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Sahara Moorer's heritage included hit records and the Harlem Globetrotters.

Last October, the brutal murder of a teenage runaway in Washington Park shocked Chicago. The victim, a 15-year-old girl from El Paso named Sahara Moorner, had been beautiful and talented, a star athlete and promising singer and actress. She was torn, some say, by her biracial past, but what seemed to have set her off on her fatal course was a terrible secret, something that pushed her to take outsize risks

SAVING Sahara

BY CAROL FELSENTHAL

In the early morning darkness last October 21st, Chicago moved one homicide closer to clinching the title of murder capital of the country. Sahara Moorner, a bright, talented 15-year-old runaway from El Paso, Texas, died in Washington Park on Chicago's South Side, allegedly at the hands of a 29-year-old ex-con named Baruch Shaw. Sahara's death by strangulation was number 530 of 666 homicides here last year—more than in any other city in the nation; New York, second at 642, has almost three times Chicago's population. ¶ In both major Chicago papers, friends and relatives blamed the high school sophomore's grisly end on her confusion

about her mixed race—her mother, Michelle “Missy” Hufford, was white; her father, Mark Moorner, was black. For the last four years, Sahara had lived on El Paso’s upscale East Side, across the street from a golf course, with her grandmother, mother, uncle, and younger half brother, all of them white. Even her mother said that Sahara had felt caught between the races. “We are white, and she did not think we understood what she was going through,” Missy Hufford told the *Sun-Times* just after the murder. “We would talk and cry, but we thought we would get through it.” Eventually, Sahara decided to move to Milwaukee to live with her father’s family. She had stopped in Chicago en route.

Sahara’s quest for racial identity may have contributed to the tragedy, but her story turns out to be both sadder and more complex. Her parents on both sides of the color line had problems of their own, and while loving relatives and friends tried hard to help her, she seemed driven, in the last year or so of her life, to take outsize risks. Several people close to her say that a particularly brutal incident two years earlier in Milwaukee may have unhinged her.

Every murder represents lost promise, but Sahara’s stands out



because she was so young and her promise seemed so endless. The spitting image, friends say, of superstar singer Alicia Keys (who is also biracial), Sahara was 5 feet 10 inches of ultra-slim, flawless beauty. She had been a good student and an outstanding athlete. Her mentors thought she had the talent to succeed in show business. Just two years ago, her drama teacher watched her perform “brilliantly” in a select competition at Harvard University.

Her heritage included a handsome sports-star father; a mother—herself a beauty—who had pulled herself out of the doldrums to pass the demanding physical tests to become a firefighter; and a grandfather who, while still in high school, had started a group that later had two hit records.

In the end, all that promise died with Sahara in the back seat of a stranger’s car, and her family and friends are left with nothing but memories and regrets.

The Moorers of Milwaukee are not just any family. Sahara’s grandfather Gilbert Moorner Jr. has spent much of his adult life trying to repeat a success that started in 1957 at Milwaukee’s North Division High School when he and his siblings formed a

standup soul and rhythm-and-blues quintet. In 1967, the Esquires scored a hit, “Get On Up,” which rose to number three on the R & B charts. A follow-up, “And Get Away,” reached number nine.

Early on, the Esquires toured the United States, Europe, and Japan. They played the Regal in Chicago, sharing the stage with Aretha Franklin. But, too soon, out-of-town gigs came to mean Madison or Racine. Though the group eventually put eight records on the R & B charts, nothing new made the charts after 1971.

Gilbert Jr.’s wife, Nancy, became the glue of the Milwaukee family, which eventually included five boys. (Nancy’s father, the late Johnny Watts, had been something of a sports star: He led Beloit High School to three consecutive Wisconsin state basketball titles in the 1930s, and then played with the Harlem Globetrotters and with the Chicago American Giants of baseball’s old Negro Leagues.) She worked as a supervisor for Allen Bradley—a manufacturer of electrical components—which relocated her to El Paso in 1979. At the time, the city’s population of 400,000 was just 3 percent African American. El Paso might have come as a culture shock to the Moorers, but most of them found it an easy place to live. Overwhelmingly Hispanic, the city seemed almost colorblind. El Paso’s Fort Bliss—larger than the state of Rhode Island and home to more than 12,000 soldiers—brought many temporary black residents.

