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LATOYIA: THE MEN IN HER LIFE

**A FATHER IN PAIN,
AN EX-BOYFRIEND UNDER
SCRUTINY — AND THE
MYSTERY DIVIDING THEM**

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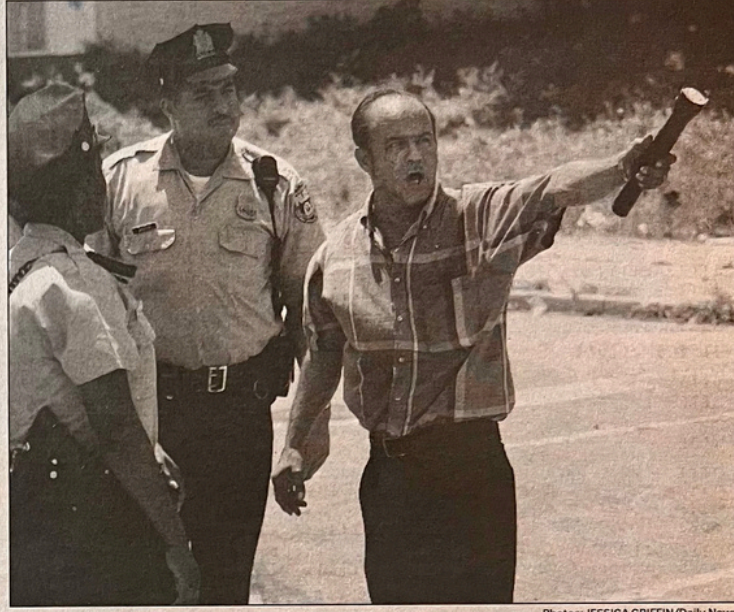
PLUS: REWARD UP TO \$100,000 IN HER DISAPPEARANCE

THE LATOYIA MYSTERY

Latoyia's dad presses search



Crowd gathers (left) yesterday near poster at 52nd and Market streets showing old reward. At right, Melvin Figueroa talks with police about his missing daughter.



Photos: JESSICA GRIFFIN/Daily News

Baby's dad avoiding spotlight

By **SIMONE WEICHSELBAUM**
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THE MOTHER of his unborn daughter has vanished. Cops have grilled him almost every day since he said he was the last person she was with.

But Stephen Poaches is not trying to help find Latoyia Figueroa, 24, who disappeared July 18.

At about 5 foot 6 with a slight frame, Poaches, 25, of West Philadelphia, has complained that he is scared of the Figueroa family and doesn't want to go near them.

Instead he is trying to continue his daily routine — working at F.C. Haab oil company and staying with his self-described “first baby mama,” who gave birth to their child early last month.

While Figueroa's friends and family have used the media to promote the case, Poaches is lying low.

Instead of talking with report-

ers, Poaches is sharing his thoughts on a late-night radio sex show.

“When I see her, I am going to make sure she is OK; then I don't want to see her no more,” Poaches told Power 99 (WUSL-FM) self-described “sexpert” Girl last week.

“Hopefully [Figueroa] is in a hotel mad at everybody,” Poaches said on the show, which draws about one million listeners.

The station gave police copies of interviews with Poaches.

And despite his efforts to avoid the spotlight, police have been paying close attention to him.

Yesterday, police named Poaches for the first time as a “person of interest” in the case.

Poaches is not a suspect.

Since Figueroa vanished, police have been digging through his life,

See **POACHES** Next Page

1000 REWARD

▶ WHAT'S THE STORY?

Latoyia Figueroa, 24, and five months pregnant, was last reported seen on July 18, after she and Stephen Poaches, the father of her unborn daughter, visited Pennsylvania Hospital.

▶ The reward in the Figueroa case has been raised to \$100,000, City Councilman Juan Ramos and the Citizens Crime Commission said yesterday.

▶ The reward is being funded by rap stars Beanie Siegel and Damon Dash, Beneficial Bank, T.G.I. Fridays, local philanthropists Joe Mammama and Kal Rudman, and Internet bloggers.

▶ If you have any information on Figueroa's whereabouts, call the Crime Commission's tip line: 215-546-TIPS.

Can't eat or sleep, father says

By **DAVID GAMBACORTA**
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MELVIN Figueroa is a live wire when he's leading volunteer searches for his daughter. He paces and yells orders, contemplates rumors and often submerges himself in tick-infested bushes, desperate for clues.

But catch Figueroa, 45, earlier in the day and you find a devastated father and husband whose every waking moment is hell.

He agonizes over the fate of Latoyia Figueroa, his missing 24-year-old, pregnant daughter.

“I don't sleep. I got maybe an hour last night. Can't eat, either,” Figueroa said with a sigh while waiting to go on an MSNBC morning news show yesterday.

