

Family of missing man presses for awareness day

BY BRYNN MANDEL
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HARTFORD — The search for Janice and William Smolinski's missing son has led them to coroners' offices and police departments, to the banks of the Naugatuck River with cadaver dogs and to psychics.

On Monday morning, the Cheshire family's efforts to unearth what happened to Billy Smolinski, Jr., of Waterbury, took them to another unexpected place: the state capitol.

They went to ask lawmakers to designate a day for awareness of missing persons and their families left behind.

State Rep. Selim Noujaim, R-74th, proposed Aug. 24 as missing persons day after meeting the Smolinski family at a vigil held for Billy last August on Naugatuck's Green.

Members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee seemed especially moved by the Smolinskis' story and pledged to do what they could to move the bill forward.

"We feel our own story will end in a tragic manner," Janice Smolinski told lawmakers and



Janice Smolinski, seated, is flanked by her daughter, Paula Bell, and her husband, William Smolinski, as she testifies Monday before the Government Administration and Elections Committee in Hartford.

more empty seats than filled ones in the Legislative Office Building's Room 2A.

She sat flanked by her hus-

band and daughter, Paula Bell. They wore green ribbons

marked "Billy" and pins with his picture. The 53-year-old housewife's hands shook slightly as she spoke: "Take into consideration our plea ... I have taken the initiative to help other families of future missing loved ones so they, in fact, will not have to suffer the same heartache our family faces on a daily basis."

Billy vanished on Aug. 24, 2004. Then 31, Billy was last seen by a neighbor whom Billy asked to look after his German Shepherd, Harley, while he went up north to see about a car. He told the neighbor he would leave a key, but never did.

A Burger King receipt printed at 2:59 p.m. that day, nearly 19 months ago, and found in the trash at Billy's Holly Street home is the last trace the family could find of him. The case remains open and under investigation by Waterbury police.

At the Monday's hearing start, committee leaders recommended to those testifying: speak from the heart instead of from prepared materials. It has more impact.

Billy's father, William, 57, couldn't help but let his heart

get in the way.

"I feel all the dad-and-son moments together, walking and talking, now are just memories," he said, taking a long, hard pause. He continued, his usually gruff and deep voice now high, tiny and shaky: "Many days are hard to cope."

Noting the high-profile case of a constituent who disappeared on his honeymoon cruise last July, Rep. Livvy R. Floren, R-Greenwich, asked that the committee ensure no other state celebrations occurred on Aug. 24. "This is so important, it should have its own day," she said.

The committee will decide which proposals to send on to the General Assembly in coming days.

Calling the Smolinskis' testimony compelling, committee chairman Sen. Donald DeFronzo, D-New Britain, said there was a good chance of success.

Janice has her sights set higher. She plans to push for laws to shore up and make uniform the way that missing person cases are handled by law enforcement, such as in the collection of DNA.

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