

CRIME & PUBLIC SAFETY

'A pain that will never go away': Gwinnett mother grieves teen daughter's death

Ex-Doraville police officer charged in connection with 16-year-old's death



Maria Bran holds a photo of her daughter Susana Morales, whose body was found recently in Gwinnett County. A former Doraville police officer has been arrested in connection with her death.

By Rosana Hughes
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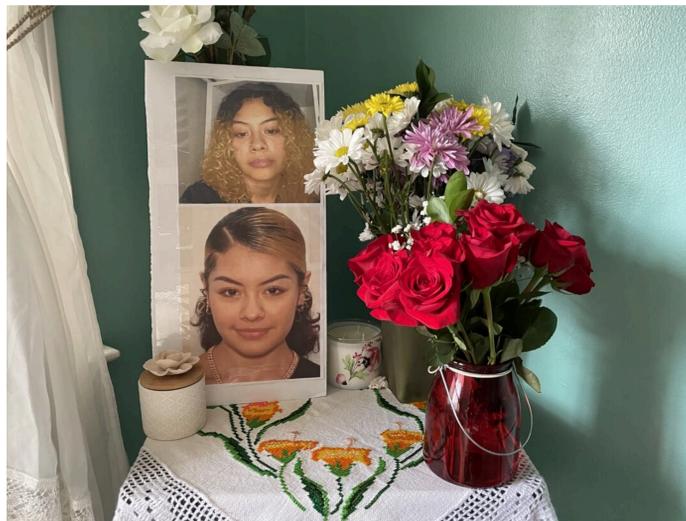
For six months, Maria Bran desperately hoped and prayed her missing 16-year-old daughter would come home.

That hope was shattered last week when Gwinnett County police informed her they had found skeletal remains that belonged to the teenager.

"I'm sad," Bran told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution in an interview at her Norcross home Wednesday. "I know where she is now. It's not the same anguish anymore. Now it's just the pain of not knowing how much she suffered before she died. It's a pain that will never go away."

Susana Morales, a junior at Meadowcreek High School, went missing on the evening of July 26. A former Doraville police officer, Miles Bryant, has been arrested in connection with her death on the suspicion that he dumped her naked body in the woods, according to court records. Police have not determined when or how she died.

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Susana Morales, 16, went missing the evening of July 26. Her body was found just over six months later.

Morales was a happy teenager, popular and loved by many, her mother said.

The family immigrated to the United States from Mexico nearly 24 years ago hoping to raise children in a country with more opportunities, said Bran, who does not speak English.

Morales wanted to one day be an undercover detective, her mother said. She played the guitar and piano and would do her makeup just to keep from being bored. She loved getting takeout as a treat, even if her mom already had a homemade meal ready. And, as the youngest of three girls and the only one left at home, she was always allowed to have it, Bran said.

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It has been a difficult six months for Morales' family since she disappeared while walking home from a nearby friend's house. She texted her mother that night that she was on her way, but she never arrived and no update from her ever came.

The day after Morales went missing, Bran went out looking for her at 6 a.m. It was out of character for her daughter not to communicate. Even if she was frustrated, she'd always respond to her mother.

After that, Bran said she didn't want to leave the house out of fear that Morales would find her way back home and she wouldn't be there.

"It's agonizing. Waiting on the moment she'd return. Waiting on her to call me. Waiting to get news that I need to go pick her up," Bran said. "My hope was always that she would return alive, not the way she was found."



Susana Morales, a junior at Meadowcreek High School, wanted to be a detective, her mother said.

Bran now spends most of her time in her daughter's room. It's full of memories and the essence of who Morales was, and it helps her grieve, she said. She hopes to soon visit the area in Dacula where Morales' body was found to leave a memorial cross.

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Bryant, 22, was arrested Monday, a week after the teen's body was found more than 20 miles from where she was last seen. He faces one count of concealing the death of another and one count of false report of a crime. He was fired from the Doraville Police Department the same day.

In Bryant's warrant application, it states that he "lives in close proximity to victim and dumped her naked body in the woods." It also states that there was no known relationship between the two.

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His bond was denied Tuesday during his first court appearance, with the judge citing investigators' belief that he is a danger to the community.

Bran said she believes her daughter may have been found sooner, even if only her body, if her case wasn't treated like a runaway. The Gwinnett police department has defended its handling of the investigation, stating that detectives followed all leads beginning the night she was reported missing.

Now, the family is turning their focus to the court case.

"I promised my daughter that she will have earthly justice because the divine, that is up to God," Bran said. "That is what we're doing: standing united to seek justice."

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About the Author



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Rosana Hughes is an award-winning bilingual (fluent in Spanish) journalist with a passion for explanatory public service journalism. She has been a reporter on the breaking news team since January 2022.

