

Justice For Jelani Day

By John W. Fountain
Chicago Sun-Times

Jelani is every bit human as Gabby



JOHN W. FOUNTAIN

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The first in a series titled "Justice For Jelani."

PERU, Ill., Sept. 23 — Here in this historic sundown town, population 10,300, where the Illinois River and a railroad stretch for miles across a scenic emerald valley, a Black body was found nearly a month ago floating in the river, and questions surrounding his death still swirl like a cool autumn wind.

I have driven here as a reporter on this sun-splashed day. An eagle glides above the haunting green Illinois Route 251 Bridge, where search crews reportedly found the body on Sept. 4.

Standing above the river's serene banks, I am well aware of the documented history of Peru and the adjoining town of La Salle as having been among the hundreds of all-white Illinois towns and suburbs north of the Mason-Dixon line.

Sundown towns. All-white communities where, once upon a time in America's history, the written or unwritten warning for decades — before and long after the Civil War — to people who look like me was made clear:

*We don't want your kind livin' 'round here.
Don't let the sun go down on your Black a--.
N-words better be out of town by sundown.*

Or else risk the certain wrath of good townfolk aiming to protect the status quo and keep out miscreants and riffraff, namely Black folks.

This is not supposition on my part but well documented in a rather thick book — 576 pages — "Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism" by sociologist James W. Loewen. First published in 2005, the book names Peru as being among those towns.

I make no assertions about the quaint, aged town. And indeed I had not, before today, ever been to this river city that lies a stone's throw from Starved Rock State Park and less than a two-hour drive from

my home in suburban Chicago.

I have traveled here, self-assigned and compelled as a journalist and also as a Black man. Convicted by my conscience, and purposed in heart and craft, amid the national news media's obsession with the story of a missing and murdered white woman whilst stories of missing and murdered Black people continue to go largely MIA.

Like the story of the 51 mostly African American women murdered in Chicago since 2001, and whose cases remain largely unsolved. Like the story of a missing young Black man who disappeared Aug. 24 from the campus of Illinois State University in Normal, about 64 miles south of here. The story of Jelani Day.

The disappearance of Jelani, a graduate student and handsome 25-year-old with a brilliant white smile and a bright future, troubles me.

Not just because he is Black and reminds me of my son, or my beloved nephews and other young Black men who must walk this unenviable path in this Black skin that makes us targets in Black

and in white America.

But because Jelani is human. As human as Gabrielle "Gabby" Petito.

And ultimately because Jelani's case deserves the same media attention. Because the disappearance of a white daughter is not greater than the disappearance of a Black son.

Gabby's case appears closer to being solved. What happened to Jelani remains a mystery. His mother and family deserve answers.

I'm not the national media. Just a trained Black journalist with one damn pen.

But if I can use it to help bring some justice for Jelani, maybe shake out some truth, I figure it's at least worth my time, talent and gas.

A bit nervous, I've asked my brother Jeff to ride with me to Sundown USA — trusting him, God and Illinois Concealed Carry to return me safely home.

We drive into Peru, bound for the woods where police said they found Jelani's car, and down by the river, where 11 days after Jelani disappeared, they found a Black body in this historic sundown town.



Jelani Day FACEBOOK

The mystery of the disappearance and death of a son of Danville, Jelani Day



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Part of a series titled "Justice For Jelani."

PERU, Ill. — The steady unsentimental female Google voice guides my brother Jeff and me to a wooded area here, "south of the Illinois Valley YMCA and due north of 12th Street and Westcreek Avenue." Pulling off Interstate 80, we snake through Peru, drive past the Illinois Valley YMCA, to where police said they recovered Jelani Day's four-door sedan on Thursday, Aug. 25, one day after he had been reported missing. Nine days later, on Saturday, Sept. 4, at 9:47 a.m., searchers found a body floating in the Illinois River near the Illinois Route 251 Bridge.

The La Salle County coroner's office press release at the time did not identify the "decedent" as male or female, black or white, and gave no hint whether the corpse found floating even remotely matched Jelani's 6-foot-1-inch frame.