Such has been life for Figueroa since Latoyia disappeared two weeks ago after leaving the house of the father of her unborn baby.

An out-of-work carpenter who lives in Southwest Philadelphia,



Latoyia Figueroa

Figueroa has been running around the city on a mixture of fear and adrenaline, handing out fliers and appearing on TV.

He knows that with each passing day, the chances of finding Latoyia alive are growing slimmer.

“We're talking about my daugh-

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THE LATOYIA MYSTERY

FATHER

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ter, man. It hurts. It hurts."

Figuroa has felt this pain before. Latoyia, he explains, has two stepbrothers, Jamie, 23, and Mike, 22, who are involved in the searches. A third boy, Figuroa's youngest, died as a baby, a victim of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

But Latoyia's mystifying disappearance is another matter entirely. "She wasn't the type of person to just disappear," he says, noting that Latoyia and her 7-year-old daughter had an inseparable bond. "Something had to happen."

That gut instinct caused Figuroa to spring into action when a niece called him the day Latoyia disappeared.

Phone calls were made, fliers were put together and a large family was mobilized.

Figuroa also reached out to his distant cousin, City Councilman Juan Ramos, and a reward was posted shortly thereafter.

Figuroa's very public pleas for information about his daughter were called into question by some of Latoyia's friends, who say the father had not been very involved in his daughter's life.

But one of Latoyia's cousins said father and daughter were close, especially after Latoyia's grandmother, who raised her, died.

Figuroa said he saw his daughter two or three times a month.

"I was excited to be a grandfather again."

His excitement has long since turned to sorrow. When he returns from searching wooded areas and abandoned homes, Figuroa ritually tells the media he just wants to find out what happened to his daughter, for better or for worse.

The memory of Latoyia's mother, who was slain when Latoyia was just 2 years old, is also fresh in Figuroa's mind. "Look what happens now. Whoever's doing this is destroying me and my family," he says, shaking his head.

But when he's rummaging through new target areas with search dogs and family members, Figuroa looks like he's trying to find someone who's still alive.

He hurries between police officers, family members and dog handlers before an 11 a.m. search began yesterday on Union Street

near Cambridge in West Philadelphia. He shouts out additional locations to look at and marches into several abandoned-looking properties.

After sifting through waist-high weeds in stifling humidity and talking with neighbors, Figuroa announces that the search will move to 58th and Catharine streets. It's an exhausting ordeal for the dogs and handlers of the Delaware-based Urban Search and Rescue team.

"We structure our schedules around [Figuroa]," says Daniel Fuller, the team's director. "But we're here to help. You can't help but feel sorry for that man."

Figuroa seems to become tense when the searchers arrive on Catharine Street. Stephen Poaches, the father of Latoyia's unborn baby, lives around the corner on Walton Avenue. When handlers say the dogs picked up Latoyia's scent near Poaches' house, Figuroa looks unsteady.

His eyes start to well up. He starts to pace back and forth more. "Well, they need to get a [SEARCH]warrant. I'm not knocking on the door," he says. But after the searchers note that the scent could have been from Latoyia's last visit at the house, he relaxes. It's time to move on.

"I got shaky back there," he admits afterward. He has not spoken directly with Poaches, but the two have indirectly exchanged words on a local radio station. When asked to describe his knowledge of Poaches, his foot begins to tap impatiently.

"I met him once, about a year-and-a-half ago. My wife cooked dinner so we could meet him," he says. "He shows up, but says he's not coming in the house. I said 'Fine. Adios.'"

"I knew then somethin' wasn't right with him. My daughter said 'Dad, you always say something when I meet someone.' But look what happened."

Figuroa - short and skinny - says he's grown accustomed to living in front of the camera.

Most of his days start on national news shows and end the same way. Before his appearance on MSNBC yesterday, he quickly buttons up the top of his shirt to hide a shiny gold chain that bears his name because it might look tacky.

"I'm getting used to it, yeah," Figuroa says, rubbing his chin beard.

"I know the routine now. ★



STEVEN M. FALK/Daily News

Radio host Golden Girl talked with Stephen Poaches, father of Figuroa's unborn baby.

POACHES

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repeatedly searching homes where he has stayed and impounding vehicles he uses.

Yesterday police said they had visited an "oil yard" where he works on the West Philly banks of the Schuylkill.

A police official said Poaches has no arrest record here.

Cops are still calling Latoyia's disappearance a missing-person's case even though homicide detectives are now working on the case.

According to police policy, homicide detectives investigate all missing-person cases when there is reason to believe the person may be dead.

The Golden Girl interviews are now police evidence.

The radio-show host had invited Figuroa's father, Melvin Figuroa, to talk on her show a week after the woman disappeared.

