

## FINALLY, A GRIEVING MOTHER CAN BEGIN TO SMILE AGAIN

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Sophia **Williams** has crept from hate to healing over the last two years. The fury that drove her into the streets in pursuit of her daughter's killer hasn't vanished, but it's losing its grip. Strangers, sometimes from unexpected places, have reached out and helped make **Williams** whole again.

I first met **Williams** and wrote about her more than two years ago. I felt her rage pushing her to the edge and feared she'd be dead or in prison by now. Instead, last week, she sat in front of a social issues class at Oasis High School in Mt. Pleasant, telling her story to 35 students.

For more than two hours, **Williams** talked about the daughter she lost. She would tell this story a million times if she believed it would help one person.

**Bryona Williams**, 15, a Northern High School honor student, disappeared on March 20, 2003. Abducted, raped and murdered, she was found three weeks later frozen and nude from the waist down in a boarded-up house on Longview.

The case says a lot about race and class in America. So teacher Marsha Biggs invited **Williams** to the alternative high school in central Michigan, after writing to her through me last month.

While the disappearance of Elizabeth Smart in Utah triggered a nationwide hunt and national media coverage, **Bryona's** abduction was neglected by the Police Department and practically ignored by the local media, except for a report by WXYZ-TV (Channel 7).

**Williams** took matters into her own hands, distributing flyers, kicking down the doors of crack houses, visiting illegal after-hour clubs, and chasing down a pimp who was later tried for **Bryona's** murder. When **Williams**, posing as a prostitute, found him, she beat him down with a steering wheel lock and might have killed him if police hadn't pulled her off. **Williams** also assaulted a officer. In the months following her daughter's abduction, she was arrested five times.

Garland Malone Jr., 24, was acquitted of her murder in June but convicted of sexual assault. He's serving up to 30 years in prison at Richard A. Handlon Correctional Facility in Ionia.

Truth be told, a lot of people helped kill **Bryona**: the police who initially dismissed her as a runaway, the neighbors who knew what went down but kept quiet, the local media that blew off the story.

But there's a flip side to this tale that **Williams** asked me to tell. When people hurt, other people reach out across the lines that divide them. **Williams**, 34, received more than 50 letters from people she didn't know, about half of them from rural and suburban areas of Michigan. She told the class about a man from Flat Rock who sent her the image of an angel and told her to have hope.

The students asked a lot of questions, and **Williams** answered them straight up: She was furious when police failed to put out an Amber Alert on her daughter; too angry to

feel fear while pursuing her killer; even more upset that her daughter's killer was

black because "he should have seen his sisters, nieces and aunties when he looked at **Bryona**."

Many of the questions from the mostly white students were race related. Prejudice, **Williams** said, is not simply a matter of black and white. **Williams'** maternal grandmother was Italian, and she spent part of her childhood with her in Howell. **Williams** experienced prejudice from white people, but said she also has felt it as a light-skinned African American in Detroit, where some black kids called her a mutt.

"I'm not a prejudiced person, never have been," she told the students. "I only felt that way for a minute, when no one seemed to care about my daughter and they kept flashing Elizabeth Smart on the news. But God and the people who wrote me washed it away."

After her talk, the students came up and, one by one, embraced **Williams**, some of them with tears. She helped them understand, and they helped her heal.

**Williams** is broke, unemployed and doesn't know where she and her 14-year

old daughter, Asisa, will live next month. In April, her upstairs flat was burned, destroying most of her possessions. She's still waiting on a settlement from State Farm.

Still, she rode back home with me from Mt. Pleasant with a smile.

"I'll remember those kids forever," she said. "There was a time I didn't want to live, but I know God was saving me for something. Something positive has come out of this. I have good things to remember now."

"I know God was saving me for something. Something positive has come out of this." Sophia **Williams**, mother of **Bryona Williams**, who was murdered in 2003

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CAPTION: Sophia **Williams**, with a picture of her daughter **Bryona** behind her.

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