

Highly-publicized child murder case finally comes to an end

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Robert C. Hill, shown here during a 2012 court appearance he made via video hookup, was ordered Monday to spend the rest of his life in state commitment as a sexually violent offender. Hill, who served a 10-year-prison sentence for child sexual assaults, was long believed to be the man who raped and murdered 9-year-old Donna Willing in 1970, but he was never convicted. Credit: Journal Sentinel files

By Bruce Vielmetti of the Journal Sentinel

Robert Charles Hill may never be charged in the 1970 death of his 9-year-old neighbor, but he was ordered Monday to spend what is likely the rest of his life in custody in part because of what happened to Donna Willing.

Donna's rape and murder haunted her family for decades after she was found strangled in a west side garage, two hours after she had left home to get bread for her mother at a nearby bakery.

Hill was convicted years later of sexually assaulting several other young girls, and sentenced in 2003 to 10 years in prison.

In 2012, prosecutors announced they would ask that Hill be committed as a violent sexual offender under Wisconsin's Chapter 980 law, and held indefinitely at the Sand Ridge Secure Treatment Center in Mauston at the end of his sentence.

In the petition, officials for the first time identified Hill as their prime suspect in Donna's rape and murder, based on several confessions he made starting in 2008 but later recanted.

On Monday, Hill, 74, gave up his right to challenge the commitment. He appeared with his attorney via teleconference from Sand Ridge, where he has been held pending the outcome of the state's petition.

Milwaukee County Circuit Judge Timothy Witkowiak asked Hill a series of questions meant to assure the court that Hill was knowingly and voluntarily giving up his right to have a jury determine whether he met the criteria to be committed under Chapter 980. Satisfied, he ordered Hill committed to the Department of Health Services for treatment.

Assistant District Attorney Holly Bunch said Hill had two doctors who would have testified that he did not meet the criteria and that until two weeks ago, she expected a trial on the issue, during which his confessions to Donna's rape and murder would have been introduced.

Virginia Davis, who was 4 when her sister was killed, watched proceedings and later hugged Bunch outside the courtroom.

"The detectives told me they were 110% confident he did it," Davis said of Hill. "That's good enough for me."

During a massive initial investigation of Donna's murder, detectives did question Hill, who at the time worked in an auto-parts store and drove a car that matched a description of one a witness had seen in the area. Hill was "a person of interest," but was never charged.

Davis approached the Journal Sentinel in 2004 asking for help reopening Donna's case. A Milwaukee Police Department cold case squad, formed in 2007, dug out the old evidence boxes and began talking with Hill in 2008, while he was serving a 10-year prison term.

Over the course of several interviews, he confessed to killing Donna, said he had been molesting her for years, and apologized for not coming forward sooner. Hill said he had tried to confess indirectly by talking about her.

Indeed, as early as 2003, Hill had made oblique statements in custody about deaths of two girls, including a neighbor. But he later recanted his statements regarding Donna, making a conviction in her homicide difficult, since much of the physical evidence has long been destroyed.

Davis and her brother John Willing attended Monday's hearing to watch Hill on a large TV screen. Both said they were happy Hill would likely never have a chance to prey on more children.

Willing, who was a year older than Donna, said he remembered Hill as a neighbor who went by the name Skip, and that he and his sister considered him a friend, and that they talked in the yard with Hill's son who was younger.

Willing said he, too, is confident Hill is responsible for Donna's death. "He certainly had the opportunities," Willing said. He thanked the city, police and prosecutors for their efforts over the years.

"And we pray for the families whose children just disappeared and were never found," he said. "It's about the only thing we can be grateful for. We found Donna."

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