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Women bonded by loss, grief

Monday, June 5, 2006

BY BRYNN MANDEL

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WATERBURY -- Janice Smolinski and Lisa Keyworth wish they had never had to meet.

Grief, and their shared search for answers that may never come, forged their friendship.

Two years ago last week, Keyworth's 16-year-old granddaughter, Jessica, was found strangled in the stairwell of a semi-occupied Pearl Street home.

And two years ago this August, Smolinski's son, Billy, then 31, suddenly disappeared from his Holly Street house in an unrelated case.

The two women started talking last April at an anti-violence conference in Cheshire and swapped phone numbers.

"Our stories are so different, but we have this same commonality," said Keyworth, a travel agent from Norwalk.

"We have the same heartache," said Smolinski, the petite housewife from Cheshire, locking eyes with Keyworth.

Both women will attend a rally this Saturday in Waterbury's Library Park organized by the nonprofit CUE Center for Missing Persons, where the Smolinskis traveled recently for a conference about forensics and legislation that affect missing person cases. The North Carolina organization is traveling to 16 Eastern states as part of its annual Road to Remember Tour.

Organizers hope that renewed attention will prompt a lead or impetus to move highlighted cases in each state forward.

In Connecticut, the organization chose to highlight Billy Smolinski's case. And in Waterbury, Janice Smolinski insisted that Keyworth's case be

included in the event.

Waterbury police said both cases remain under active investigation. New tips could help, said police spokesman Lt. Christopher Corbett. "Sometimes people have information that they don't realize is important (but is) very valuable to our particular investigation," he said.

Keeping active distracts Smolinski and Keyworth from their pain. It empowers them, allowing them to feel as if they are doing something positive for Billy, and for Jessica.

The two grandmothers canvass neighborhoods around Greater Waterbury together regularly.

On Pearl Street, life unfolds to the beat of bass-thumping cars cruising through, and spates of incessant dog barking. It was near the bottom of this street -- strewn with discarded soda cups and lined by older, multi-family homes -- that Jessica's body was discovered on Memorial Day 2004.

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