The New York Times

Rural Montana Had Already Lost Too Many Native Women. Then Selena Disappeared.

For decades, with little public notice, Native women have gone missing or been found murdered. The search for Selena Not Afraid showed how much things had changed.

Ross Lebner, a member of Western Montana Search Dogs, heading out to search for Selena Not Afraid near the Fly Creek rest stop, where the teenager was last seen.

By Jack Healy Photographs by Cristina Baussan

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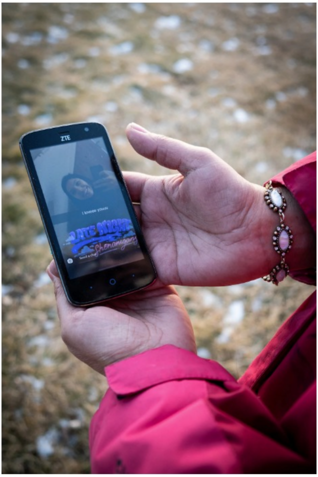
BIG HORN COUNTY, Mont. — Jackie Big Hair slept in her car for days, waking every few hours to fire up the engine and gaze at the frozen highway rest stop where her 16-year-old daughter had been reported missing.

“I just have to be here,” Ms. Big Hair, 50, said, watching semis lumber across the plains. “I don’t know where else to go.”

That was her vigil, along with searches in Billings about 30 miles away, three weeks after her youngest child, Selena Not Afraid, was reported missing from a barren stretch of Interstate 90 in a southern Montana county where 65 percent of the population is Native American. Law enforcement officials said a van carrying Selena home the day after a New Year’s party in Billings had pulled into the rest stop after breaking down, and then reportedly started up again and driven away without her. Nobody had heard from her since.



The last picture Selena sent her boyfriend before she went missing.

Jackie Big Hair, Selena's mother.

On Monday, law enforcement officials and the family confirmed the worst. Selena's body was found during a search less than a mile southwest of the rest stop. Officials said that an autopsy will be conducted, but that "foul play is not suspected at this time."

Selena's aunt Cheryl Horn posted a note on Facebook:

"We brought our baby girl home. Now she can Rest In Peace. Jackie and I want to thank everyone for helping us bring our girl home."

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Selena's disappearance played out against a national outcry over the killings and disappearances of Indigenous women. The issue hit home with particular force here in Big Horn County, a rural stretch of rolling mountains and ranch lands that contains the Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservations and has the highest rate of missing and murdered Native Americans in Montana, and among the highest nationwide.

Local activists had an incomplete count of 27 Native women who had gone missing in recent memory in Big Horn County alone. Selena was the 28th. The difference here and in many parts of the West is that for decades the disappearance of mothers and children, cousins and friends almost invariably played out in obscurity, with modest law enforcement investigations that almost invariably languished unsolved.

Activists and researchers say the crisis burned unheeded for generations until a few years ago, when families' stories of how their loved ones were sex trafficked, murdered with impunity or

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dismissed as chronic runaways gained traction through grass-roots organizing and social media, forcing politicians and law enforcement to take notice.

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Last year, 5,590 Indigenous women were reported missing to the F.B.I.'s National Crime Information Center, but advocates say the staggeringly high rates of violence suffered by Indigenous people are still not fully reflected in official accounting. Some of the victims are misclassified as Asian or Hispanic, or are overlooked if they live in urban areas instead of reservations, or their cases are lost in a jurisdictional maze over which state, federal or tribal law enforcement agency bears responsibility for investigating.

Law enforcement officials said that these can be extremely difficult cases to investigate, sometimes ranging over vast expanses of territory, but that they are committed to solving them. The families say the problem is more a matter of will and resources than of difficulty.

"Native women have been dehumanized from the very beginning," said Desi Rodriguez-Lonebear, a demographer who grew up in Big Horn County and is on the board of the Sovereign Bodies Institute, which has created its own database of cases. "The law has failed us time and time again. We're tired of it. We're tired of our people dying, of our kids going to jail."

Now, families like Selena's are taking an urgent public stand to pressure politicians and law enforcement to provide more aggressive responses to these cases. They are raising alarms through social media and even bracing themselves against Montana blizzards to keep their loved ones from being forgotten. They are organizing candlelit vigils, rallying at courthouses and sheriff's offices and marching for days along prairie highways, reservation roads and to the steps of state capitols.

Selena's family camping at the rest stop where she was last seen.

"We're here demanding it," Ms. Horn, Selena's aunt, had said one afternoon, warming her hands with a bowl of chili as volunteers returned from another fruitless search of the nearby hills. "We're not being quiet. We're not leaving."

In recent months, a flurry of federal and state agencies across the country and here in Montana have raced to respond with task forces and law-enforcement resources, including a new Justice Department effort to coordinate federal and local responses to disappearances and murders in Indian Country.

