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Clues Sought After Body of Florida Girl, 7, Is Found

By Liz Robbins

Investigators on Thursday intensified their search for evidence in the slaying of a 7-year-old Florida girl whose body was discovered Wednesday afternoon in a southeast Georgia landfill after a nationwide two-day hunt for her when she did not return home from school.

The authorities in Clay County, Fla., said they identified the body as that of Somer Renee Thompson of Orange Park, Fla., from a birthmark on her left shin and her clothing. An autopsy was performed Thursday by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation in Savannah to determine the cause of death.

“There is a child killer on the loose, and that’s why we’re going to catch this person and bring him to justice,” Sheriff Rick Beseler of Clay County said early Thursday at a news conference outside Jacksonville, Fla. “This is a heinous crime that’s been committed. I fear for our community until we bring this person in.”

Sheriff Beseler said investigators got their first break in the case when they decided to follow the trail of garbage trucks from the neighborhood where Somer disappeared. Garbage was collected Tuesday in nine trucks and taken to the Chesser Island Road Landfill, near Folkston, Ga., about 50 miles from where Somer was last seen. Investigators sorted through more than 100,000 tons of garbage.

Later on Thursday afternoon, the spokeswoman for the Clay County Sheriff’s Office, Mary Justino, said investigators were still sorting through the trash looking for forensic clues. Officers were also checking 470 “relevant” tips they had received, Ms. Justino said.

According to various news reports, Somer had gotten into an argument with a friend on Monday while walking home from Grove Park Elementary School, less than a mile away, and stormed off alone.

Sheriff Beseler would not release details about the abduction, but Ms. Justino said later that the police had questioned nearly all the registered sex offenders in the area. According to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 161 sex offenders live within five miles of Somer's home, and Ms. Justino said that as of Thursday afternoon, investigators had been able to speak to all but five of them.

"I don't think that is shocking or surprising," David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes against Children Research Center in New Hampshire, said of the number of sex offenders living in the area.

Dr. Finkelhor added in a telephone interview on Thursday: "I am of the opinion that these kinds of crimes have declined. They are shocking and galvanizing to the communities where they occur. But some of the research suggests that the effort we have made, both in flushing out sex offenders, incarcerating them and doing things like registering them and keeping tabs on them, are among the things responsible for the decline."

Sheriff Beseler said he had told Diena Thompson, Somer's mother, to be prepared for the worst when a body was found after 3 p.m. on Wednesday, and he said he called her again at 9 p.m. to tell her that the body was Somer's.

"Needless to say, she was absolutely devastated," the sheriff said. "It was the hardest phone call I've ever had to make in my life, and I hope I never have to make another one like that."