

Rumor mill in Kyron Horman disappearance reaches fever pitch

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Kate Mather, The Oregonian



A photo posted on his stepmother's Facebook page shows Kyron Horman in front of his science fair project, wearing the "CSI" T-shirt he was last seen in two weeks ago.

Two weeks into the investigation of 7-year-old **Kyron Horman's** disappearance, one of the few things certain about the case is that rampant rumors show no signs of abating.

Various reports poured in Thursday from different social media outlets claiming breaking developments. The phenomenon began with the first news of the second-grader's disappearance June 4 from Skyline School, but now appears to be intensifying. Among the false claims: an arrest in the case and that Kyron had been found.

Sheriff's officials were not only quick to denounce the speculation, but also expressed concern about the effect the rumors might have on Kyron's family. "They're not thinking about how the information that they're spreading can affect others," said Lt. Mary Lindstrand, spokeswoman for the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office.

The sheriff's office has been fielding calls from the public in response to the erroneous

information spreading online, she said.

Although much of the speculation originates on Facebook and Twitter, Portland TV station KOIN posted a story on its website Thursday afternoon with the headline, "Kyron Horman's body found."

KOIN News Director Lynn Heider said the post was a mistake and only appeared online, not on any broadcast.

"We apologize for the obvious emotional stress that this posting created," the station said in a statement on its website. "The posting was the result of internal miscommunication, and should not have occurred. This incident has prompted additional internal policies to prevent further occurrences."

Earlier in the investigation, online commentary regarding the behavior of Kyron's family prompted sheriff's officials to address some of the public speculation directly.

Capt. Mike Shults, who has worked closely with the Horman family, explained that the family members hadn't participated in the ground search for Kyron because investigators had asked them to remain in one place so they could be easily reached. His comments came after Terri Moulton Horman, Kyron's stepmother, was criticized on some online outlets for posting on her Facebook page, including saying she was "hitting the gym" shortly after Kyron disappeared.

Shults said he had asked family members to maintain their regular routines in an effort to stay healthy once it became apparent that the search for Kyron wouldn't be resolved quickly.

Public speculation isn't unusual in an emotional case like that of a missing child -- it's often a coping device to deal with distress, anger and fear, said Lauri Stevens, principal of LAWS Communications, a Massachusetts-based group that provides online media advice to law enforcement agencies.

Stevens isn't involved in the Kyron Horman case, but said in general, many people often don't consider the impact their commentary can have.

"Social media has made it possible for people to create their own content so easily and many people don't appreciate the reach their message has when they type it into Facebook, etc." Stevens said in an e-mail interview.

"The other thing that unfortunately doesn't come into play often enough is good judgment on the part of the receivers of the information," Stevens said. "People tend to believe the things they read without any critical thought. Whether or not what they read is true or not, they're going to respond."

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Despite the many rumors surrounding the case, investigators have remained focused on the task at hand, Lindstrand said.

"They're on their mission and their mission is to find Kyron and bring him home," she said. "They know that these rumors are not true."

-- **Kate Mather**

Other developments today

National broadcast: Saturday's edition of "America's Most Wanted" will include Kyron Horman's disappearance. The show airs at 9 p.m. on FOX.

Scam: The Multnomah County Sheriff's Office isn't soliciting donations over the phone to help in the case, said Lt. Mary Lindstrand, a sheriff's spokeswoman. "We are most definitely not calling to raise money for the Horman family, for the search and rescue effort, or for a reward," she said. Instead, the office is seeking donations toward the search and rescue effort through its **website** or at any Bank of America branch under the name "Kyron Horman fund."

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