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Baby Marlon case a mystery

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When Worcester police received the report of a missing 5-month-old in November 1998, they were already two days behind in their investigation.

Almost 8 years later, police know little more than they did when Marlon Devine Santos was initially reported missing by his foster parents, Jose M. and Yolanda I. Castillo.

The Castillos waited 48 hours before telling police that little Marlon was gone. The delay cost investigators precious time and, by many accounts, reduced by 50 percent the likelihood that the disappearance, believed to be a homicide, would be solved.

“Those first 48 hours are so critical,” Worcester District Attorney John J. Conte said. “The missing child was not reported to us until two days later. That left us with quite a gap.”

Miami police Lt. Joseph Schillaci, known for his role in A&E’s reality television show “The First 48,” agreed that time is critical in solving homicide cases. However, even after 48 hours, he said, the cases can still move along.

“The cases that get solved are cases where people didn’t give up. Sometimes we say we hit a wall, but you know, you have to find a way over it, through it or under it. You can’t say you’re shelving the case,” he said.

In the days after Marlon was reported missing, Worcester police put all their resources to work, according to Worcester Police Detective Capt. Edward J. McGinn Jr. The media spotlight stayed on the Baby Marlon case for months, something that would normally generate calls from tipsters or witnesses — but none came.

“This case didn’t generate information like some other cases do,” Mr. Conte said. “This is not the type of case you get a lot of calls on.”

Lt. Schillaci said that in cases with few leads, investigators have to take steps to create new leads.

“You’re never out of leads,” he said, recalling a fellow detective who has been actively pursuing a decade-old homicide. “You have to have passion,” he said. Investigators cannot give up on such cases.

In Marlon’s case, police say they are still passionate about solving the disappearance, but they are not even sure that some leads they followed early on are good. They don’t know if information they’ve received is credible, because they got little cooperation from those associated with the child.

“We couldn’t really get reliable information,” Mr. Conte recalled recently. “We were working with theories.”

Detective Capt. McGinn said, “The problem was, a lot of people were actual caregivers (for Marlon) and everyone had their story.”

The fact that no one would cooperate means something in the case, Lt. Schillaci said. Using the science of “victimology,” Lt. Schillaci said, he likes to look at the victim’s home and family. He studies parents and children and relationships between the victim and others. He wants to determine who the person was and why they might have been targeted for a crime. He sits in victims’ bedrooms and tries to get a sense of the person. Often that helps him make a connection that leads to a case being resolved, he said. The experience, he noted, is sometimes “spiritual.”

With a 5-month-old victim, though, there are few connections to be made, and police found themselves thinking out several

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scenarios. Perhaps the baby died in an accident. Maybe he was sold. But nothing panned out.

What investigators were told was that Mrs. Castillo left the baby and two other foster children, ages 2 and 3, in the house alone while she drove eight miles to East Middle School and back to pick up two of her biological children. She told police that when she returned, the baby was gone. Her husband, a Pentecostal minister who police would later learn had a rap sheet, was out of town. His wife had picked him up in New York before reporting the baby missing.

The baby's birth mother, Dina Santos, had problems of her own and also failed to cooperate with the police, Mr. Conte said. She had been in and out of a local shelter and, by some accounts, often left the child with friends and strangers for days at a time.

The baby's birth father had a brief and stormy relationship with Ms. Santos. William H. Kahanic, who lived in Spencer at the time, had sought custody of the baby and promised to make those responsible for the boy's disappearance pay. There is still no one for him to blame.

In the first year after the baby's disappearance, police received information that Marlon could be found along the banks of the Wachusett Reservoir in Holden. A search turned up a baby blanket, diaper and several other items of interest, but the infant's remains were never found. Detective Capt. McGinn said he is not convinced the items belonged to Marlon.

Mr. Conte said he has always felt detectives were close to finding the child, but could never find the one piece of information needed to lead them to him.

Despite a rumor that the child was sold, possibly in New York, the district attorney has operated primarily on the theory that Baby Marlon is dead. If he were sold, it might have been the best possible outcome for Marlon, Detective Capt. McGinn said.

"If he was sold, not for criminal purposes but to a family that wanted him, that would probably be the best of the scenarios," he said.

If the child is alive, it's not likely he knows that he has been the subject of an intense investigation. He may not know that some police officers still lose sleep over the case or that Detective Capt. McGinn would like to see him found before he retires.

Referring to cases such as Baby Marlon's as "cold" disturbs some investigators. Some prefer to call the cases "old" or "inactive."

A grand jury assembled in 2000 looked at the evidence but did not indict anyone. In 2005, at Mr. Conte's request, Worcester police went over their files and took another look at Marlon's disappearance.

"We do revisit these old cases," he said. "We just keep working on them. We're blessed with a lot of terrific investigators. ..."

Marlon's case is as baffling as others that have challenged investigators for decades.

- Taj Narbonne left a note after a dispute with his stepfather on March 31, 1981. The boy, then 9 years old, was never heard from again. His grandparents have said they want to find their grandson, and police continue to work on the case.

- Townsend teen Deborah Quimby vanished during a bike ride to her grandmother's house in 1977. In recent years, anonymous tips have led police back to Walker Pond, where they first searched for the remains of the 13-year-old girl, but subsequent searches have turned up no new evidence in the case.

- Andrew Amato's family still wonders where their child could be. Andrew was 4 years old on Sept. 30, 1978, crying in the woods near his Webster trailer home, when his playmates went for help. The child was gone when they returned. Investigators have followed dozens of leads, to no avail.

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