The mystery swelled like the pain of a mother's broken heart.

The discovery of a body only raised more questions, shook Jelani's mother, Carmen Bolden Day, to the core. A petite, mocha-brown woman whose Danyne smile mirrors her son's, Day, 49, mulled over the possibility that the dead body could turn out to be her baby boy.

She hoped not. Prayed not. Chose to keep believing that Jelani would be found safe and sound — even in the days and weeks that followed with no definitive word from the authorities on the corpse's identity.

And yet, there was no solace, no answers, to be found in Peru. Not yet. Only questions. Lingering questions amid an unfolding surreal, if not bizarre, case that Day and her family found themselves facing with relentless dread, and wishing, hoping, that it was only a bad dream from which they might soon suddenly awaken.

The absence of answers and progress early on led Jelani's mom to press investigators to act with more urgency and intensity. She still wonders why they didn't search



Jelani Day with his mother, Carmen Bolden Day. PROVIDED BY THE FAMILY OF JELANI DAY

the river that first week after the discovery of Jelani's white 2010 Chrysler 300, which had belonged to his grandfather who died in October 2014, and whose name Jelani bears

as one of his two middle names. His mother was proud that Jelani had recently fixed up his grandfather's car, working and paying off the cost of repairs.

That car was found with its license plates removed, and with no sign of the keys, or Jelani.

Day wonders whether an earlier search, rather than the passage of nine days before a police search of the river, which turned up a body, might have made a difference, might have yielded more answers, evidence, or perhaps clues about what happened to her son.

A son who was once on his school's swim team, an avid swimmer, who didn't just end up in a river, in a town an hour's drive north of his Illinois State University campus.

A son of Danville

Jelani Jesse Javontae Day was born on a pre-summer Saturday in June 1996. At 7 pounds, 9 ounces, and 21 inches long, he was the fourth of his parents' (Carmen and Steve Day) five children, and the youngest of three sons.

The married couple poured their heart and soul into raising their children in rural Danville, Illinois. Day plied her children with Scriptures. Taught them to be respectful. She and her husband passed their children away from complacency and the entrapments of poverty, gangs and drugs — evident even in small town America — toward education and academic excellence. All five would earn college degrees.

"Miss Carmen's kids," as Jelani and his siblings were known, were raised in the Church of God in Christ, where the Word of the Lord, nightly bedtime prayers and even good old-fashioned church shut-ins were a way of life.

She cautioned her boys especially, telling them that they had been born already with two strikes: One — the color of their skin. Two — being both Black and male.

"A good name is better than riches," she often told her sons. A good name, no one can take from you . . .

Jelani, in Swahili, means "great, powerful," full of strength. By all accounts, he was a good young man with a future as bright as his grandfather's white 2010 Chrysler 300 with its black cloth top and handsome chrome wheels — a car found inauspiciously in Peru.

A million reasons to live

My brother and I spy a faint creek beneath this wooded area where Jelani's car was found. We note the apparent tire tracks and trample of brush that might have served as



Signs like this one photographed on Thursday in Danville, Illinois, where Jelani Day grew up, appear across the town in support of finding answers and justice for a native son. JONATHAN TRUETT

a good covering to ditch and conceal a car. And we note a piece of orange marker tape, but the absence of anything else that might mark this area as a potential crime scene.

As we stand upon grass and soil, we have just learned — more than two weeks after the authorities discovered it — that the body found floating in the river has been identified as Jelani Day.

On Sept. 7, the coroner's office had released a statement saying that a "preliminary autopsy" on Sept. 5 had determined the body to be male but that it would take "several weeks to months" to make positive identification due to "the condition of the recovered body."

On the day my brother and I traveled to Peru, the coroner's office told me on the phone that a statement, alas — 19 days after a body was found — would be forthcoming. A press release popped into my email confirming what I had already suspected.

"LaSalle County Coroner's Office identifies the male body located on 9/4/21; body confirmed to be missing person Jelani Day." Cause of death: Still unknown.

