



Saying goodbye: Many touched by Opal's story

'We know she's home in God's hands,' girl's grandmother says

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By LESLEY TÉLLEZ / The Dallas Morning News

NORTH RICHLAND HILLS – Nearly five years after the 6-year-old girl with the pink Barbie tennis shoes was kidnapped, those who knew Opal Jo Jennings – and several who never met her – finally said goodbye.

About 100 people attended Opal's memorial service Saturday at Richland Hills Church of Christ in North Richland Hills. Two horseback riders discovered Opal's remains Dec. 30 in a rural Fort Worth field.

Relatives said the service brought some closure, but the healing process continues.

"It's bittersweet," said Opal's grandmother, Audrey Sanderford, clutching a purple teddy bear given to her by Donna Norris, whose daughter, Amber Hagerman, was abducted in 1996 in Arlington. Her abduction led to the creation of the Amber Alert system.

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"We know she's home in God's hands," Ms. Sanderford said. "And in a way, that's a good feeling to know."

Opal, a brown-haired, blue-eyed child, was kidnapped in March 1999 while playing in her grandmother's front yard in Saginaw. Her playmates, a 4-year-old cousin and 2-year-old neighbor, said a man with a ponytail pulled over and pushed her into his vehicle.

Law enforcement identified the man as Richard Lee Franks, a convicted child molester. A Dallas County jury convicted him of kidnapping in September 2000. He's serving a life sentence in a prison near Beeville.

The ceremony opened with melodic children's songs played on the church piano, including "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" and "Where Is Thumbkin." Visitors were invited to pin pink ribbons to their clothes. A smiling photo of Opal sat on an easel at the head of the stage, framed by heart-shaped wreaths of pink flowers.

The Rev. Grady Brittain of Salado United Methodist Church in Salado, Texas, gave the invocation and led the service. Sarah Martino, a 19-year-old Fort Worth resident, sang Elton John's version of "Candle in the Wind" at the family's request, opening the song with "Goodbye, Texas Rose."

Then Opal's aunt, Theresa Sanderford, and her kindergarten teacher, Gioia Jones, gave eulogies.

Scott Gidley of Fort Worth, who sat in the audience with his wife and 11-year-old daughter, Breanna, said he didn't know Opal but was riveted by her story.

The day she was kidnapped, he said, he was at a youth soccer practice just minutes from her grandmother's house.

"It turned the community upside down," said Mr. Gidley, adding that her disappearance spurred him to remove youths' last names from their soccer jerseys, in case predators were watching. "It kind of turned on some new lights for us. ... I think everyone holds their kids a little closer and tends to watch out."

Opal's disappearance led Sheila Holland and other volunteers to start United Response Search and Rescue, a search team based in Midlothian. Opal was their first case, but they've since searched for 10 other missing people, Ms. Holland said.

Despite Opal's remains being found, the girl's "missing" flier will remain on the organization's Web site, Ms. Holland said.

"It was a child," she said. "It could have been my child, your child ... it just touches your heart."

Patricia Bradbury, who also didn't know Opal, said she moved to Saginaw months after the girl was kidnapped, mostly because she saw how the community united to find the girl.

Ms. Bradbury's daughter, Rae-leigh was kidnapped by a baby sitter in November 1998, and found a short time later using the Amber Alert system. It was the first time it was ever activated, she said. Rae-leigh's now 5 and healthy.

"I just wish for a better outcome," said Ms. Bradbury, 31.

Ms. Norris said she's become close with the Sanderford family, and wanted to come to the service despite memories of her daughter's abduction.

"Opal and Amber are now in heaven together, playing Barbies, just being sweet," Ms. Norris said.

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