

Beat: Health

British girl, 14, found murdered weeks after disappearance

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USPA News - A body which was recovered from a river in London on Tuesday night has been formally identified as Alice Gross, the 14-year-old schoolgirl who vanished in west London in late August, British police said on Wednesday after an autopsy was carried out. The Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), which is better known as Scotland Yard, said an autopsy began on Wednesday at Uxbridge Mortuary and confirmed that the body recovered from the River Brent on late Tuesday evening is that of Alice.

"Due to the complex nature of this investigation, the post-mortem is still ongoing and will resume tomorrow," a police spokesperson said. Speaking earlier on Wednesday, MPS Specialist Crime Investigations Commander Graham McNulty said the body was located in the water as part of a search for Alice. He said the missing person's investigation had now become a murder investigation and appealed for the public's help to find the person responsible. "Our work at this scene is crucial to ensure we capture all the available evidence allowing us to identify who is responsible for this dreadful crime. This may take some time, and I ask people to remain patient with us," he said. "I can confirm that significant efforts were made to conceal the body. At this point I do not wish to speculate any further on what has happened." Alice's parents, Rosalind Hodgkiss and Jose Gross, said they had been left "completely devastated" by the confirmation that their daughter had been killed. "It is difficult to comprehend that our sweet and beautiful daughter was the victim of a terrible crime. Why anyone would want to hurt her is something that we are struggling to come to terms with," they said in a written statement. Hodgkiss and Gross added: "Alice was a loving and much loved daughter and sister, a quirky live spark of a girl, beautiful inside and out. She was a funny companion, a loyal friend, both passionate and compassionate, and so talented with a bright future ahead of her. She brought so much joy to our family and those who knew her." The girl's parents also thanked the community for the support they had received over the last few weeks, during which posters were put up across London - and even beyond the capital - in an effort to find Alice. "We would like to thank all those that have supported us in our efforts to find Alice, especially the local community; it is comforting to know that so many people care," they said. Latvian builder Arnis Zalkalns, 41, a convicted murderer who lived in the same area as Alice, remains the main suspect in the investigation. He was reported missing about a week after Alice's disappearance and was found to frequently cycle the same path on which the schoolgirl was last seen. Detectives have also identified Zalkalns in CCTV footage from near the moment of Alice's last sighting. Alice, who had not been in good health recently, left her home in west London at 1 p.m. on August 28 and told her family that she would be home at around 10 p.m. that night, but never returned. She was seen on CCTV walking alone on the Grand Union Canal towpath at 2:23 p.m. and was later seen at that same point at 3:45 p.m., heading in the direction of her home. Detectives looking into Zalkalns have found that the Latvian man traveled the same towpath at 4 p.m., riding fast on a bike in the same direction as Alice was going. Zalkalns himself was last seen at his home in the London Borough of Ealing on the night of September 3 and his disappearance has been described as "completely out of character" by friends and family, who have expressed concern for him. Investigators said Zalkalns has not accessed his bank account or used his mobile phone and his passport was left at his house. It is believed Zalkalns left his home early on the morning of September 4, less than 24 hours after police announced that the Homicide and Major Crime Command (HMCC) would take over the investigation into Alice's disappearance. Zalkalns was reported missing by his partner around noon on September 5, more than 36 hours after he was last seen at their home. Detective Superintendent Carl Mehta, from the Homicide and Major Crime Command, said there was no evidence to suggest that Alice and Zalkalns knew each other. Latvian State Police spokesman Toms Sadovskis previously confirmed that Zalkalns was convicted in 1998 for the murder of his wife and spent seven years in prison, after which he moved to the United Kingdom in 2007. He was later arrested in Ealing in 2009 after the alleged indecent assault of a 14-year-old girl, but the case was dropped after the victim declined to give further evidence. Alice's backpack, which contained some of her personal belongings, was discovered near a towpath alongside the River Brent on September 2. The discovery, along with the CCTV images, prompted the Homicide and Major Crime Command (HMCC) to take over the investigation as concerns grew that the teen had been the victim of crime. Two people - a 25-year-old man and a 51-year-old man - were arrested on suspicion of murder in connection with Alice's disappearance in early September, but both were released with no further action to be taken after they were cleared of any involvement.

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

United Press Association, Inc.

3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168

Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA

(702) 943.0321 Local

(702) 943.0233 Facsimile

info@unitedpressassociation.org

info@gna24.com

www.gna24.com