What happened to a young man so full of life, zest and promise, a vivacious woman's boy so beloved by family and friends? A son beloved by a father who has cancer and for whom Jelani was planning to donate bone marrow.

A young Black man who already had defied the odds in a world, even in the city

of Danville — a lurchcrabable town in a former coal mining area — the kind of place known to make you or break you.

A graduate of Alabama A&M University, Jelani had enrolled this fall at Illinois State with aspirations of becoming a doctor. His chosen major was speech pathology as he sought to make good on a childhood promise born of his friendship and compassion for a little boy who was teased for a speech impediment.

A member of Omega Psi Phi fraternity, Jelani was full of hope and vigor. And he was looking forward to the next leg of his academic journey, to life and also to traveling with family to Destin, Florida, this Thanksgiving.

He had a million reasons to live, not die.

Standing at the wooded area beneath the YMCA, two things are clear to me: That this secluded spot is likely one that only a local might know. And that with the Illinois River about two miles away, it seems unlikely that a young Black man parked his car here, then walked through a nearly all-white town without being seen, to jump in those rippling river waters almost naked.

Aided by Google, we drive toward the Illinois Route 251 Bridge, where the authorities pulled a young Black man's body from the water, still in search of answers and Justice for Jelani.

Next week: The story of Jelani Day continues.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Maybe Michelle Obama had to 'leave the South Side to find 'culture,' but I sure didn't

I felt bad when I read in a Lynn Street column that Michelle Obama's family, when she was growing up on the South Side, felt they had to head north to the Loop to find culture. My memories of shows at the Regal Theater on the South Side include the Temptations, James Brown, Stevie Wonder and hundreds of others. As far as art, we had the Hyde Park Art Center.

We had "happenings" and "be-ins." We had the Aric Crown Theater, too, once McCormick place opened. There were always free classical music concerts at the University of Chicago, and students organized concerts by Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf and many others.

Most of my friends who lived on the North Side complained that all the good shows were on the South Side. I think Michelle was a selective memory.

I don't object to the Obama Presidential Center, but I do object to its location. It should have been located adjacent to Washington Park, as there is vast open space there for fairs and festivals. It would have expanded that park.

Russ Peterson, Lincoln Park

Get the lead pipes out

Sitting on the shores of Lake Michigan, it's understandable how someone might take this vast natural resource of fresh water for granted. But this Sunday, Oct. 3, kicks off Chicago Water Week, an annual event that aims to bring attention to water's important role in our lives and understand the varied and complex factors that ensure clean and reliable water delivery.

Though our region is blessed with a nearby resource of fresh water, not all of us can rely on safe water to come out of our taps. And, unfortunately, some of those people are here in Illinois.

For years, Illinois has had the dubious distinction of being the state with the most lead pipes in the country, largely due to the amount of lead pipes in the City of Chicago (the city with the most lead pipes in the country).

At the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, our mission is to protect the water environment so that a source of clean and safe water is available for all. But the presence of lead in our drinking water is incredibly dangerous and we know that it doesn't take much lead to have disastrous effects, particularly among children.

Fortunately, efforts at the federal and state levels are poised to make a real difference: President Joe Biden's infrastructure plan would eliminate 100% of lead service lines in the United States, and this summer,



Former first lady Michelle Obama in Jackson Park last Tuesday. ANDREW ARONSON/THOMAS

the Illinois Legislature passed the Lead Service Line Replacement Notification Act, which mandates that water suppliers develop plans to remove lead service lines across the state.

These investments and commitments in our water delivery infrastructure are crucial and cannot be delayed. Our water supply must be accessible to all Chicagoans because it is an essential component for a healthy life.

Join the MWRD as we partner with Current, an organization dedicated to being a catalyst for cleaner water, for Chicago Water Week. Learn more about this most important of natural resources at CurrentWater.org.

Maryann Spyropoulos, commissioner, Metropolitan Water Reclamation District

Frats get foolish every fall

It happens about this same time every year. No, I'm not referring to the waning hours of sunlight or the brilliant autumnal color changes. I am referring to frat parties and initiation ceremonies that go terribly wrong.

