

Felicia Floriani: A short and troubled life

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Hamilton Spectator | Jun 05, 2012

Felicia promised to meet her friend at the corner of Upper Paradise and Hadeland at 2 p.m. on June 10, 2002.

But she never showed up.

The friend waited two hours. Annoyed at first. Then worried. Felicia could be unreliable and troubled. She was a runaway who lived on the street and in group homes, used drugs and worked in the sex trade. But she'd never stood her up before.

"I told my mom Felicia never met me," recalls Danielle Brown. "And then a week later police contacted me and said she was missing."

Since then, June 10 has been considered by police and those who love Felicia Lynn Floriani as the day the pretty and tiny teen disappeared. For nearly a decade, the troubled girl has been missing.

Until a Lincoln farmer trudged through a sodden field six weeks ago and found bones.

It has always been suspected Felicia was murdered. She was among the eight Hamilton victims focused on by *Project Advocate*, a massive joint task force formed by Hamilton and Halton police in March 2003 to investigate attacks on five sex workers, the disappearance of two others — Felicia and 39-year-old Susan Gourley — and the murder of another, 19-year-old Kimlyn Tolgyes, whose body was found at Kerncliff Park in Burlington on Aug. 29, 2002.

At first there was one suspect. He was thought to drive a white car and cruise the streets of Hamilton looking for vulnerable women. Over time though, investigators began to suspect there were two men preying on the city's sex workers.

In the 15 months it operated, *Project Advocate* resulted in the arrests of two men for sex crimes. Peter Conka was found mentally unfit to stand trial at first then later convicted of sexual assault on one woman. He has since been deported to the Czech Republic. John Crouse pleaded guilty to sexual assault. He is incarcerated on unrelated charges. Neither man has been charged with murder.

After they were jailed, the attacks stopped.

Officially, Felicia was categorized as "missing." There was always that possibility — that hope — she was just somewhere else.

That notion ended Monday when police announced forensic tests had determined the human remains from the farm field were Felicia's. Her death is now being investigated as a murder, according to Staff Sergeant Steve Hrab, the original *Project Advocate* case manager from Hamilton police. Hamilton's homicide unit will take the lead, while police from Niagara — the jurisdiction in which her remains were found — will assist.

"It's obvious to us there is some sort of a link" between the eight victims, says Hrab. "We do believe there is a tie-in with those attacks."

Felicia and Danielle met when they lived at Charlton Hall, a home for girls with mental health issues.

Felicia's hair was long, blond and naturally curly, she had hazel eyes "and she was really little," Danielle says. She was 5-foot-8 and about 120 pounds. She had a pierced nose, liked to wear lots of blue eyeshadow. She wore flared, hip-hugger jeans, sweatshirts and platform boots.

"She told me a lot of stories about her family," says Danielle. "She didn't really have much family."

On the first anniversary of Felicia's disappearance, I spoke with her father, John Floriani. He told me he married Felicia's mother, Kelly, when she was pregnant. Felicia was born Feb. 11, 1987, and her mother left the family 18 months later.

Little Felicia loved to catch frogs and bugs. She watched *The Little Mermaid* over and over. She clung to her father so voraciously, he dubbed her "The Shadow."

John started a new family and a custody battle over Felicia ensued between him and her maternal grandparents. For a while, she shunted back and forth.



Felicia Floriani in a school photo taken in what appear to be happier times.



Felicia Floriani

At 12, she watched her grandmother die of a heart attack. Not long after that, Felicia's biological mother died of a drug overdose.

Felicia spent less time with family and more time hanging out with friends in downtown Hamilton.

She was diagnosed with a learning disorder and while enrolled at Sir John A. Macdonald, she rarely attended class.

Felicia stayed at Danielle's house for a while. They sunbathed and drank together.

"She'd always clean my room. She was really caring."

But she didn't take care of herself. Felicia often hitchhiked with men she didn't know. And though they never spoke of it, Danielle knew she was selling her body for money.

On June 10, they spoke on the phone and arranged to meet on the street corner. Felicia had a pair of Danielle's pants to return. That was the last time they had contact.

Danielle thinks of her friend often.

"She was always depressed. She never thought she was worth anything. When I told her not to hitchhike because something bad could happen, she always thought it wouldn't happen to her."

In a way, Danielle is glad Felicia has been found, so her family will know what became of her.

That sentiment is echoed by Detective Greg Jackson, who has been the Hamilton investigator on Felicia's case since the beginning. It was his task to notify her family that the found remains were those of their missing child.

"They were upset, but in the end relieved," he says. "They have an answer as to where she is."

Still, after all these years, the emotions are raw for Danielle.

"People need to know she wasn't just a hooker," she says. "She was a little girl."

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