Nancy was energetic, competent, outgoing, big-hearted—her son Kirk calls her a “superwoman.” She tried to keep her boys on track, including Mark, the second youngest of her sons. Handsome and smart, Mark was a sports star at El Paso’s J. M. Hanks High School, a middle-class public school where he was among the few black students. But Mark had a wild side and, says his father, got involved with drugs.

At Hanks—the same school that Sahara would later attend—Mark Moorner met Missy Hufford, a lovely redhead whose mother, Meleney Kienle, had succeeded against odds in providing Missy and her two brothers with a comfortable upbringing. Meleney, Sahara’s other grandmother, had married right out of

high school, worked for a time as a legal secretary, divorced, remarried, and divorced a second time—receiving as part of the settlement an ice business, which she ran successfully until selling it two and a half years ago.

Missy Hufford and Mark Moorner struck up a romance at Hanks. “I objected to him, and of course . . . my daughter said, ‘That’s because you’re prejudiced,’” Meleney says today, speaking by telephone from her home in El Paso. While a junior in high school, Missy became pregnant by Mark and they moved into a small apartment. At that time, Meleney began noticing ugly bruises on Missy’s arms, neck, and face; eventually, says Meleney, Missy told her that Mark had been beating her. “[Missy] felt that if [Mark] would do that to her when she was pregnant, what in the world would she be subjecting her child to?” Missy was only 17 when Sahara was born in 1986. (Neither Missy nor Mark responded to repeated requests for interviews.)

The couple never married, and the relationship ended when Missy took six-week-old Sahara and moved back home to live with Meleney. Mark showed little interest in his daughter. “I guess Mark just kinda forgot about Sahara all her life,” says his



Lost promise: Athletic and a born entertainer, Sahara (above and opposite) was known for her brilliant smile. Barack Shaw (right), charged with her murder

"SAHARA HAD A LOT OF PERSONALITY," SAYS ONE OF HER DRAMA COACHES. "SHE WAS WONDERFULLY TALENTED. SHE WAS ONE OF THE ONES THAT I THOUGHT COULD MAKE IT."



PHOTO: RAPHAEL ANGLI / COURTESY OF COOK COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

brother Gilbert III. (Now 36, Mark lives in Los Angeles; his two other children, Sahara's half siblings, live with Gilbert Jr. in Milwaukee.) As Sahara grew older, Gilbert III became a father figure to her, and he would routinely ask if she had spoken to her dad. "Who's my dad?" she would reply.

Sahara also complained that she didn't exactly have a mother, either; that Missy would disappear into her room, unwilling to do the things that moms do—carpool, attend school functions, take her daughter shopping for clothes. "Her mother didn't take care of her," says Phillip Barraza, 27, Sahara's middle school theatre arts teacher. He says that Sahara was embarrassed by Missy's behavior. But Missy's mother, Meleney, defends her daughter and, while recognizing her shortcomings, insists that Missy often assumed her motherly duties.

Phillip Barraza—Mr. B. as his students call him—had his first glimpse of the girl he calls "model gorgeous" when his video class made a documentary about Sahara, the school's first girl player on the seventh grade boys' football team. Mr. B. recruited Sahara into his small group of performers. His wife (she was then his girl-

friend), Mabel Toscano, spent much of her free time at school coaching Mr. B.'s kids. She grew particularly fond of Sahara, who had "a lot of personality, a lot of spunk, and a lot of smiles," Mabel says. "She was wonderfully talented. She was one of the ones that I thought could make it." Sahara worked hard—arriving at school at seven in the morning, sometimes staying until nine at night, going in on weekends. Her backpack never left Mr. B.'s room; she pulled down A's and B's without studying.