Law-enforcement authorities say that Selena, a member of the Crow tribe, went missing at about 2 p.m. on New Year's Day. A New Year's Eve party in Billings had spilled over into the following afternoon, and she was riding back toward her home in Hardin, about 50 miles east.

According to local and federal law-enforcement alerts, the van broke down and pulled over at the rest stop, where Selena was last seen walking into a field. Her family believes she was taken, possibly by a passing car.

When her relatives heard the news, they began pouring into the rest stop, circling their cars and campers and horse trailers into a makeshift windbreak and transforming a frozen spit of asphalt and concrete into a scene of prayer and protest.

The vigil played out in frigid weather and lonely surroundings.

Selena's friends and family cook lunch at the rest stop.

They lit a campfire, searched through ranchers' fields and garlanded the fences and sign poles with red ribbons and posters of Selena. They saturated social media with calls for help. "Internet warriors," one of Selena's aunts called the response.

At 16, Selena already knew the toll of violence too well.

She had buried three siblings — a brother who had been fatally shot by Billings police officers; a sister who was struck and killed by a car; and her twin sister, who died by suicide when she was just 11 years old.

"I've always felt like there's a bad presence against us," Selena's older brother, R.J., said. "I've expected the worst."

After Selena was reported missing, police officers from South Dakota and Wyoming joined Big Horn County sheriff's deputies, Bureau of Indian Affairs officers and volunteers to search the nearby hills. Federal and local law-enforcement officers set up a command center in the basement of the county courthouse. Thermal drones and helicopters buzzed overhead.

A member of the Northern Cheyenne rescue team photographing a gift brought in by neighbors.

The F.B.I. issued an alert for Selena and sent in a search team, but agents and sheriff's investigators had said little more about her disappearance or whether they were investigating the older acquaintances who had been riding in the van with her.

The swift response had surprised some activists. "Nothing moves that fast," said BethYana Pease, a Crow community organizer.

Families and activists say they have been sounding these alarms for years. They say the crisis flows from generations of discriminatory government policies and racism in reservation border towns like Hardin that devalue Native women's lives and deaths.

Jay Harris, the county prosecutor, who is a member of the Crow tribe, said the proliferation of meth use and a scarcity of federal law enforcement had exacerbated the problem. Last November, the Crow chairman declared a state of emergency over what he called ineffective investigations and unanswered police calls on the 2.3 million-acre reservation, and said the tribe would move to form its own police force.

Some victims’ families wondered why the deaths and disappearances of their own mothers, sisters and nieces had not sparked a similar outcry. Ms. Pease ticked off names she said had never received justice: 14-year-old Henny Scott, who was found dead two weeks after she went missing in December 2018. Bonnie Three Irons, a mother of six, whose body was found in the mountains in April 2017.

A memorial for Kaysera Stops Pretty Places at the spot where she was found dead in August.

Or 18-year-old Kaysera Stops Pretty Places. It was late August when Kaysera went out with friends in her hometown, Hardin, the county seat. Four days later, a jogger found her body in a suburban backyard next to the house where she had been that evening, just steps away from a busy road.

“Where the hell were these big shots when my granddaughter was missing?” asked Carmelia Brown, a relative who said she loved Kaysera as a granddaughter.

Kaysera’s family believes she was murdered, but her cause of death has lingered undetermined for four months, her autopsy still unfinished. Her family says it has never been told a certain time of death. The case is classified as “Suspicious” and still being investigated, said Mr. Harris, the county attorney.

Kaysera’s family members wondered how she could have lain in someone’s lawn for days without being seen. They were troubled that her body had been shuttled back and forth between the funeral home and state crime lab before being cremated by the county coroner, who is also the funeral director. They were disturbed that one of the lead investigators into Kaysera’s death had also been involved in an incident in which her younger brother was beaten and forcibly restrained.

“Why does nobody care about this?” asked Grace Bulltail, one of

Kaysera's aunts and an assistant professor of engineering at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "We're not being given any information."

Family members were uncertain whether Kaysera and Selena knew each other, but their stories have become intertwined. When Kaysera's family led marches to the county courthouse seeking answers into her death, Selena attended, her aunt Cheryl Horn said. She posted Facebook tributes to Big Horn County's missing and murdered Indigenous women.

One morning at Selena's roadside vigil, as one of her great-aunts lit the day's fire, her overcoat swung open to show a red sweatshirt bearing Kaysera's face.

"This is the justice that Kaysera didn't get," Ms. Horn, Selena's aunt, said.

Selena's cousins gathered near a fire at the rest stop on the 10th night of her disappearance.

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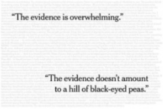
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