

Questions haunt family of missing man
By Michelle Tuccitto Sullo, Naugatuck Valley Bureau Chief
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Jan and William Smolinski Sr. stand with a photo of their son, William Smolinski Jr., this week in their Cheshire home. (Mara Lavitt/Register)

Every time the phone rings, Janice and William Smolinski of Cheshire hope it's the police calling to say they have finally found their missing son, William Smolinski Jr., who vanished Aug. 24, 2004.

Renewed activity in the case has raised the family's expectations that an answer will finally come.

Earlier this month, police started searching a 21-acre open field at 160 Bungay Road in Seymour, using a variety of tools, including metal detectors and ground-penetrating radar, which can help detect objects beneath the surface. So far, police haven't found anything.

The Smolinskis joined investigators at the Seymour site for a couple of hours, but now wait at home for information.

"After four years of constant searching and trying to get answers, if you know your child is there, you want to be right there," Jan Smolinski said. "I know the search is very active, and the police are strategizing right now. My hope is that, with the technology they have, they will start looking again soon."

Speaking at her home this week, Jan Smolinski said, "Every time the phone rings, I run to see who it is, and when I see the (FBI) agent's number, I can't wait to answer."

William Smolinski Sr. said, "It has been a long wait."

“With all the digs and them not coming up with something, it is hard to believe,” he said. “The police seem pretty confident that he is there (the Bungay Road site), and if he is, I think they’ll find him. I think they are on the trail of whoever was involved.”

State police spokesman Lt. J. Paul Vance said Thursday police are no longer actively searching the Bungay Road property, but are not done with the case.

When asked if police now believe that Smolinski’s body isn’t at the Seymour location, Vance responded, “We aren’t saying for sure he isn’t there. Are we going to go back there? I’m not sure. Right now, we are working on other leads and information. It is an open, ongoing case.”

A police source close to the investigation, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Thursday investigators will be using more technology to search the Bungay Road site in coming weeks, and any more digging depends on those results. According to the source, the site has not been ruled out as a location for Smolinski’s remains.

The town’s heavy equipment was active at the Seymour site Thursday, but police insisted workers were only restoring places that had already been searched. State police have said the search was performed with the cooperation of the property owner, who isn’t involved in the investigation.

“The local, state and federal authorities are all working on this and brainstorming,” Jan Smolinski said. “They are dedicated and want to find Billy.”

Leads have proven to be deadends in the past. In May 2007, investigators searched for Smolinski at locations in Shelton.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Smolinski asked a neighbor to watch his dog for a few days just prior to his disappearance. Smolinski said he was going to look at a car that he was interested in buying, but he left behind his truck, wallet and keys, according to the FBI.

Jan Smolinski said the truck wasn’t parked in the spot where her son normally parked it. The family was fearful of foul play, and police later received a tip that an acquaintance, an individual who worked in the construction industry, may have been involved. But finding Smolinski’s body may finally help solve the mystery of what transpired. Jan Smolinski dismissed any speculation that her son would have harmed himself.

“Police know he has been murdered,” Jan Smolinski said. “You just want answers. The kindness and patience of the investigators, who have children of their own, helps us get through.”

Billy Smolinski left behind his German shepherd, named Harley, who now lives on a farm. After summer turned into winter, the family finally sold their son’s house in Waterbury.

“Every time you give away or sell something, it is like losing another part of yourself,” Jan Smolinski said. “It is just an ache and it doesn’t go away. I think maybe once he is

found, we'll come to terms with it. We have to know how he was murdered and if he suffered.”

Billy Smolinski was 31, an apprentice heating and air-conditioning technician and part-time tow truck driver when he disappeared. His mother describes him as an “outdoor person” who loved fishing, hunting, snowmobiling and riding horses.

The night before his disappearance, Billy Smolinski made plans for a trip to Six Flags amusement park, according to his mother.

Jan Smolinski said she has been active with missing persons organizations, and tries to reach out to others in the same situation.

“It is rewarding and my form of therapy,” she said.

There are thousands of missing people in this country, and thousands of unidentified remains. Jan Smolinski said she wants to see more done to identify remains, such as putting more DNA in the National Missing Persons DNA Database, so more families will get answers.

Billy's Smolinski's family will be marking the four-year anniversary of his disappearance this weekend with a “Missing Persons Day” rally on the Green in Waterbury.

The event, from 2 to 5 p.m. Saturday, will feature fingerprinting for children, face painting, a balloon launch, music, guest speakers and the Quilt of Hope, which has pictures of missing people. Several lawmakers and police officials are expected to attend.

“We are encouraging families to come,” Jan Smolinski said.

To give a tip in the Smolinski case, call state police in Bethany at 393-4200. Vance said anyone uncomfortable with talking to police can send information confidentially from a personal electronic device by texting “TIP711” plus the message to CRIMES, or 274637.

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