

Major break in mysterious Gadsden cold case

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By Beth Shelburne, Anchor



His name was Laytwan Brown, and for almost two decades his disappearance remained unsolved, along with another mystery that unfolded more than 700 miles away in Etowah County.

ETOWAH COUNTY, AL (WBRC) -

His name was Laytwan Brown, but everyone who knew him called him Twan. He was just over six feet tall and handsome, "like a young Michael Jordan," his sister Laytia Brown told me from her home in Wisconsin. Twan was a free spirit, loved to make people laugh and he was trying to change his life when he vanished at age 20. He was last seen alive on Mother's Day, 1998 near his home in Zion, Illinois.

For almost two decades, the disappearance of Laytwan Brown remained unsolved, along with another mystery that unfolded more than 700 miles away in Etowah County. On May 28, 1998 a fisherman found an unidentified body in Gadsden.

Investigators said he was a young black man, and his body showed multiple gunshot wounds and evidence that he may have been beaten and burned. Beyond an imagined horrifying death, they knew little else about the victim.

(Dub Parker Boat Launch in Gadsden, where an unidentified body was found in 1998.)

Until recently, no one connected the dots between these two cases, but investigators and the family of Laytwan Brown finally have DNA confirmation. The body found in the Coosa River 20 years ago was Laytwan Brown. How his body ended up in Gadsden and who killed him remain a mystery.

Sgt. Paul Kehrli with Zion Police said the next phase will be a homicide investigation involving multiple agencies, but could not offer many details, including any connections the victim had to Alabama.

"We certainly have some ideas, but I can't get into specifics," Kehrli said. "The factors that led up to it started around our area with people who are in our area."



The mystery surrounding Twan's disappearance has haunted his family and those who loved him. "It's been twenty years of torture," Laytia said. "All the sudden he vanished into thin air, like he never existed."

Twan was Laytia's big brother, but they were born just 17 months apart, "almost like twins," she said. "We knew each other's secrets, we shared everything." Growing up, he protected her and she protected him. He was popular, with no known enemies.

Zion City is situated in the far northeastern corner of Illinois, 50 miles north of Chicago on the shores of Lake Michigan, and less than 10 miles from neighboring Kenosha, Wisconsin. Laytia said shortly before his death, Twan had moved to nearby Kenosha for a change of scene. On the day he disappeared, he had gone to a cousin's house to get his hair braided. Laytia said somebody picked him up, and he was never seen alive again.

"Not knowing has been pure hell," she said.

Over the years, she would pass people who looked like Twan and her heart would skip a beat, until she realized it wasn't him. He never left her dreams, which turned into nightmares when she was pregnant. Laytia eventually suspected that her brother was dead, but accepting the truth has been hard.

"No one deserves to die like that," she said. "That's what hurts the most, to know that he was tortured before he died."



More than six months after he disappeared, in 1999, Laytwan's mother filed a missing persons report with Zion Police. Sgt. Kehrli said it wasn't uncommon for Laytwan to go away for periods of time and rumors surrounded his disappearance, including one that Twan's mother heard, that her son was incarcerated under a false name. Another rumor swirled that Twan was killed in Kenosha, and the case was transferred to Kenosha Police, where a detective worked the case for several years, to no avail.

