

No More Than 48 Hours

Dr. Gloria C. Duffy, President and CEO

Surprise and shock coursed around San Francisco when the news spread in November that Ray Taliaferro, one of the city's most talented citizens, was missing.

The former KGO nighttime talk show host was well known and beloved in the San Francisco community. He had chaired the San Francisco Arts Commission for 16 years, been president of the San Francisco NAACP and the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, was emcee of the Monterey Blues Festival and served on The Commonwealth Club's Board of Governors.

In his early years, Ray was a music prodigy—a brilliant pianist who as a teenager was music director of San Francisco's Third Baptist Church and conducted his own singing group, the Ray Tal Chorale. He advocated for integration on San Francisco's Auto Row in the 1960s and played music The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. requested when King preached at Third Baptist.

Last November 10, at age 79, Ray accompanied his wife of six months to visit a house she had inherited in rural Brookport, in Massac County in southern Illinois. Apparently, Ray was in or near the car while she was at the back of the house, and he drove off. Ray's wife reported him missing to law enforcement that morning.

The rental car Ray was driving was reported four days later in a bank parking lot in Paducah, Kentucky, a small town 11 miles away across the Ohio River. The police investigated on the 16th, finding Ray's wallet, credit cards and cell phone in the car.

It came to light at this point that on the day Ray disappeared, he had walked around Paducah, talking to staff in the bank, the manager of a restaurant across the street, and finally he had stopped and chatted with the music director of the West End Baptist Church. Then he disappeared. Temperatures that night and for the next few days in Paducah ranged from a low of 21 degrees into the 30s and 40s.

The Massac County sheriff and Paducah police searched for Ray, but no trace was found for over three weeks. The sheriff expressed his opinion that Ray was still alive; that he might be staying with someone locally or making his way across the country to San Francisco.

At this point, Ray's son Raphael, from Stockton, flew to Paducah, and an hour before his plane touched down, Ray's body was found. He had died in a wooded residential area, next to a small stadium, about a mile from where he was last seen in Paducah. The presumed cause was exposure. The coroner told Raphael that the autopsy showed that Ray had suffered from severe dementia for at least five years.

A number of factors contributed to Ray's tragic death. He was 2,000 miles away from home, in an unfamiliar environment, with below-freezing temperatures in the middle of winter, and momentarily alone with access to a car and keys.

Ray had become isolated in recent years. Friends, including former San Francisco Mayor Frank Jordan and broadcaster Belva Davis, say they had called him, but he never returned the calls. We had not seen him for a few years at The Commonwealth Club.

Those immediately around Ray did not recognize the signs of dementia or call it by name. Law enforcement did not issue a Silver Alert, similar to an Amber Alert but for seniors, because Ray was not classified specifically as having dementia. A Silver Alert sends messages immediately via text, radio, TV and road signs about a missing person. Since Ray walked around Paducah for six hours and spoke with several

people, had this alert been issued, he might have been recognized and found quickly. The rental car in which he drove off was also not traced for almost a week.

If someone with dementia wanders off, an intensive search must be mounted immediately. Particularly in winter, there is no more than 48 hours to find the person; often much less.

Law enforcement's theories about Ray staying with a kindly stranger or making his way across the country (without his car, keys, ID, credit cards or phone, and without being reported by anyone for three weeks) didn't reflect this sense of urgency.

One person who accurately gauged the situation was the music director of the West End Baptist Church, Brian Henry. After Ray's visit to the church, Henry knew Ray had a cognitive issue, because Ray repeated himself over and over. To assist in the search, Henry went online, verified Ray's identity, contacted Ray's son, spoke with law enforcement, and posted video and a photo online showing Ray as he looked during his visit to the church.

The lack of awareness that Ray was suffering from dementia and lack of familiarity with what to do if someone with dementia wanders off were major contributors to Ray's death from exposure, 2,000 miles away from his beloved San Francisco. Hopefully, we can learn from his tragic death.



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

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