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Still no leads in Hill's death 

Halifax filmmaker's murder to be featured on America's Most Wanted, 48 Hours

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Helen Hill with her husband Paul Gailunas, their two-year-old son Francis and their pets. The murder rate in New Orleans is by far the highest in the U.S. (File photo)

It has been almost eight months since the early morning silence was broken by the retort of gunfire from inside Helen Hill's tidy white house in New Orleans.

Eight long, frustrating months since the acclaimed Halifax filmmaker was killed by a bullet wound to the neck. No clues, no arrests and no closure for family members desperate for answers.

Jacob Hill, Helen's brother, keeps in frequent contact with the NOPD detectives investigating his sister's murder but says "there is nothing happening, no news" about a possible break in the case.

"It's disappointing, but we have to be on their side and we have to trust that they do feel strongly this is a case that needs to be solved," he says. "We take them at their word that they do care."

In the absence of progress by police, the family has enlisted the aid of two high-profile U.S. television programs, in the hopes they will produce new leads.

America's Most Wanted is scheduled to air a segment on Hill's murder Sept. 15 and ABC's *48 Hours* is planning its own story in late September.

'Not giving up'

"We are not giving up and we are hopeful that the national press will help to put the case even more so on the front burner," Hill said. "We obviously need someone from the community who knows what happened to come forward. It's a very difficult proposition in New Orleans."

Still grieving, Hill's stepfather has come to his own painful conclusions.

"I felt right away that New Orleans killed Helen," Kevin Lewis said. "In my bad moods - my worst moods - I don't care if New Orleans gets flooded out again and is just plowed over."

Lewis said he knows "in the long run" he can't hold the city itself culpable in the death of his daughter, but his assessment holds more than a kernel of truth.

Two years after Hurricane Katrina brought this historic city to its knees, murder is coming to define New Orleans's personality as much as jazz funerals, Mardi Gras parades and French Quarter debauchery.

While the Big Easy's recovery proceeds elsewhere in fits and starts - fears remain about the strength of repaired levees and few residents have returned to the most devastated neighbourhoods - the only thing that has truly returned to pre-Katrina levels is the violence.

The city recorded 161 murders in 2006 alone, giving it a murder rate that is 30 per cent higher than that of the next major American city.

By Aug. 17 of this year, the city had already recorded 127 homicides and is on pace to surpass last year's total by 15 per cent.

Many of the murders have been linked to the drug trade, the violence fuelled by rival gangs fighting to re-establish territory lost when floodwaters covered 80 per cent of the city on Aug. 29, 2005.

But there have also been several random, high-profile murders that have unsettled middle-class New Orleanians who once felt immune to the inner-city crime that has plagued the city for decades.

Hill, 36, was shot by an unknown assailant who broke into her family's home at around 5:30 a.m. on Jan. 4 while she slept. Her husband, Halifax-born doctor Paul Gailiunas, was shot three times and survived. The couple's two-year-old son, Francis, was unhurt.

Hill's death, in particular, triggered a wave of outrage among New Orleanians because it was the city's sixth homicide in a 24-hour period, and because Hill was well known in the city's artistic community.

Lived in Halifax in late '90s

Born in South Carolina, she met her husband at Harvard University and became a naturalized Canadian citizen while the couple lived in Halifax in the late-1990s. Hurricane Katrina forced the couple out of New Orleans in 2005 but, against the objections of Hill's parents, they returned to their adopted city in August 2006.

Hill and Gailiunas were described affectionately by family members as "do gooders" who were eager to help New Orleans revive. Hill began a film co-operative and offered free seminars while Gailiunas worked at a community health centre.

A week after her slaying, thousands of angry residents marched on city hall to protest the failure of city officials to curb rising crime. But the city's response since has, by most accounts, been tepid.

While the empty streets of post-Katrina New Orleans provided a fertile ground for the city's gangs to re-establish their businesses, the beleaguered police department has struggled to regain its footing.

The seemingly intractable problems facing law enforcement have been a source of constant pain for members of Hill's family.

"It's not a place where the rule of law runs very deep," Lewis said.

Difficult subject

Among Helen's family members, the question of whether New Orleans itself is culpable remains a difficult subject.

"I've never been angry at New Orleans, *per se*," Jacob Hill said. "I honour the fact that my sister loved New Orleans. It's important to me that my sister not become a symbol that represents the need to leave New Orleans. She should be a symbol to help New Orleans come back."

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1. Wow from halifax, ns writes: people will post 60 posts in something related to a ticket for dogs and not one in this article. Some sorry for your loss.. I would never live in New orleans... Alot of probelms then pre katrina and even worse after. I hope you find out who did this to her and they are brought to justice

Posted 25/08/2007 at 12:49 pm | [Alert an Editor](#) | [Link to comment](#)

2. Seajay from Nova Scotia writes: My prayers go out to this family and their friends too.

Several months ago THE COAST dedicated the front page and an article to this tragic story...It made this woman into more than just another tragic news story about someone I never knew. The article touched for a moment the brilliance and magic that this woman was blessed with.

Posted 25/08/2007 at 1:14 pm | [Alert an Editor](#) | [Link to comment](#)

3. cristin from CA writes: I would like to thank Sheldon for writing such a nice article and for helping to keep Helen's memory alive.

For more information about Helen, please see her memorial website: <http://www.helenhill.org>

Posted 25/08/2007 at 2:20 pm | [Alert an Editor](#) | [Link to comment](#)

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