

‘Find Rashid’: How a Philly lawyer’s quest to locate a former client helped solve his murder

The man police say killed Rashid Young wasn't charged until three years after his death. The alleged killer's arrest was due in part to the work of a lawyer seeking answers in Young's disappearance.



Rashid Young was an aspiring actor whose friends and loved ones said had a larger-than-life presence.
Courtesy Kimberly Cyrus

by Vinny Vella

The news from a fellow lawyer puzzled and worried Nadeem Bezar.

An old client had stopped withdrawing money from a bank account set up from the seven-figure proceeds of a lawsuit. Not a penny had been taken out in three years.

Bezar scribbled a note on a legal pad.

“Find Rashid”

Over the next five months, Bezar sought answers about why Rashid Young had dropped out of sight at age 22. Working with Young’s anxious family, two Temple law students, and a private eye, Bezar would uncover the truth of Young’s disappearance — and help solve a murder

Young, they learned, had been stabbed to death in August 2019 and buried in a makeshift grave in a Philadelphia arboretum. The killer, prosecutors now say, was Young’s boyfriend, Keshawn Sheffield, who was arrested last month after eluding investigators for three years.

In that time, prosecutors say, Sheffield impersonated Young to hide his death, sending text messages to friends and relatives with Young’s phone and posting on his social media accounts to keep his profiles active. Sheffield, police say, siphoned almost \$8,000 from Young’s trust fund and even drove Young’s Honda Pilot — until his family reported it stolen and it was seized as it sat parked near Sheffield’s mother’s house on a block in East Mount Airy.

Sheffield, 20, has denied any involvement in Young’s murder.

Bezar’s work raised troubling questions about the police response to what authorities now say was murder. Detectives in Pottstown, where Young was killed, let the case languish for several years despite evidence raising questions about his disappearance and his contentious relationship with Sheffield.

And a key clue did not seem to have been followed up: A recycling bin used to carry Young’s body was found in September 2019, just steps from the grave in the arboretum. It came from Pottstown, and its serial number tracked back to the 200 block of East High Street, where Young lived with Sheffield.

Police efforts to find Young had all but stopped by the time Bezar received a call from a colleague in December, and began his search for answers. Months later, the case was solved, thanks to that renewed attention.

“I’d like to say it was some great, divine intervention, but that would be me trying to put a pretty ribbon on a bad situation,” Bezar said in a recent interview at his office. “It just called to me, it was on my list, and I had this connection with Rashid that made me want to find answers for his family.”

'larger than life' personality

Young was 17 when he met Bezar, a lawyer at Kline & Specter who represented him in a civil suit against a foster-care agency that had placed him in an abusive home years earlier when his family was experiencing homelessness. The case ended with a settlement that left Young with a trust fund that Montgomery County prosecutors said was worth nearly \$2 million.

Bezar and Young kept in touch for years. As Young graduated from high school and prepared for college, they shared laughs over the phone and in Bezar's office. As a token of their friendship, Bezar kept a copy of Young's college admissions essay tacked to a wall near his desk.



Nadeem Bezar looks at a photo of Rashid Young after a vigil for Young at Sankofa Freedom Academy Charter School on June 4. In December, Bezar created a practicum course with two of his Temple Law students to help find Young, who had been missing since 2019.

ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer

Ask Bezar or anyone else who knew Young well and they'll provide similar descriptions of the West Philly native. He had an energy that filled any room he walked into. He was "larger than life," friends said, a whirlwind of laughter and smiles that swept up anyone near.

Young, who lived in Pottstown, had dreams of becoming an actor or model, of expressing his creativity to the world. After high school, he studied at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in Manhattan and aspired to a career in Hollywood.

His was a light, those closest to him said, that never went dim.

His mother, Kimberly Cyrus, said he made friends everywhere he went, and was often the unofficial party planner and emcee at family gatherings, determined to get everyone dancing.

"If you did not know Rashid before he walked in, you were gonna know about him and what he wanted to do," Cyrus said, smiling, on a recent afternoon in her Pottstown home. "And you were going to absolutely love him, because he's so outgoing."

Young made a fast friend in Mike Cilio, his manager at Redner's Quick Shoppe, a convenience store in downtown Pottstown. Cilio and Young spent many nights running the store together, talking about life. Young shared with Cilio his dreams of starting a clothing brand and moving to L.A. Cilio teased him, telling the 6-foot-7-inch Young he should have tried out for the Sixers.

"His dreams were big, and he never got the chance to evolve to what he could have been," Cilio said. "And that's what hurts the most. He could have done so much in this world because of how much he gave to everybody."

An abrupt disappearance

In August 2019, Young's outsize presence disappeared from the lives of his loved ones. His stream of texts and social media messages to his friends stopped. And when he did respond to his family, they said, his replies were clipped, angry, and insulting.

Once, when Cyrus reached out to her oldest son, he told her he didn't want anything to do with his family, a statement so out of character she immediately knew something was wrong.

"His friends started contacting me," she said. "They were asking me if I had talked to Rashid, if I had seen him. And then I just got this bad feeling that something had happened."

Rashid Young, seen here with Ijah Ortiz before their prom at Sankofa Freedom Academy Charter School, were best friends and inseparable since they were teenagers.