Don't get me wrong, I'm totally in favor of frivolous hijinks on campus. Heaven knows that innumeral and unisexual conduct is a pleasant way to shake the monotonous pattern of attending classes and writing term papers.

But enough is enough, already. People are getting hurt and the scar tissue can linger well into adulthood. Co-eds are being drugged and molested and unwilling pledges are being forced to conduct themselves in a manner that is not only embarrassing but potentially dangerous.

Particularly disturbing is the fact that many of these events are occurring on the campuses of well-respected institutes of higher learning. Apparently SAT scores bear little or no relationship to a student's level of common sense or maturity, especially when alcohol is introduced into the equation.

Has the time finally come to eliminate frat parties and initiations once and for all?

Bob Gray, Elgin

Send letters to letters@outlines.com. Please include your neighborhood or hometown and a phone number for verification purposes.

* OPINION

Horrifying wait, lack of answers are things no mom should have to endure



JOHN W. FOUNTAIN

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This is the third column in a series titled "Justice for Jelani."

PERU, Ill. — It was, in a sense, a premature autopsy on an opaque, near faceless and scalpless body that not even a mother might recognize. The waterlogged corpse lay in the possession of the La Salle County coroner's office for 24 days.

Even after the authorities finally made positive identification, reportedly through dental records and DNA, Carmen Bolden Day still had not been allowed to see the body that the authorities eventually said was her son Jelani Day, 25.

But how could she know if it was her Jelani, unless she had a chance to finally lay eyes on the body — even as a decomposed refrigerated shell?

How could she know? How could she rest, know for certain in her heart that it was her son, or ever have some semblance of peace and acceptance, unless, or until, she had perhaps had the chance to scan the body from head to toe? A little while to search for signs, no matter how seemingly insignificant, that the autopsied body was indeed her baby boy?

Some things a mother knows. Some things are unimaginable. Some things just don't add up. Some things about this case just ain't right because they just ain't right.

Some things make absolutely no sense. Some things only God knows. Some things — even a puzzling mystery — can, in time, come to the light.

But some things no mother should have to endure. Among them: having to wait nearly a month for the chance to view a body that might be her dead son. Among them: sensing a lack of urgency by police to initially search for her son, even after his car was found in a wooded area in Peru a day after he had been reported missing.

Also among them: an unnerving, painstaking wait of more than two weeks for the authorities to at last identify the body; and the perceived lack of empathy shown to a

COMMEMORATION OF A LIFE

Well Lived:

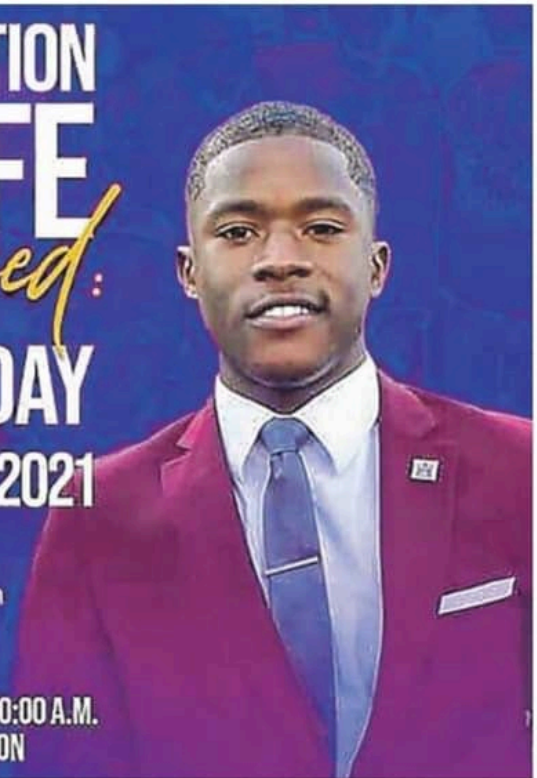
JELANI "JJ" DAY

DATE: OCTOBER 9, 2021

LOCATION:

Danville High School Auditorium
202 East Fairchild Street
Danville, IL 61832

OMEGA PSI PHI MEMORIAL SERVICE: 10:00 A.M.
OFFICIAL HOMEGOING SERVICE: 12 NOON



A poster announces a "Celebration of Life" for Jelani Day, 25. A body of a male found in Peru floating in the Illinois River on Sept. 4 was identified as Day. He was a graduate student at Illinois State University. JOHN W. FOUNTAIN/SUNTIMES

grieving Black mother of a dead or possibly still missing Black son, which in itself begs the question:

Would Jelani Day's case have been handled differently if he were not Black and male but a woman who was white and blond?