Mark Moorner may have abandoned his daughter, but Nancy Moorner doted on her firstborn grandchild and "unofficial daughter," as her son Kirk calls Sahara. Gilbert III bristles at the remarks in the Chicago media suggesting that Sahara was searching for the black side of her family. "That's all wrong," he says. "She definitely knew who I was. She thought I was her dad."

In 1997, however, when Sahara was 11, Allen Bradley retired Nancy after nearly 30 years, and the Moorers moved back to Milwaukee. During summer breaks in the following years, Sahara visited her grandmother in Milwaukee. The Moorers loved having her. An uncle, Alvis Moorner Jr., recalls her "good spirits" and "winning attitude." Her uncle Kirk found her a "very smart, happy-go-lucky girl." Her grandfather, Gilbert Jr., remembers her saying, "Come on, Granddaddy, let's go fishing."

That sunny disposition darkened after July 16, 1999, when Sahara—then 13 and about to enter eighth grade—was making what would be the last of her summer trips to Milwaukee. Sahara later told friends and family that a man who was part of the extended Moorner family had raped her. Nancy, sick with cancer, went to her death just before Christmas that year never knowing what had happened.

Sahara waited to tell an adult until the following spring,

when, in an emotional letter to Mabel Toscano, she described the circumstances of the rape. The man had picked her up after a babysitting job to drive her to her grandparents' house. Instead, he took her to a hotel, she claimed, and raped her. Later he gave her \$20 and whispered, "Don't think I forgot about you." Sahara told Mabel that she could not tell her mother because Missy was "in her own little world and thinks I can handle everything while she . . . stays in her room like a hermit . . . It's like she thinks she's a teen and she . . . won't affect anybody. . . . I refuse to grow up and become my mom; that's what my family thinks of me. . . . I can't wait to prove them wrong."

Last April, in a tearful telephone conversation, she told Gilbert III what had happened. Gilbert dates the start of Sahara's downward slide to the rape. "It messes a child's head up," he says. To Mabel and Mr. B., the rape explained why Sahara developed a profound sense of insecurity about her looks, her abilities, her future—why she seemed unable to believe that she was worthy of admiration or love. "No matter how much we told her how beautiful she was," says Phillip Barraza, "she always felt like she was ugly."

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SAVING SAHARA

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During her eighth grade year, Phillip and Mabel took Sahara and 15 classmates to Harvard University for a speech and drama competition. Sahara performed excerpts from *Chicago: The Musical*. Meanwhile, Missy, who had remained with Sahara in her mother's house, working occasionally as a bookkeeper for the ice business, had decided that she wanted to become a firefighter. She seemed to be emerging from her shell and paying more attention to Sahara. Missy passed the department's written tests and its upper-body-strength tests—which could defeat even brawny men. Ultimately, the fire department rejected Missy because, says her mother, of a DUI arrest, and the setback caused Missy to retreat back into herself. (Missy, who at 33 has never married, had had a second child, a boy, now ten.)

Mabel, who was then studying to be a nurse, took on various motherly chores—driving Sahara here and there, taking her shopping, even buying her a red dress for her eighth grade banquet, a knockout that she also wore to homecoming eight days before her death. Mabel and Mr. B. took Sahara to church, as did other families of her friends. "She clung on to normalcy as much as she could," explains Mabel.

Meleney, now 53, pitched in, but Sahara carried some resentment for her grandmother. Sahara told friends that she suspected her grandmother was racist, and that perception may have been part of what troubled the young woman. But the facts seem to paint a different picture about the relationship between Meleney and her granddaughter. Adults close to Sahara say that Meleney did all she could for Sahara, including supporting her. "Sahara used to tell us that her grandma did not accept her," recalls Mr. B., "but it was obvious to me her grandma loved Sahara."

