

Family of filmmaker murdered in New Orleans last year dismayed with investigation

4 days ago

The shots lasted only seconds, but the quick burst of gunfire that cut through a New Orleans neighbourhood almost a year ago took one life, shattered many others and put the city's violent pedigree under even greater scrutiny.

The death of Helen Hill, a respected former Halifax filmmaker who died on that Jan. 4 morning from a single shot to the neck, also put into sharp focus a justice system in disarray and a police force struggling to solve a soaring number of deaths in the most rudimentary conditions.

One year after she was gunned down and her Canadian husband, Paul Gailunas, and two-year-old son, Francis Pop, escaped with minor injuries, relatives and friends say they're dismayed, but not entirely surprised there are no suspects, no witnesses and few solid leads in her case.

"There were 164 homicides in 2006 and one conviction, so does that give you pause? Hell, yeah," Jake Hill, Helen's older brother, said in a recent interview from New York.

"I couldn't find the trailers where the detectives were working when I went down there because the street signs weren't up and it had been 500 days (since hurricane Katrina)."

Hill said the conditions police officers are working under are difficult.

"They were in trailers and the phones were not working properly in the detective's office. There's something absolutely shocking and reprehensible about that," he said.

The destruction caused by the powerful storm more than two years ago laid waste to a city that already ranked as one of the more violent in the United States.

Hill said New Orleans is still so mired in poverty, corruption and mismanagement that police are having trouble keeping up with a murder rate that outpaces most other U.S. cities.

The force is pitifully short-staffed, often has to try to solve crimes without the help of witnesses who are too afraid to step forward, and lacks proper resources, like a crime lab.

The district attorney's office is also so under-funded that it was in danger of shutting down following a lawsuit that found it discriminated against white employees.

"We have a criminal justice system that's on life-support," said Brad Ott, a close friend of the couple's who lives in New Orleans. "And we have a near-total breakdown in social services and they're doing very little to bring them back."

That has fuelled a lethal battle among gangs fighting to reclaim valuable turf for the drug trade, and stymied efforts by police to clamp down on the violence.

Frustrated over a lack of progress and the fact that the detectives investigating his 36-year-old sister's death had changed at least three times, Hill returned to New Orleans in September to try to prompt some movement.

He held a news conference with Supt. Warren Riley and increased a Crime Stoppers reward for information from \$3,500 to \$15,000.

America's Most Wanted also featured Helen in a special show and a CBS news program did a documentary on her and the death of Dinerral Shavers, a 25-year-old musician who was murdered just days before Helen.

Despite the exposure and growing pressure from weary residents who want officials to do something to control the violence, there have been no tips or credible calls from potential witnesses.

"Once you get past the first few weeks and the case is not solved, you're in for the long haul," said Hill, 41, who spent Christmas with Helen's husband and his nephew at his parent's home in South Carolina.

"Two months go by and they're still working on the case and it seems like an eternity when it's your sister that was killed, but I've learned to accept that. I understand that it's a very difficult place to get witnesses to come forward," he said.

Hill, who keeps in regular contact with the cold case detectives who are handling the file, said there is a glimmer of hope that

someone might be caught. Without giving details, he said police are looking at potential evidence that could eventually lead to an arrest.

The lead detective in the case was not available, but a police spokesman said the investigation is continuing.

It's not clear whether anyone saw the person who killed Helen, who had lived with Gailiunas in his hometown of Halifax before moving in 2001 to New Orleans, where he worked at a medical clinic for the poor.

At about 5:30 a.m. on Jan. 4 last year, Gailiunas said he heard his wife in distress and pleading for someone not to hurt her baby, Francis Pop. He rushed out to the hall and found her struggling with a man of medium build and cropped black hair.

As he and their son stood nearby, the intruder fired one fatal shot at her.

Gailiunas raced to the bathroom cradling his son as the gunman fired shots down the hall, striking Gailiunas in his hand, forearm and cheek. The little boy was unharmed.

Hours later when the city awoke, people were stunned to hear that the community activist had been killed, making her the sixth murder victim in 24 hours.

Hundreds of people marched through the city, demanding that something be done to reduce the murder rate, which was already poised to surpass last year's with 163 killings by October.

For Hill, that might be the only glint of hope in the death of the acclaimed animator.

"If there is anything good to come out of what happened to her, it is to help New Orleans recover," he said.

"It may shed light on how devastated New Orleans still is and maybe wakes up the rest of America that it needs help. It's shameful."