This much is clear as black and white: that someone knows what or who brought

this handsome, promising young Black male graduate student to this town, population 0.4% African American, and 60 miles north of his college campus, where he was studying to be a doctor.

Clear is that someone knows how Jelani ended up floating dead in the Illinois River. And that even as the authorities continue to

call the case of Jelani's demise a "death investigation," there is something foul about this case that stinks to high heaven and that cries out for answers, and for justice for Jelani.

Still waiting

Weeks after Jelani was reported missing by his mother on Aug. 25, the case had

* OPINION

I don't know how Jelani Day died. But somebody out there does.



JOHN W. FOUNTAIN

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This is the fourth and final column in a series titled "Justice for Jelani."

PERU, Ill. — *Speak, river.* If only these rivers could speak. If these rippling, reflecting waters in this town could talk. Could testify of the horror endured by Jelani Day.

If this flowing tributary could reveal the truth in precise fact and unmitigated detail how Jelani's near-naked, mortal Black body came to be submersed in this snaking Illinois River that stretches 273 miles to the Mighty Mississippi. If only this river — once upon a time a burgeoning trade route through this scenic valley — could speak.

If its banks could merely whisper her darkest secrets. Her revelations might solve the mystery of what happened to the 25-year-old graduate student at Illinois State University, reported missing Aug. 25, and whose body was found floating facedown in these waters on Sept. 4, near the Illinois Route 251 Bridge that looms like a haunting green relic from a bygone era.

Speak, river...

If only this river could talk, it might help bring some measure of solace to a grieving mother who — nearly eight weeks after her son disappeared from his college campus 60 miles south of here — is still searching.

For answers. For truth. Still longing for proof that the near-skeletal remains returned to her and identified by the authorities as Jelani Day — are indeed her baby boy.

But because rivers cannot speak — because Carmen Bolden Day understandably believes she has more reason to trust her gut and knowledge of the son she raised than the authorities investigating her son's death; and because there is so much about this case — from the body's condition, to the fact that his car was found about two miles away from where the body was found with its license plates removed, to his school lanyard and his wallet being discovered



A sign on a lawn in Danville calls for justice in the mysterious death of Jelani Day. JOHN FOUNTAIN/SUNTIMES

reportedly at separate locations in nearby La Salle — she cannot rest.

Cannot properly grieve. Cannot dry the flood of tears. Cannot begin the process of mending her broken heart and wounded soul. Cannot lay her son Jelani to rest. Not yet.

Not until, or unless, she is 100% certain that those remains in the mahogany-colored casket that graced the front of the Danville High School auditorium a week ago for services commemorating the life of a good son, are Jelani. Not yet.

Though her agonizing wait for answers lingers. Not yet.

A race story

I traveled to Peru, having never been here before, with my brother Jeff, on a warm Sept. 23, Thursday, having felt compelled as a journalist to seek the truth about Jelani. To tell his story. To humanize and try to shine some light.

I honestly hadn't heard about Jelani's disappearance until days earlier after posting a story I had written on social media about the

glaring disparity by national news media in its treatment of the Gabrielle "Gabby" Petito case versus the cases of women of color.

"And the missing ISU Black male isn't in the national news either," a former colleague wrote on my post.

I checked it out. The stories I found were mainly local. They depicted a worried and impassioned, yet articulate and determined mother, critical of the national news media for covering Petito's story fervently but ignoring her son's. It is a well-documented tendency to which I can attest as a Black reporter who, over a 30-year career, has graced some of American journalism's most hallowed halls.