Hanks High School seemed a good fit for Sahara. It has a student population of 2,560—officially, about two-thirds Hispanic, a quarter white, 7 percent black, but scores of biracial students bridge categories. Sahara played basketball for the Lady Knights. Her speed and aggressiveness set her apart, says her coach, Fernie Rizo. She competed on the varsity track team, played volleyball, and worked as a football trainer. She talked of becoming a lawyer. But there were signs of trouble. She would sometimes miss parts of classes to meet with Justin Vanley, 27, a social worker who counseled her about what he

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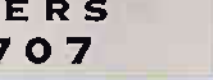
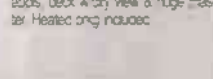
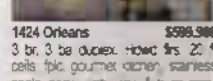
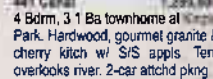
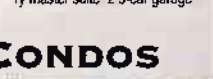
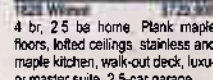
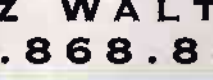
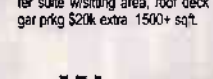
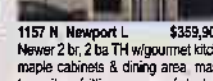
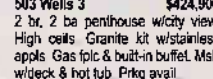
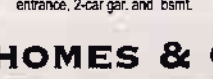
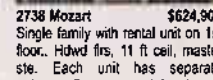
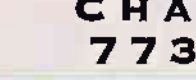
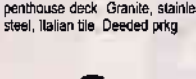
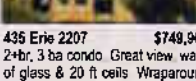
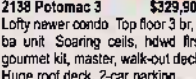
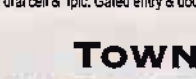
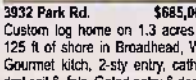
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SAVING SAHARA

calls her "tough" problems at home. Krystl Medina, a fellow football trainer, recalls that Sahara would sometimes arrive at games in tears and wouldn't say why.

Toward the end of her freshman year, a mostly black gang called The Folk relentlessly recruited Sahara. Mr. B. says the gang members recognized Sahara's vulnerability and "wouldn't let her go. She resisted for a while but they hassled her and hassled her and hassled her until in April [of freshman year] she joined. That's when she started running away." Sahara dropped her friends from middle school and stopped seeing Mabel and Mr. B.; The Folk became her family, her support group, her substitute for academics and extracurricular activities.

Sahara began to hang out on the northeast side of El Paso, which has a relatively large black population because the military base is nearby. She would smoke marijuana, says her friend Amanda Glasgow, drink, listen to rap music. She began stealing from her grandmother. She became sexually promiscuous, developing a taste for what Mr. B. called "thugs."

Natasha Benefield, an 18-year-old African American senior at Hanks, had a boyfriend and she arranged for Sahara to see his brother. "I'd always pick her up at night and take her over there," Natasha says. Later, Sahara started to leave school at third period, when Natasha's boyfriend would pick her up and drive her to see his brother. Sometimes Sahara stayed at Natasha's boyfriend's house. "At times his mom would tell me that she don't want to get in trouble for harboring her, so I would have to tell her to call her mom," Natasha says.

"Sahara didn't see any use in going to school," says Amanda, and she skipped it regularly. "Party now, school later," Sahara exclaimed. She last attended classes on September 21, 2001, and after that she was classified a truant.

As Sahara pushed the limits, Missy began to consider her daughter's plea that she be allowed to go to Milwaukee and live with Gilbert III. Gilbert understood that Sahara's urgency to move to Milwaukee had much more to do with her hope that he would dispense with rules and curfews than it did with any search for her racial identity. He warned her that she would be expected to conform to whatever rules he imposed, but he says he sensed that she figured he would be too busy with the challenges of his own life to focus

much on her. Gilbert, who works for General Electric assembling electronic parts for life monitors, had a fiancée (with whom he had two children and another on the way), a stepdaughter, a house, and a slew of financial problems. When Sahara called him last September and asked if she could come, he told her that she could, but to wait a few months—"until," he said, "I can get on my feet."

