

Unsolved: Young, black and vanished



By [Leslie Rangel](#) Published: May 12, 2017, 8:00 pm Updated: May 12, 2017, 10:32 pm

AUSTIN (KXAN) — Debra Kay Stewart disappeared in 1976, when she was 19 years old. Stewart, who was a student at the University of Texas, was last seen leaving work from the Sears at the Hancock Center near Hyde Park.

Forty years later, detectives are still searching for Stewart as well as the missing link connecting her disappearance to two other young, black women, all of whom went missing in Austin within days of each other.

Stewart was last seen leaving the Sears on May 21, 1976. Friends say she was not feeling well. After that, no one heard from her again. Police found her car abandoned in the 1800 block of Ferdinand Street in East Austin. Her car keys were still in the ignition.

“Somebody robbed her lifetime. She could’ve married, had a career, children, and it’s a mystery as to who took that away from her,” says Mary Bell, a volunteer with The Doe Network, a nonprofit website database that tracks thousands of missing people. “We publish missing person cases, and we also publish unidentified bodies.

Bell is familiar with Stewart’s case. She was 24 years old when Stewart disappeared, but she never imagined decades later she would be assisting in the search for her.

“We have some articles, we have researchers and some matches made to Doe Network, but they did not pan out. Either they were eliminated by dentals or DNA,” Bell explains.

They’ve had no luck, and neither have detectives with the Austin Police Cold Case and Missing Person’s Unit.

“They ran it down as far as you could, but you can only work with what you have. If you don’t have anything that points to anything, you’ve got to keep going back and starting over and re-looking at it and doing it again until something develops,” says Richard Faithful, a detective with Austin Police Cold Case and Missing Person’s Unit. “Or [it takes] somebody that knows something coming forward and sometimes that never happens, at least for many times.”

Could the Cases Be Linked?

Before Stewart’s disappearance, there was Brenda Moore. She was another young black woman who police say disappeared in March of 1976 from an area where US 183 now runs on the east side. Her car was found in the 1900 block of Coletto Street—less than a block from where Stewart’s vehicle was found. Her car keys were in the vehicle, but she had vanished.

“There are some similarities here, but is there anything that’s definitive to say that the same thing happened to each female? No there’s not,” says Detective Tanya Jefferson.

Detectives found out a third black woman, 20-year-old Jennifer Joyce Barton, vanished on May 16, 1976, within days of Stewart’s disappearance. She was a known prostitute.

“She was seen getting into a vehicle, which was brown or tan in color and van and it bore California license plates,” Jefferson says.

Different circumstances, but she was young, black and vanished nonetheless.

“You have three separate cases of three different people. Three different lifestyles. Because one of which we know is a known prostitute and the other two were working females who had lives that they were living as well, one of which was married,” explains Jefferson. “It makes it very difficult because all the similarities that you want to match up just don’t match as you want them to. They just don’t, so they are different cases and we have to treat them as different cases.”

One of the biggest challenges for Jefferson and others in her department is the fact that cases like these were handled very differently years ago.

“Somebody robbed her lifetime.”

“You had very few detectives, or they called them Sergeant Investigators back then, and they did everything,” Faithful says. “They collected all their evidence, they took all their photographs, they collected all their own fingerprints, the only thing we had going for us back then was a department photographer.”

Today, there are more resources.

“Detectives are allowed to concentrate on the actual investigations because we have crime scene people, which do a phenomenal job for us,” Faithful says. He explains it frees up their time to think through the processes without doing a dozen other duties.

To get this case solved today, it’s going to take the public’s help.

“[Somebody] knows something important and it’s eating at the—eating at them,” Faithful says. “The closer you get to meeting your maker, they start reflecting on things and what are you going to answer to.”

Those still searching may not be those who are closest to the missing, but they’re committed.

“We still care, we’re not going to close this case and we’re not going to stop. We’re not going to stop looking for them,” Jefferson says.

If you have any information that could help detectives solve these cases call the **cold case/missing person’s unit at 512-974-5250**.

Brenda Moore, 20

- Last seen by co-workers on March 7, 1976 around 3:15 p.m.
- Car was found by her co-workers on March 12, 1976 in the 1900 block of Coletto St. The keys were left inside the car.
- Moore was married to Willie P. Moore and according to her husband, he and Brenda had been separated for about four months.
- Moore's husband thinks she skipped town with another man.
- Moore had a new boyfriend who drove a blue Chevy pickup truck.

Jennifer Joyce Barton, 20

- Last seen by a friend on May 16, 1976 getting into a van described as a "Good Times Van"
- Van was tan or brown in color with California license plates
- Witnesses say there were two black males inside
- Barton was a known prostitute and frequented the area near 11th Street at Waller and 7th Street at Congress Avenue
- Rumors indicated Barton had stolen from drug dealers who were never positively identified
- Witnesses also said Barton made comments about going to California
- Investigators made efforts to check in Los Angeles for Barton, but no one ever came up

Debra Kay Stewart, 19

- Last had contact with family May 20, 1976
- Went to work on May 21, 1976 and was not seen after leaving work
- Car was found in the 1800 Block of Ferdinand in East Austin between 8-9 p.m. Her car keys were still in the ignition.
- Two witnesses describe a black male, with a medium stock build getting out of her car.
- He was about 5'9-5'10, 190 lbs.
- He was described as neat looking with short hair wearing a long sleeved button up shirt and dark casual pants