

Family of missing Beecher Bay woman chooses hope

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By Nina Grossman



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Family and friends of Raymona Peter, 45, haven't given up on finding her. Raymona was last seen Sept. 30 leaving her father's house in Scia'new First Nation. (Aaron Guillen/News Staff)





UPDATE: The search for a woman missing from Scia'new First Nation has ended in loss. Sooke RCMP announced the evening of Oct. 9 that the 45-year-old woman's body had been found. RCMP believe foul play is not suspected.

Original story:

His daughter's official search was suspended more than a week ago, but Raymona Peter's father is decidedly positive.

"If I start crying and thinking about her being in that water ... if I was to think about that and cry about that, that's just like praying for that to happen," said Raymond (Rick) Peter. Peter is from Cowichan but lives on the Scia'new First Nation. He's upbeat while he talks about his daughter over the phone, songs of hope and prayer floating in the background. That's his family singing, he said. Some are from the Beecher Bay area, but many have come in from across Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland. They're all there to find Raymona.

The 45-year-old woman's bright smile and blue checkered shirt have been appearing in images shared across online community groups and in printed posters around East Sooke for more than two weeks. She has been missing since Sept. 30, when she left her father's house on foot.

Peter believes she was looking for a missing pay-as-you-go cellphone when she left that day. And he doesn't think she's left her community since.

"I do firmly believe she is out here in Beecher Bay reserve," he said. "I firmly believe she was going out to look for that cellphone."

RELATED: Search effort suspended for missing Indigenous woman last seen in East Sooke (<https://www.sooke.newsmirror.com/news/missing-woman-last-seen-in-beecher-bay-area-of-sooke/>).

About 10 days before she disappeared, Raymona suffered a mental breakdown, Peter said. His daughter struggles with drug abuse and mental health issues. But on the morning of the day she went missing, Raymona got a phone call with promising news about a rehab facility.

Raymona truly wants to get better, he said.

"You could hear the positive emotions coming out," he recalled. "She was getting excited and happy about ... going away and getting her body healthy."

She asked her dad and his wife if they could meet the next morning to discuss details around rehab, Peter said. But around 10 a.m., she left the house, heading out the back door. He watched from the front window as she crossed the front of the house and disappeared out of sight.

The RCMP, Juan de Fuca Search and Rescue, the Royal Canadian Marine Search and Rescue, helicopters, dog squads and search teams from across southern Vancouver Island were deployed to find Raymona. They searched the reserve, coastline, bush, surrounding trails and residential areas.

But after three days, the search was suspended. Unconfirmed sightings of Raymona in Victoria had been reported to police.

Family and friends of Raymona Peter, 45, haven't given up on finding her. Raymona was last seen Sept. 30 leaving her father's house in Scia'new First Nation. (Aaron Guillen/News Staff) Peter is at peace with that decision. While his family and friends continue to search – heading out in groups to scan the community and dense wilderness surrounding it – the official search teams had done as much as they could do at that time, he said. "And if there's any new evidence, they'll be out right away."

The Lil' Red Dress Project, a grassroots organization from the Comox Valley, supports the family's search. The group raises money to help families of missing and murdered Indigenous women or girls, often paying for signage and billboards.

For Raymona, the volunteer coalition has launched its first-ever digital campaign.

"I imagine for them it must be excruciatingly painful not knowing where a loved one is at the end of the day," said Carla Voyageur, Lil' Red Dress Project co-founder.

Voyageur, whose close friend went missing, said the not knowing was extremely hard on her community.

"Indigenous communities are tight-knit," she said. "It's a very heavy situation for any family or community to be in. Our numbers of missing and murdered cases are disproportionately high compared to non-Indigenous people," she added. "We all know there has been the government inquiry, but there are yet to be steps taken on recommendations from that inquiry."

For Peter and his community, the search for Raymona continues.

"We want her to know how much we love and miss her," he said. "If she gets mad or angry at us for putting all this out there ... and she calls, at least we'll know."

– with files from Aaron Guillen

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