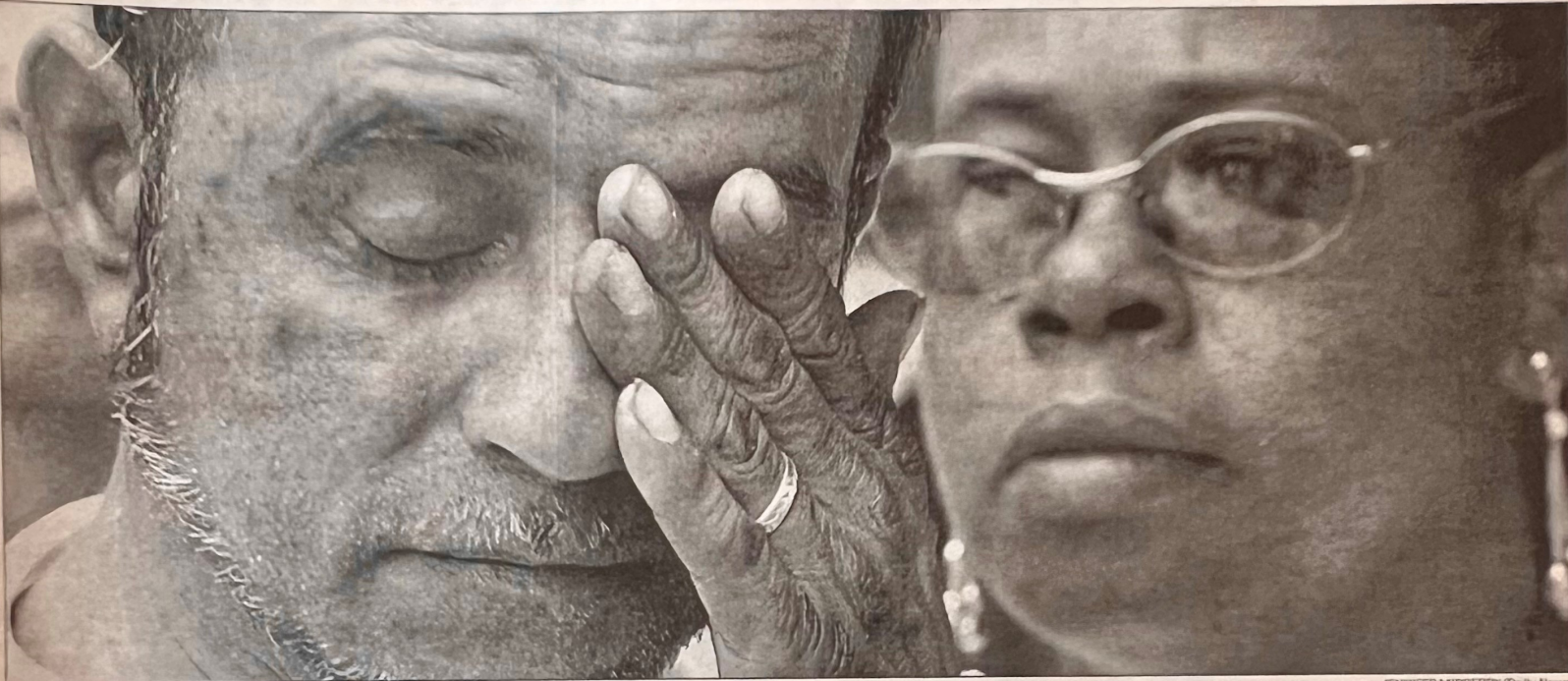


WHERE IS SHE?

WHAT HAPPENED TO LATOYIA?



JENNIFER MIDGERRY/Daily News

Melvin Figueroa, father of Latoyia Figueroa, and his wife, Yvonne (above), speak with reporters yesterday.

And why did it take so long for her disappearance to become national news?

By **SIMONE WEICHELBAUM**
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UNTIL yesterday Latoyia Figueroa was just another missing woman.

But only a handful of people knew the 24-year-old pregnant mother was gone.

That was until her cousin, the city councilman, gathered his fellow politicians for an afternoon press conference imploring the public to help find her.

And her uncle, the cop, phoned detectives and the department's top brass to help on the case.

Then a local blogger, angry with the national media for not giving the story any play, vented for days on his Web site until they took notice.

It took these three men to jumpstart the public relations machine needed to put a story in the spotlight. But those who love Figueroa can't understand why it took so long to get her disappearance into public view.

"She has been missing since



STEVEN M. FALK/Daily News

Latoyia Figueroa, a waitress and mother, has been missing since July 18.

last Monday, but at least we have something," said Anthony Williams, the father of Figueroa's first child, Izhanah, 7.

"Finally, we're going to get the word out," he said hours after yesterday's press conference where city leaders and the police commissioner spoke to reporters from every major local media outlet about the Figueroa case.

July 18 was the last time Will-

iams, or anyone else, knew of Figueroa's whereabouts.

She and her unborn daughter's father drove from his Southwest Philadelphia row home to Pennsylvania Hospital for a pre-natal check-up, cops said.

Later that day, they drove back to his house on Walton Avenue near 58th Street. She left a little after 3 p.m. and that is when cops said she disappeared. Police said she is not using her cell phone or taking money out of her bank account.

It is rare that a minority missing person case is attracting so much attention, cops said. According to the FBI, as of July 1, there were about 48,000 missing adults, 7,000 are black women, and none are major national news.

CNN posted Figueroa's disappearance at the top of their Web site yesterday morning. And she was mentioned on MSNBC's 9 p.m. show, "The Situation with Tucker Carlson." The network said it plans to discuss her case

on the "The Abrams Report" tonight.

And why now?

Jeremy Gaines, spokesman for MSNBC, wrote in an email response "there's no simple formula."

"These decisions are among the hundreds of editorial decisions we make every day. In most cases, these stories rise to a national level after breaking through in local media."

It takes more than a few metro newspaper headlines for a missing persons case to hit the rarely reached stratosphere of national mega-stories.

A quick Google search of recent news items featuring Natalee Holloway, the Alabama teen who vanished two months ago while on vacation in Aruba turned up 509 articles.

As of 9:30 last night, Figueroa's name appeared in 12 Google news hits.

There is a "human hierarchy which puts white women victims at the upper end," said Keith

Woods, dean of the faculty at the Poynter Institute for journalists.

"Racism is somewhere in the mix but it isn't the whole thing," he said.

The class of the person, police interest with the case and community organization are all part of the "snowball effect" which builds a local news story into an well-publicized national discussion, Woods said.

Last Tuesday, Williams noticed something was wrong when Figueroa never picked up her cell phone. The next day he went to pick up their daughter from Figueroa's childhood home (where her uncle and cousin raised her) on Ithan Street near Spruce.

The daughter broke the strange news that her mother never came home over night. "Then I got worried," Williams said.

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