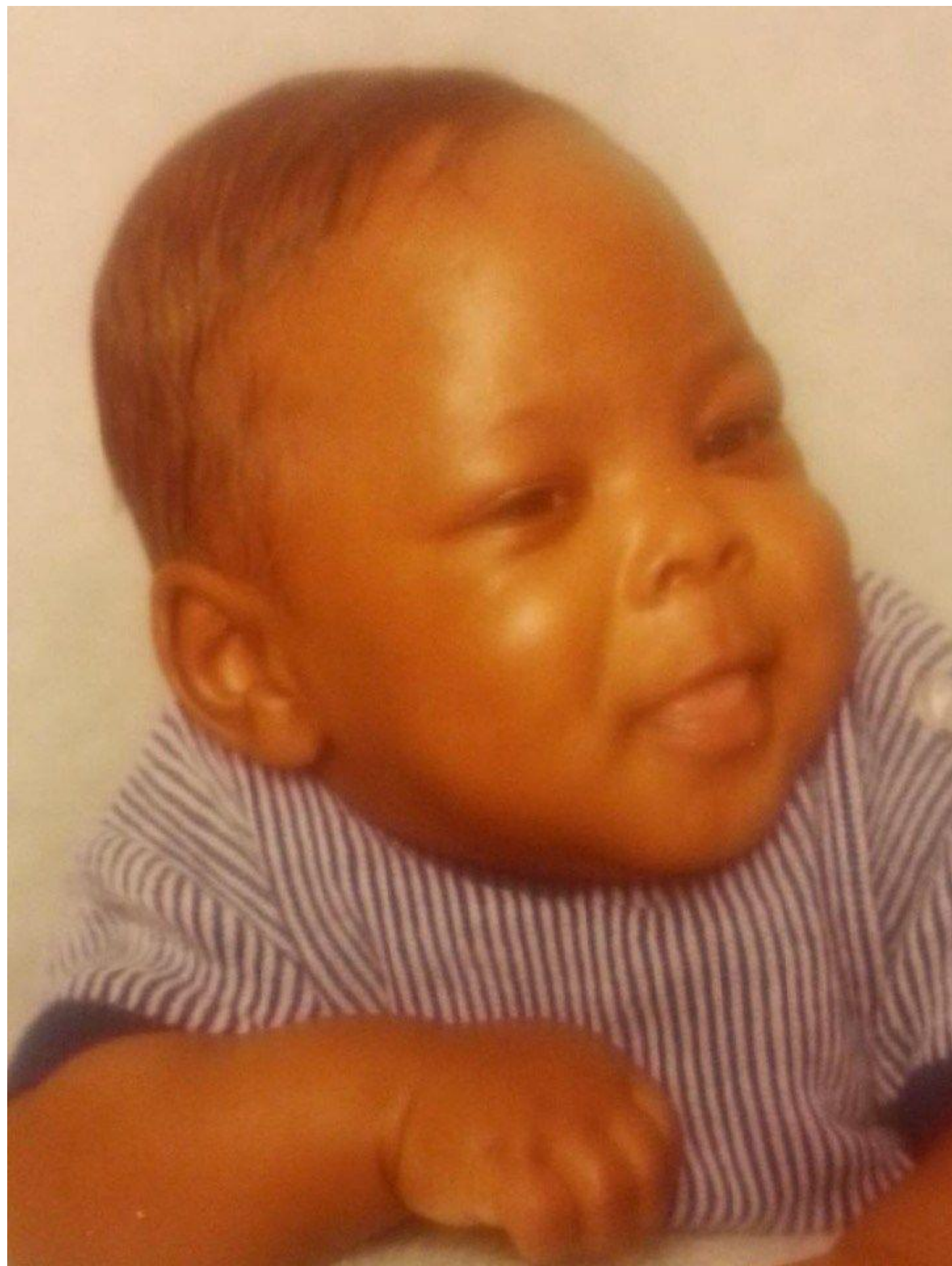
The investigation sputtered into neutral until 2016, when Sgt. Kehrli discovered it during an audit of leads in unsolved cases. He reached out to Laytwan's mother, who told him nobody had ever told her what happened to her son.

"We needed to still be investigating what happened to him," Kehrli said, "so it became an open case again, that had been forgotten."

Sgt. Kehrli registered the case with [NAMUS](#), the public online database of missing and unidentified cases, and asked Laytwan's parents to submit DNA samples for testing. Their samples were run against samples from unidentified remains in the database, including a body stored in the Forensic Anthropology Center at the University of Tennessee. Gadsden officials had sent the unidentified body found in 1998 there for analysis, where it has remained for years.

In November 2016, they had a break. The DNA report showed there was only a one in 1.2 trillion chance that the body stored in a Tennessee lab was not the biological child of Laytwan Brown's parents.

"That put the science behind it," Sgt. Kehrli said. "There's not 1.2 trillion people on earth, so we can say, beyond a reasonable doubt, there is a match."



Sgt. Kehrli explained the science to Laytwan's mother, who seemed caught between acceptance and denial. Twan was the love of her life, "her baby," Laytia told me. "My mom has been through so much," she said. "She has a tendency to deal with things herself and hold it all in."

Closure reached another snag when Sgt. Kehrli contacted officials in Alabama and asked for the death certificate, but no record of the death could be found. It turns out, when the body was discovered in 1998, a death certificate was never created in Etowah County.

I've spoken to Etowah County Coroner London Pierce several times, trying to figure out what happened. Pierce said it was unusual for a case to not have a death certificate attached, but he didn't know why one wasn't generated in 1998. Pierce took office in September 2016, and said after he heard from Zion Police, he contacted the Alabama Department of Public Health and Etowah County's District Attorney to try to figure out how to rectify the situation. I left a message for Etowah County District Attorney Jody Willoughby, which was never returned.

When I first called Pierce on February 15, more than a year had passed with no resolution. He confirmed this week that a death certificate is now being processed and it should take about two weeks for final certification in Montgomery. After that, the death certificate for Laytwan Brown will be sent to Zion, Illinois, so his family can make arrangements for his remains almost 20 years after he was taken from them. Zion Police and Laytia Brown both told me they are grateful that the death certificate is on its way.

"Your questions into things probably had a good hand in moving this along," Kehrli said.

In 2011, Laytia set up [a Facebook page](#) for her brother, but until I made contact with her through the page, and later spoke to her on the phone, she had not talked with Zion Police. Her mother had told her about a possible break in Twan's disappearance through DNA evidence, but Laytia didn't know too many specific details. I referred her to Sgt. Kehrli and they met this week. Laytia told me knowing finally that Twan is dead gives her some closure, but reading the few news reports surrounding her brother's body being found has been heartbreaking. Suddenly, now that she knows how he died, his murder feels fresh, like it just happened.

"That part did not give me closure," she told me, breaking into sobs. "It keeps me on the hunt and I swear, until my last breath, I'm going to do as much as I can to catch whoever did this to my brother."

If you have any information about the murder of Laytwan Brown in 1998, **contact [Zion Police](#) at (847) 746-4110.**