But Sahara couldn't wait. One of the girls she had met in The Folk was a 19-year-old named Theryl (pronounced "Tara") Bonner, a 2000 Hanks High graduate, already the unmarried mother of two daughters by different fathers. In October, Sahara was living with Theryl and her daughters in Theryl's parents' house. Theryl was going to Chicago to see her boyfriend, David (he does not want his last name used), who worked as a security guard there, and Sahara decided to go with her.

On October 12th, Missy, who did not know that Sahara was staying with Theryl, reported Sahara missing to the El Paso Police Department. The next evening, Sahara showed up at the Hanks homecoming dance and told Amanda of her plan to go to Chicago. At two the next morning, Sahara and Theryl boarded a Greyhound bus for Chicago. Arriving at 8:40 p.m. on Monday, October 15th, they checked into an Extended StayAmerica in Hillside, and spent the next five days wandering around the mall in North Riverside.

On Saturday, October 20th, Sahara called her grandfather and asked him to pick her up. He said he couldn't that day but he would be there Sunday. She called Gilbert III and told him that she would see him the next day. Tonight, she said giddily, she and Theryl were going to the "hood." Gilbert warned her that Chicago was "no joke," that it was not El Paso. She assured him that she would be fine.

On Sunday morning, Sahara's grandfather was about to leave for Chicago when he heard his niece on his front lawn screaming that Sahara had been murdered. The niece had just seen the news on TV. "Missy and I didn't even know Sahara was in Chicago," says Meleney, "until the police came to our house that terrible Sunday morning and said she was dead."

While hanging out at the North Riverside Mall, Theryl says, she and Sahara saw an ad for a "Sweetest Day" party at a lounge on the 5000 block of West Madison on the city's West Side. Theryl's boy-

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SAVING SAHARA

friend, David, drove them to the lounge around midnight. He stayed in the car while the girls spent a few minutes inside. When they came back out, they encountered Baruch Shaw and two of his friends.

Later, the newspapers would juxtapose a glowing snapshot of Sahara with a mug shot of Shaw, who had previously served time for burglary. Yet Shaw, who had attended South Shore High School—he did not graduate—could be affable and sharp when discussing basketball, football, the job market, and the economy. He was a “pretty good” transmission technician, says a former neighbor, although he had dropped out of a training program. Shaw has a girlfriend, Barbara Myles, 25, with whom he has lived for six years and with whom he has a six-year-old son.

That night at the lounge, says Theryl, Shaw flirted with her and Sahara, and then he and his friends asked the girls if they wanted to smoke some marijuana. “Sahara was all happy about it,” says Theryl, and Sahara and the three men piled into Shaw’s car.

“Get out—you don’t know these guys!” Theryl screamed.

“So what?” Sahara replied. “I’m going to go get high.”

Warning Shaw that Sahara was only 15, Theryl grabbed Sahara’s arm through the open window, but “she jerked it away from me,” Theryl says, and describes how Shaw, who was driving, laughed as he rolled up his window and peeled away from the curb. Theryl and David tailed Shaw’s car but lost it near the Chicago Skyway. The couple flagged down a Chicago police car and were taken to a tollway police substation to file a report.

Meanwhile, according to Shaw’s October 23rd bond hearing, Shaw drove to Washington Park, where his two friends got out, leaving Shaw and Sahara alone in the car. At the bond hearing, assistant state’s attorney Eileen Austin-Murphy said that Shaw had had vaginal intercourse with Sahara. Then, said Austin-Murphy, when Shaw began having anal sex with Sahara and she resisted, he became angry and strangled her.

When his friends returned, Austin-Murphy said, they saw Sahara “face down in the back [of the car] unconscious and not breathing.” One friend took off, but the other helped Shaw drive Sahara to the emergency room of the University of Chicago Hospitals. According to a police spokesman, Shaw told staffers that he had

been strolling in the park when he came across Sahara lying in the grass, and, as a Good Samaritan, he had brought her to the hospital. On arrival, at 3:18 a.m., she had no vital signs; she was rushed to the trauma room, but an aggressive and lengthy attempt to revive her failed. Sahara, whose identity was not yet known, was pronounced dead at 4:08 a.m. (Chicago police later made a preliminary identification by using a national law enforcement database, which included information from the El Paso police, entered after Missy had reported Sahara missing.)

