

Monday, August 22, 2005

300 Hold vigil, pray for Waterbury man who vanished last year

By Brynn Mandel

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NAUGATUCK — Flames flickered in Sunday's slight evening breeze as close to 300 people clutched candles and offered prayers for a Waterbury man who vanished a year ago this week.

Emotions hung as heavy as the evening's humid air on the Green, where a vigil was held by the family of William "Billy" Smolinski Jr.

"For Bill," longtime friend John Pensanti of Naugatuck said as he joined his candle's flame with three others. A soft glow encompassed the Green as attendees passed fire from wick to wick. The vigil was held in Naugatuck because that's where Smolinski grew up.

Smolinski, a tow-track driver and HVAC technician, disappeared Aug. 24, 2004, leaving behind his keys, wallet and truck — and close-knit family.

A neighbor was the last to see him. Smolinski, then 31, asked the Holly Street neighbor to look after his German shepherd, Harley, while he went up north to see about a car. He never returned.

Smolinski's family has done something almost every day since then trying to find him. What began with daily foot searches has evolved into nightly drives to put up posters and efforts to draw the media's attention. Waterbury police

have said they found no signs of foul play, and leads have waned in recent months. Sunday night's vigil included prayers and calls to action.

Several speakers implored anyone with information on Smolinski's whereabouts to come forward. "There's always somebody who knows something," said Waterbury

Mayor Michael J. Jarjura, citing a city murder case that stalled for five years before someone came forward with information. Smolinski's mother, Janice Smolinski, urged the state to develop a list on missing adults. Trying to find her son, she learned that only a list of juveniles is maintained.

"Adults are people, too, and this is very upsetting," said the Cheshire housewife. She mentioned high-profile cases like Natalee Holloway's: "It's downright unfair for a few to get recognition."

Janice spends hours online weekly, corresponding with other mothers, including an Arkansas woman whose son disappeared a week before Smolinski. His remains were found this summer.

"I know your hearts are breaking," Billy's aunt, Linda Smolinski, read from a letter sent by that Arkansas mother. "You and I have paid a very dear price for this friendship of ours."

After they sang "On Eagles' Wings," Billy's sister, Paula Bell, and his aunt and uncle, Bruce and Grace Smolinski, and Thomas Clifford, deacon of St. Hedwig Church, gathered before the crowd.

With a gentle toss, four white birds flew from their hands skyward. One for the deacon's son, who died unexpectedly last year. Another for the late Arkansas man whose mother Janice has come to know. Yet another for a close friend of Smolinski's who died in a motorcycle accident years ago. And one for Smolinski.

A simultaneous vigil was planned for Sunday evening at a Lawton, Okla., church, organized by a longtime friend.