

Sex offender suspected in 1970 Wis. child murder

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This 1970 handout photo shows Donna Willing. Donna was raped and strangled in 1970. Police have identified Donna's childhood neighbor as the alleged killer: 73-year-old Robert Hill. He's been in prison for other sexual assaults of children. The biological evidence in Donna Willing's case was lost or destroyed, and prosecutors are using Wisconsin's sex offender law to possibly keep him in custody indefinitely. They hope to prove Hill is a sexually violent person during a Monday, Nov. 19, 2012 hearing. (AP Photo/Family Photo via Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel)

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MILWAUKEE (AP) — Virginia Davis describes says the pain left behind by her 9-year-old sister's 1970 rape and strangulation as being like "a million holes."

Only 4 years old at the time, Davis knew little about the crime. The subject remained off-limits for the next four decades for many in a family that hoped to forget the hurt. But Davis couldn't forget, and after years seeking help to solve her sister's killing, she's preparing to face the man police believe is responsible.

On Monday, prosecutors will argue that a childhood neighbor and convicted sex offender — who they say confessed to the killing but has since recanted — should go to trial in the death of Donna Willing. With physical evidence in the case lost or destroyed, prosecutors say the will argue under the state's sex offender law that Robert Hill, 73, is a sexually violent person and must remain in custody indefinitely.

Davis says that when she was a child, her sisters would scold her for talking about Donna, warning, "You don't want to make mom cry, do you?" Most of the siblings don't discuss it even now.

But Davis needed answers. At 15 she found the courage to go to the library and read news coverage about her sister's death. Every detail discovered since has helped.

"I didn't feel like so lonely, I didn't feel so empty, I didn't feel like I had a million holes anymore," said Davis, now a mother of three who lives in suburban Milwaukee. "I just started feeling like it's easier, it's easier, it's easier now. I can talk about her now. I can speak her name."

Davis clearly remembers the afternoon of Feb. 26, 1970. Her big sister Donna was reading to her from a favorite book about animals as they sat on the couch. Her mother wanted Donna to go to the bakery for bread, but Virginia purposely delayed the trip, begging for one more story.

"I remember seeing out the window, it was getting dark and thinking 'Mom won't make her go if it gets dark. She'll send (my brother) or somebody else. She can't go,'" Davis recalls. "We were afraid of the boogeyman and stuff back then. The boogeyman will get her if she goes out after dark."

Donna walked out at 5:15 p.m. A witness later saw her get into a green car. Less than two hours later, a man discovered her bruised and bloodied body under a car in his garage about a mile away.

Newspaper reports at the time said police had people of interest, but no leads panned out.

In 2004, Virginia Davis saw a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel story about police arresting an 83-year-old man for a 1958 murder based on DNA evidence. She called the reporter for help getting police to take another look at her sister's case.

A cold case unit that formed in 2007 did, and soon focused on Hill. He had lived next door with his wife and five children and Davis said she remembered playing with his son. She also remembered his wife, who always yelled, but not him.

Prosecutors soon discovered physical evidence in Donna Willing's case had been lost during a flood or when detectives cleaned out the evidence room in the 1990s, according to police Lt. Keith Balash. So investigators in 2008 began interviewing Hill in prison — where he was serving a 10-year sentence for sexually assaulting four children under the age of 10 between 1995 and 2002.

Hill first told police he sexually assaulted Donna after she got into his car that night, according to court documents. She began to squirm and slapped him. He became angry, afraid she would tell on him. He strangled her and dumped her in a garage. It all took about 10 minutes, he said.

In another account outlined in court documents, Hill said he molested Donna for years, picked her up and had sex with her. After she screamed, he put his hand over her mouth and strangled her.

Hill, who is now being held in a supervised facility, has since recanted both statements. Balash said Hill knew specifics of Donna's injuries that hadn't been released.

Hill's attorney, Robert Prifogle, didn't return a phone call seeking comment before Monday's hearing.

Before her mother died in 2009, Davis finally asked why she needed Donna to go to the bakery. Her mother said she wanted to make French toast for dinner. That filled a big hole. This year, Davis met the man who discovered his sister's body — another big hole filled. She said she had blamed herself when she was younger for delaying her sister's trip until after dark, but no more.

Davis chokes up when talking about her gratitude for the cold case detectives who pursued the case.

"I want to invent or create a word and I can't come up with anything yet that is the equivalent to how I feel," she said.
