the "missing" sign that sits outside the Lovingston gas station where she was last seen.

"With careful consideration for Alexis' family being paramount, notification to the community was delayed to allow them time to grieve and make proper arrangements," the sheriff's office said online Wednesday.

Hill, who took office in 2016, did not elaborate on what circumstances led law enforcement to the Lovingston property, but he did note there have been periodic searches that have occurred over the years and some leads that proved "fruitful."

On Wednesday, officials provided no details about the location, when the site was identified as a place of interest, or who and how many people and agencies were involved in the recovery effort.

In a statement released through the sheriff's office, Alexis Murphy's family said, "Our family is so grateful for the continuing love, support and prayers for Alexis and our family over the past 7 years. While we have been grieving the loss of Alexis since 2013, we remained hopeful that she would be found alive and well. Alexis was the fashionista, athlete and joker of our family; we were blessed to have loved her for 17 years and her memory will continue to live on through us all."

Reached by phone Wednesday, Trina Murphy, Alexis Murphy's aunt, said the family is not giving interviews at this time but may talk at a later date.

Shared experience, mixed emotions

The news was met with a flurry of reactions on social media as the region learned that Alexis' remains had been found.

"Experiencing what it's like to have a missing child, knowing that pain, it's like being in a terrible club," Gil Harrington said during a phone interview on Wednesday afternoon.

She met the Murphys shortly after Alexis' disappearance when her family's nonprofit, Help Save the Next Girl, stepped in to help search for and raise awareness of the then-17-year-old's disappearance and the need for young women to look out for one another.

Harrington's daughter, Morgan Harrington, disappeared in 2009 and her remains were found the following year. Help Save the Next Girl has been a constant in the continued search for Alexis, with Gil Harrington even attending Taylor's trial in support of the Murphy family.

Harrington extended her love and sincere condolences to Alexis' family Wednesday.

"I was overwhelmed with both sadness and relief for the family," Harrington said of the news. "It's debilitating to go years wondering every moment where she is, so I'm relieved they now have the opportunity to memorialize her. I hope the community

can put their grief to rest now that she's been reunited with her family.”

Joanna Graver, a Nelson County mother whose daughter, Azalia Berrian, went missing for several days last year before being found, was relieved to know the family finally has closure.

During the four-day search for Azalia, the Murphys were there to offer their support and recite a prayer for Azalia to be found safely.

“The little time I didn't know where Azalia was made me feel psychotic,” Graver said. “To think that they have a loved one that's been out there for years ... I'm sure they can breathe again and for that I'm really, really happy for them.”

Graver said their families will be “forever connected.”

“These kids belong to us [the community]. Alexis being missing was like all of us were lost, all of us lost a kid,” Graver said.

Alexis 'will never be forgotten'

Alexis was a rising senior at Nelson County High School at the time of her disappearance. She played volleyball at the school and was set to be the team's captain during her senior season.

In the days following her disappearance, Alexis' family and the Nelson County community searched for her, distributed flyers with her picture and spread word of her disappearance online. Less than a week after her disappearance, the community held a vigil and prayed she would come home safely.

In the years since her disappearance, hundreds of her classmates, teammates and community members have continued to gather on the anniversary of her disappearance and the community has continued to place flowers, signs and balloons at the gas station where she vanished.

In June 2014, Alexis' parents accepted an honorary high school diploma for her. A few months later, the school dedicated a garden on campus to Alexis.

At the garden's dedication ceremony in October of that year, families of other missing children gathered and shared photos of their loved ones.

“This [school] is a place where Alexis had her hopes and her dreams,” Shawn White, the Virginia coordinator for the CUE Center for Missing Persons said at that event. “It’s now a place where her mother can come to get away and just reflect on happy memories.

“This will keep Alexis’ memory alive.”

The Murphys now annually award an Alexis Murphy Scholarship to one or two Nelson County High School senior girls in honor of their daughter.

In a statement to The News & Advance Wednesday, Nelson County Public Schools Superintendent Martha Eagle said the division was saddened to hear Alexis' remains had been found, but will continue to remember her and her contributions to the school community.

“While we remained hopeful we would be reunited one day, we are relieved that her family can now have some sort of closure. Although Alexis did not have the future any of us would wish for her, she made quite a difference in her young life and made a significant impact on all those who knew her,” Eagle said. “Alexis may be gone, but she will never be forgotten.”

In a Facebook post Wednesday, Savanna McGarry — a classmate, teammate and friend of Alexis' — thanked law enforcement for “never giving up.” McGarry said Alexis' memory will live on.

“After 7.5 years of keeping hope alive, we finally get closure to properly heal,” McGarry wrote. “Here’s to the fifth stage of grief: Acceptance.”

Disappearance led to murder charge

Video footage of the Lovington gas station presented as evidence at Taylor's trial showed him crossing paths with Alexis on Aug. 3, 2013, and a vehicle she was driving following his vehicle out of the parking lot and heading north on U.S. 29.

An employee of the gas station also testified she saw Taylor and Alexis talking shortly before the two vehicles left the parking lot heading north on U.S. 29 in the direction of Taylor's residence.

A diamond stud, a fingernail fragment, a long black hair that showed signs of being forcibly removed, all of which had Alexis's DNA, were found in Taylor's camper, Martin has said. Alexis' crushed cellphone — found in brush outside of Taylor's camper — and a bloody blue T-shirt found under the sofa of the camper containing Alexis' DNA were among other evidence presented at the trial. Family members testified the phone was her "lifeline" and she would not have parted with it voluntarily.

The phone's last active signal came from an area near Taylor's camper north of Lovington, according to prosecutors' evidence presented at the trial.

Taylor is serving his two life sentences at Red Onion State Prison.

In 2015, he appealed his case to the Virginia Supreme Court and was denied. After Taylor argued against the denial, the Supreme Court denied him again in 2016.

The most recent court filings in Nelson Circuit Court records show Taylor was transported from the Red Onion State Prison to the Virginia State Police Office in Lebanon twice in early October before being taken back to the prison.

Virginia Department of Corrections records indicate Taylor is still being held at Red Onion. No further details about Taylor could be located in court records as of Wednesday.

"The case is closed," Hill said during the Wednesday news conference. "What we're concentrating now on is Alexis' family and ultimately bringing Alexis home."

Nelson County Commonwealth's Attorney Daniel Rutherford said he was grateful for continued search efforts and also thanked his predecessor, Anthony Martin, for his work in the case.

"We were able to do these things because the community never gave up and law enforcement never gave up," Rutherford said.

The (Charlottesville) Daily Progress contributed to this report.

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