The police found Shaw and his friend in the waiting room, says Barbara Myles, Shaw’s girlfriend. Austin-Murphy stated at the hearing that Shaw made some kind of admission to one of his two friends, from whom the police took a “handwritten statement.” Austin-Murphy also cited the “physical corroboration” of “anal and vaginal tearing on the victim’s body.” Shaw and his companion were placed under arrest, but the friend was later freed.

Theryl and David were taken to the Area Two detective division on East 111th Street. Later that morning, detectives told Theryl, “We found your friend, but we don’t know if she’s hurt or not.” They suggested she accompany them to the hospital; instead, they took her to the Cook County Medical Examiner’s Office on West Harrison Street and told her that she was expected to identify her friend’s corpse. Two of Mark Moorner’s brothers, Gilbert III and Johnny, drove to Chicago later that day to confirm the identification, but when Sahara’s body was flown to El Paso, her big toe still carried a morgue tag identifying her as “Jane Doe.”

For the viewing at El Paso’s Mt. Carmel Funeral Home, Sahara’s body was placed in the red dress that Mabel Toscano had bought her. The next day, a prayer service at the Cielo Vista Church drew some 200 people, mostly students. Gilbert III, who had traveled from Milwaukee to El Paso by bus, cried as he stood beside the wide-screen video monitors showing Sahara performing the *Chicago* numbers that she had sung at Harvard. Speakers blasted Alicia Keys’s megahit “Fallin’,” and even Mark Moorner made it from Los Angeles to say goodbye to his daughter.

Back in Chicago, Barbara Myles, accepts—and recounts—Shaw’s version of the events. She says that, because Shaw met Sahara at a club, he figured she was 21;

that Sahara approached him and his friends; that, once in the car, they suggested going to a hotel and she said they could save their money, just give her something to drink and they could take her anywhere. By Shaw’s account, Myles says, the two were having sex when suddenly Sahara stopped moaning with pleasure. He tried to give her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, and he called his friends for help. “When he was in the lockup and the police told him she’d been strangled and raped,” says Myles, “he was like, ‘Strangled and raped? She was willing.’”

Baruch Shaw has been indicted on charges of first-degree murder and aggravated criminal sexual assault and he is currently residing in the Cook County Jail. Shaw’s sister, who is married and lives in suburban Glenview, is paying for a private defense lawyer, a former Cook County public defender named Cheryl Bormann. (Bormann did not respond to repeated requests for interviews.)

Mr. B. and Mabel Toscano continue to cry over Sahara Moorner. They regret not having grabbed the opportunity to talk to her at seven one morning last fall when Mr. B., heading to school, and Mabel, heading home from the night shift at the nursing home where she worked, saw Sahara walking alone after an all-night party, wearing a long skirt that undulated in the breeze. They knew she was not going to school. Neither stopped. “I was going to turn back,” recalls Mabel. “I was tired. I said, ‘Can’t save the world,’ and I regret that day; I will regret that day forever.”

In the end, saving Sahara Moorner was beyond any of the people who loved her. She was too trusting, too eager to be liked, too ready to take risks. She was easy prey. She thought that Chicago was just like El Paso. Last year, El Paso had 19 homicides.

At Shaw’s murder trial, Sahara will make her final appearance on center stage (the trial was scheduled to begin March 13th). Her reputation will likely be sullied, as previewed in the bond hearing when Shaw’s public defender said of the events in Washington Park, “It sounds like something consensual going on . . .” Sahara’s story will again become grist for the newspapers. Still, if the dashed promise of her short life resonates with one other girl contemplating boarding a Greyhound for territory beyond her capacity to navigate, Sahara will, after all, have left a legacy—just not the one her many admirers had in mind. ■