I was compelled by Day's plea. Moved, unapologetically, by the tears and grief of a woman who is Black like me, and mother to a missing son, Black like mine.

It wasn't the color of their skin alone that moved me to lend my pen as a newspaper columnist to the telling of Jelani and his mother's story, to try and shake out some truth.

It was, however, undeniably the element

of "race" that drew me in. For this is a race story. Not Black, not white, but no less about race: the human race.

And yet, the details of Jelani's story, filtered through the context of my own traumatic DNA embedded in my soul as a Black man in America, quite frankly, conjured visions of Emmett Till, of strange fruit dangling from poplar trees, and centuries of lynching, of flaying and various and sundry desecrations of the Black body in towns across America from sea to shining sea.

I have said from the beginning, "I make no assertions about" Peru. But neither can I deny history — even the history of an America that from slavery to Jim Crow to George Floyd causes the hearts and souls of Black folk to consider the possibility of racial hate as a factor when a young Black male body turns up dead in a river in a largely all-white town — even if it turns out not to be the case.

Even if it makes some uncomfortable. Even if some would rather forget, deny the facts of history. Jelani Day's dead body was

As family, friends prepare to lay Jelani Day to rest, his mother declares, 'I can't rest'

BY JOHN W. FOUNTAIN
For the Sun-Times

Jelani Day returned home Saturday a radiant, good and honorable native son.

His remains lay in a closed mahogany-colored casket, highlighted in bronze and topped with a spray of white flowers that was flanked by a multicolored assortment of dozens of roses and other floral arrangements that shone as vibrantly as the life that friends and family say he lived — before it was unjustly cut short.

But it was unquestionably a celebration of the life of the 25-year-old Illinois State University graduate student, whose body was found Sept. 4, floating in the Illinois River in Peru, despite the mystery and questions surrounding his disappearance and death.

The more than three-and-a-half-hour afternoon service, which began at noon and was held at downstate Danville High School, flowed with tears and with music, with prayers and praise. There were also messages of faith and hope.

Perhaps no message rang more loudly than the declaration that it ain't over. Not his legacy or light. Not the demand for justice for Jelani Day.

"The journey does not stop here," his mother Carmen Bolden Day told mourners. "I'm only getting ready to lay Jelani to rest. But I can't rest because I don't know what happened to him."

"Whoever you are, I want you to know, your time will come," the mother continued as the crowd rang out in support. "Jelani did not deserve this."

Throughout the service, there were expressions of love and of gratitude for having been touched by a light called Jelani. Among them was childhood friend Paul DeArmond, 26, who spoke of their ties since kindergarten, of their fondness and love for each other and of how Jelani's desire to become a speech pathologist was birthed by his desire to help him.

Amid words of faith and hope at celebration of life for ISU grad student, no message rings louder than demand for answers and justice



A wreath encircles a photograph of Jelani Day near his casket at services held Saturday in downstate Danville. JOHN W. FOUNTAIN PHOTOS

The service began as a preacher declared from the podium, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?"

The choir, dressed in black, some holding red roses, sang "Praise Him, Praise Him... Jesus, blessed savior, is worthy to be praised." The drummer beat slowly, the melodic keys of a piano drifting toward heaven, filling this high school auditorium turned sanctuary.

Jelani's family filed in, walking down the center aisle as hundreds of mourners stood, the crowd stretching even to the balcony, some wiping away tears, others trying to fight them back.

Soon, the song, "Jesus Loves Me," spilled from the auditorium's speakers as young people lined up to pres-



Paul DeArmond, Jelani Day's childhood friend, speaks Saturday at the service.

ent red roses, one by one, to Jelani's mother and the immediate family.

The choir sang: "The best is yet to come," their joyful noise seeking to lift the spirits of those who gathered here and who grappled with a sense of not only sorrow, but disbelief and horror over Jelani's death.

"We're praying for their strength," the program moderator said. "We're praying for their strength."

There were prayers for healing. Prayers for strength. Prayers for answers. Prayers for justice.