Cyrus and her family called Pottstown police and reported Young missing in December 2019, four months after they had last seen him. It was then that his mother learned there was a warrant out for Young's arrest on criminal mischief charges. Someone had clogged a sink in his apartment and left it running, causing \$20,000 in water damage.

When Young's landlord reached out to him, his mother was told, he texted her back, admitted causing the damage and promised to pay for it. Then Young fell silent, according to the landlord, who called police and pressed charges.

Cyrus wondered whether the arrest warrant somehow dissuaded Pottstown police from taking seriously her report that her son had gone missing.

As Young's family puzzled over his disappearance, homicide detectives 40 miles away in Philadelphia were confronted with a mystery of their own.

A month after Young was last seen, a groundskeeper at Awbury Arboretum, a 56-acre oasis of trees and rolling hills in East Germantown, noticed that someone had dug a hole near a secluded walking trail. When he returned days later to fill it in, he discovered human remains.

A medical examiner in Philadelphia determined the victim had been stabbed multiple times, but the body was too decomposed to identify.

Near the battered corpse was the recycling bin issued by the Borough of Pottstown with a serial number that tracked to the block where Young lived. Young's family had yet to report him missing at the time the body was found, but even after they did that three months later, police never made the connection to the unidentified body in the city morgue.

Cyrus now wonders why Pottstown police didn't collaborate further with their counterparts in Philadelphia.

Bezar, too, had reservations about the police investigation.

"It just didn't seem like people were moving quickly or were quick enough to find out what happened or what could have happened," Bezar said. "It should have been 'missing,' not 'wanted.' An apartment is destroyed, and a person is

not heard from suggests to me that something bad happened and you need to get out there and start looking.”

Pottstown Police Chief Mark Markovich declined to comment on the investigation and referred questions to Montgomery County District Attorney Kevin Steele. Steele’s office also declined comment, citing the active criminal case.

Trying to ‘Find Rashid’

Last year, after receiving the call about Rashid, Bezar and two of his students at Temple University’s Beasley School of Law created “Find Rashid,” a practicum course they initially believed would be instructive in tracking down missing people and dealing with grieving families.

Bezar and his students, Maggie Nealon and Peter Limberg, combed through Young’s social media accounts and spoke with those who had seen him last. They filed Right to Know requests with Pottstown police, trying to get investigative materials detectives had gathered that might jump-start the case.

“You can be taught how to do legal research, and you can be taught advocacy in the courtroom to a certain degree,” Nealon said. “But nobody really prepares you for what it’s like when you’re sitting right in front of somebody who has gone through immense grief, and you have to talk to them and be graceful and still try to keep an eye on your mission.”

On a Saturday trip to Pottstown, they walked around Young’s neighborhood and visited the places he’d frequented, trying to drum up any leads they could about what may have happened. They hoped to find inspiration, Bezar said, by literally retracing Young’s footsteps.

“We were not under the illusion that we would find Rashid laying on a beach somewhere drinking a mai tai, but that we might find something dark,” Bezar said. “But at least we would be able to communicate some form of comfort or closure to the family.”

Eventually, the group hired a private investigator, Jeffrey Goldstein, to help them in their search. Goldstein discovered that Young’s car was still being driven in 2022 after seeing it parked near the block in East Mount Airy where Sheffield’s mother lives.

Armed with this evidence, Goldstein called the Montgomery County District Attorney’s Office in April and spoke with one of its lead homicide detectives. The

office agreed to take up the case, investigating it as a potential murder rather than a missing persons case.

Within weeks, the detectives had identified the body in the arboretum. Dental records confirmed that it was Young who had been buried in the grave beside the secluded trail.

Montgomery County detectives then tracked down one of Sheffield's former boyfriends, who they said told them Sheffield had admitted he killed Young, stabbing him after a fight in which he said Young had attacked him first. The man — whom police did not identify — said he helped Sheffield dig the grave. Four days later, on June 1, Sheffield was charged with first-degree murder.

How an alleged killer hid

Sheffield, police say, kept investigators at bay in the months after Young's disappearance by using Young's cell phone and posting on his social media accounts. Those earlier, out-of-character messages sent to his family and friends were written by Sheffield after the murder, prosecutors say, including the message to the landlord that led to the warrant for Young's arrest.

After killing Young, investigators say, Sheffield hid the body in the recycling bin outside his mother's home until he enlisted his ex to help bury the corpse in the arboretum.

Sheffield's attorney, Marni Jo Snyder, declined to comment about the case ahead of his preliminary hearing, which is scheduled for July 21.

Young's mother said the efforts of Bezar, Goldstein, and their team — and the murder investigation they spawned — brought her and her family the answers they'd so desperately sought.

"Not knowing whether he was hurt or if he was OK, just walking that fine line of trying to keep hope, but not sure if you should keep hope, was extremely difficult," Cyrus said. "To finally have answers, even though they're not the answers that we wanted, is a blessing to a fault."

Bezar said he viewed the arrest in the case as a victory — and a welcome result of the work he and his students did in memory of his friend.

"People loved Rashid, and that doesn't come through fully from a phone call or behind a computer screen," Bezar said. "So I'm reminded again, rejuvenated again, of the power of rolling up my sleeves and just getting out there."