Angered that Melvin Figuroa criticized him for being absent in the searches, Poaches called the show.

"Why would I help you if you think I have done something already?" Poaches said on the show. "I can't trust y'all. I can't come walking with y'all nowhere."

Monday night, Golden Girl aired clips of a Saturday-night discussion with Poaches in which he referred to Figuroa as a "female."

Golden Girl asked Poaches to refer to Figuroa as his "baby's mom" instead of "female" but he refused.

In a recent interview with the *Daily News*, the radio-show host described the Figuroa case as "a baby-mama drama at its worst."

The term "baby mama" or "baby daddy" has become an inner-city colloquialism referring to a parent of a child who may have a casual relationship with the other parent.

Figuroa and Poaches were casually dating off and on for two years, her friends said.

She has a 7-year-old daughter with her high-school boyfriend, Anthony Williams.

Cops also said she dated numerous other men, a factor that has slowed the investigation.

About two months before Figuroa became pregnant with Poaches' child, Poaches also impregnated another woman.

Both women were angry with one another for carrying a child of Poaches', friends said.

The Figuroa case has become the hottest topic on "Power After Hours with Golden Girl" because it is turning her usual sex show into "reality radio," Golden Girl said. ★

S. Phila. woman is missing in similar case

By **SCOTT FLANDER**
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IN RECENT DAYS, all eyes have been focused on the search for a missing South-west Philadelphia woman, Latoyia Figuroa.

But other Philadelphians are missing under worrying circumstances as well.

Including 27-year-old Taneke Daniels of South Philadelphia, whose May 12 disappearance has parallels to Figuroa's.

And though the national media has latched onto the Latoyia Figuroa story, Taneke Daniels hasn't received nearly as much attention.

Daniels' mother doesn't think that's fair.

"My heart goes out to that family. I know how they're feeling because I'm going through the same thing," said Gail Daniels. "But my child is just

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THE LATOYA MYSTERY



Taneke Daniels and her 2-year-old son, Yahmeen. She has been missing from her South Philadelphia home since May 12.

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as important to me.”

As with Figueroa, police don't believe that Taneke Daniels, of 26th Street near Moore, simply ran off.

Daniels, the mother of three children, was last seen leaving her boyfriend's house, just days before he was to appear in court on charges of abusing her.

Police say the boyfriend has been cooperative, and is not a suspect.

But they fear that something bad has happened to her.

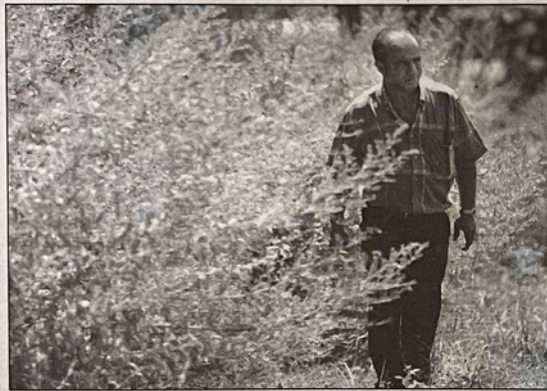
It couldn't immediately be determined how many suspicious disappearances there have been in Philadelphia this year.

But in the South Police Division — one of six police divisions in the city — there are at least two such cases.

Besides Taneke Daniels, there's the highly publicized disappearance of Danielle Imbo and Richard Petrone, the couple last seen leaving a South Street bar in February.

Figueroa's disappearance found the media spotlight thanks to efforts by her uncle, a police officer; her cousin, a city councilman; and a frustrated blogger who got CNN's attention.

Until now, Gail Daniels hasn't been so lucky.



JESSICA GRIFFIN/Daily News

Melvin Figueroa searches lot in West Philadelphia yesterday.

The *Daily News* ran a story about her daughter in June, and the *South Philadelphia Review* carried an item last week. Meanwhile, the Figueroa case has been on CNN, NBC's "Today Show," and other national media outlets.

But Daniels has found a supporter of her own.

At the suggestion of a co-worker, she called the office of state Rep. Harold James. James spoke with Gail Daniels on Monday, and he's started trying to drum up media attention, including getting her an interview Monday on WHAT-AM.

James also spoke to Police Commissioner Sylvester Johnson, who called Daniels on Mon-

day.

James, a retired Philadelphia cop, said he believes that police should be more aggressive in their search for Daniels, who is African-American.

"Usually it is harder for people of color to get media attention, especially when families don't have a lot of money," he said.

Detective Mike Fuss, who's been investigating Daniels' disappearance, said police have been working hard on the case.

Their investigation has included searching the boyfriend's apartment, on 63rd Street near Girard Avenue, in West Philadelphia, he said. Police have searched through other parts of the apartment building, including the elevator shaft. ★