And there were reassurances that, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning."

There were hands. Hands lifted in praise. Hands outstretched for divine strength. Hands for tissues to wipe away a flood of tears. And

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hands rested upon shoulders in comfort for this abrupt farewell amid the echoing question: "What happened to Jelani Day?"

There was also wailing — the unbearable audible release of sorrow too heavy to hold — that rose intermittently amid this grief-stricken assembly.

And yet, there was also celebration. In the old-time church way. The evoking of "Hallelujahs" and "Glories" that have long soothed the souls of Black folk, even amid the endurance of unspeakable horrors, and which stirred the crowd, even if momentarily.

And there were remembrances: Of Jelani as a church boy, singing in the choir. Of his laughter. Of growing up.

And on today, there was the blessed assurance, one speaker told mourners, that Jelani "now has exchanged his white coat for a white robe."

And there was a promise, a vow, to seek answers and justice for Jelani Day.

Not letting people forget about Jelani



JOHN W. FOUNTAIN

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PERU, Illinois — I said it once and I'll say it again: "Justice for Jelani." And just in case you still can't hear me: "Justice for Jelani."

I said, "Justice for Jelani!"

For the life of a young Black graduate student whose body was found floating in the Illinois River in this historic sundown town, 60 miles north of his college campus, and whose death remains shrouded in mystery, I echo the words of hundreds of protestors who gathered here this week to declare: "Justice for Jelani!"

Some stories are worth repeating — over and over and over and over again. Jelani Day's is one of them.

In the more than 4,000 words that I wrote in a recent four-part series titled "Justice for Jelani," the aim was to humanize him. And I'd write 4,000 more words to bring some measure of solace to a grieving mother's heart and soul.

To give voice to Jelani, 25, and to his mother's cry for justice for her baby boy in a world where the mainstream press is often devoid of empathy or compelling interest in covering the stories of missing or murdered people of color: Black women, Black girls and also young Black men like Jelani.

I seek to shine some light. To be a conduit for the voices of the unheard, for the invisible, for the neglected and downtrodden.

And sometimes, columnists, like any good preacher worth their salt, return to essential sermons time and time again. Some even preach a series when the weight and message of the subject are critical and necessitate more than the allotted space or time.

I usually get 600 words weekly. The more I reported Jelani's story, it became clear to me that I needed more space — and time. My esteemed editor at the Sun-Times, Tom McNamee, now since retired, agreed and granted me both.

Tom trusted my journalistic judgment — and for that reason alone, I hold him head and shoulders above any editor I have had in more than 30 years as a journalist. (But that



A member of Omega Psi Phi carries a sign in support of Jelani Day at a rally in Peru, Illinois. JOHN W. FOUNTAIN

is a different story for another day.)

I returned to Peru this week, having ended my series two weeks earlier and with no intentions of writing again so soon about Jelani, but drawn by the case's momentum and a rally here by the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson and Rainbow/PUSH.

A multiethnic, multigenerational crowd of hundreds gathered peacefully near the river where Jelani's body was found. Among them were members of the Omega Psi Phi fraternity to which Jelani belonged, and also others in the Divine Nine (Black fraternities and sororities) who came to call for justice for one of their own.

Marchers toted signs and echoed Carmen Bolden Day's demand for a federal investigation into her son's death, and for answers, one day after the LaSalle County coroner's office announced the cause of Jelani's death to be drowning.

A graduate student at Illinois State University in Bloomington-Normal, studying speech pathology, Jelani was reported missing on Aug. 25. A day later, police found his car in a secluded wooded area here. On Sept. 4, the authorities found Jelani's body two miles away from where his car was found, floating facedown in the river.

"None of this stuff adds up," Day told the protesters this week. "I want answers. ... I need answers. I deserve answers. I need justice for Jelani."

Rev. Jackson led the crowd in a chant. "Jelani will live, as long as we remember him, fight for him. Keep fighting for him, until eternity ..."

I vow to keep writing for him.

How many words or columns are a good young man's life worth? Every single one.

So here's another one. And I'm still not done.

Justice for Jelani.