



The Huntsville Times

The search for a long missing son

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Documentary spotlights man with local ties

Last week, a poet from a large city in California and a retired woman from a small town in South Carolina started piecing together the clues of a mystery that's lasted almost 26 years.

They met in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., where the taping for a documentary on Maurice "Red" Jefferson began.

Jefferson, 16, disappeared on the afternoon of Nov. 28, 1983. The case has never been solved.

Jefferson spent much of his youth shuttling between elementary schools in Huntsville and Florida.

In the fall of 1982, he attended Lee High School in Huntsville, where his mother, Bettye Bridges, worked at a Pentecostal church.

The next year, he returned to Fort Lauderdale to attend school and live with his grandparents.

"Everyone in our family had graduated from high school in Fort Lauderdale," Bridges said. "He wanted to graduate from there, too. That's why he ended up there."

Bridges, now living in Williston, S.C., and Terry O'Neal, a poet, author and screenwriter from Sacramento, Calif., met in Fort Lauderdale last week to begin interviews for the documentary.

The documentary, tentatively titled "Hope of Finding a Son: The Maurice 'Red' Jefferson Story," is scheduled to be released in November.

The film is being produced by O'Neal. The budget is a \$10,000 grant from O'Neal's educational nonprofit organization, Lend Your Hand.

"The goal is to create awareness about Maurice," O'Neal said. "There are people who knew what happened to Maurice. Our goal is to make the truth come out."

By and by, the truth began to seep out late last week and into the weekend.

O'Neal interviewed Jefferson's former classmates and neighbors.

She found his girlfriend, who lived near the park where Jefferson disappeared.

She talked to the director of his choir.

"We found out a lot of information, a lot of leads that we hadn't known before," she said. "Back then, people

were young and scared. Now, people are coming forward and talking."

Around 3:30 on the afternoon of Nov. 28, 1983, a Monday, Maurice Jefferson said goodbye to his grandmother and left his home at 295 Northwest 30 Terrace in Fort Lauderdale.

He was headed to basketball practice at Dillard High School, where he was a member of the junior varsity team.

The walk to the gym was four miles, maybe five. Before he got to the school, he stopped in Franklin Park, near the school.

He wanted to talk to his girlfriend, who lived across from the park.

"He was talking to two girls in the park," Bridges said. "One of the girls said a car pulled up. A guy called him over to the car."

Jefferson walked to the car, then looked back at the girls.

"He turned and looked at them as if the guy had a gun or a knife," Bridges said. "The look on his face said he was scared. They forced him into the car and took off."

The next morning, a relative phoned Bridges in Huntsville about her son's disappearance.

After living in Huntsville for 13 years, Bridges moved to Fort Lauderdale in 1986.

She worked in a finance office there for 10 years, then worked in Orlando until she retired.

In 2004, she moved to Williston, S.C., her hometown.

"I always told my kids if we ever got separated they could find me in Williston," Bridges said. "They all knew this is where I would come when I retired from work."

Last fall, Bridges got her break when she received a phone call from O'Neal.

O'Neal had seen Maurice Jefferson's photo on a missing children's flier.

First, she crumpled the flier and threw it away.

"But his face kept calling out to me," O'Neal. "I took the flier out of the trash and did some research about his life."

Then she wrote a letter to Bridges, informing her about her interest in telling Jefferson's story.

For almost a week, Bridges ignored O'Neal's letter. One Sunday, Bridges came home from church, grabbed the letter and called O'Neal.

"I believe God still works miracles," Bridges said. "I hope God will work that one last miracle and bring him home. If he doesn't do it, I'm OK with that. God has made us strong."

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