

Convicted pedophile and suspect in 1970 cold case murder of 9-year-old Donna Willing dies

[jsonline.com/story/news/crime/2019/05/27/suspect-1970-cold-case-murder-9-year-old-donna-willing-dies/1213751001](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/crime/2019/05/27/suspect-1970-cold-case-murder-9-year-old-donna-willing-dies/1213751001)

Robert Charles Hill, the convicted pedophile who authorities believe raped and murdered a 9-year-old Milwaukee girl almost 50 years ago, has died, closing the file on what had long been one of the city's most notorious cold cases.

Hill, 79, died May 3 at Sand Ridge Secure Treatment Center in Mauston, a state-run facility where he'd been held since 2012 as a sexually violent offender, according to court records.

Hill was the prime suspect in the rape and murder of Donna Willing, who disappeared on an errand to a west side bakery on Feb. 26, 1970. She was found, two hours later, beneath a car in a garage on North 51st Street.

Virginia Davis, Donna's younger sister whose inquiries helped police reopen the case more than a decade ago, said she is not quite sure how to feel.

"I'm not happy, just relieved, I guess, though it hurts too much to really think too much about it," she said. "After all that trauma, I can't believe it's over."

Davis, [whose online memorial to Donna, at donnawilling.webs.com, has drawn viewers from around the world](http://donnawilling.webs.com), said she also thinks about Hill's family.

"We know we weren't the only ones affected."

Davis said Hill was in the process of trying to gain his release when he died, the prospect of which, she said, terrified her and her family.

"I couldn't comprehend it," she said.

Hill left behind a legacy of violence and heartbreak.



His death comes 16 years after he pleaded guilty to four counts of sexually assaulting a child in an unrelated case.

In 2012, as his release date was approaching, prosecutors took the unusual step of petitioning the court to hold Hill in a secure treatment facility beyond his release date under Chapter 980, a Wisconsin statute that allows sexually violent offenders to be held if it can be shown they pose a risk to society. During those proceedings, authorities revealed for the first time publicly that they believed Hill was Donna's killer.

Donna's death was shocking in its brutality. In the days and weeks that followed, police and FBI agents fanned out across the city. Leads poured in, and more than 1,000 people were interviewed.

Detectives questioned Hill, who worked in an auto-parts store and drove a car that matched a description of one a witness had seen in the area. He was considered "a person of interest" but was never charged.

Detectives actively worked the case for more than a decade, with some taking copies of the files into retirement.

Davis approached a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reporter in 2004 asking for help reopening Donna's case. A Milwaukee police captain pulled the files, and detectives were willing to meet with her, but she couldn't bring herself to make an appointment, fearing it would stir up unwanted memories for her family.

Milwaukee police's newly formed cold case squad picked up the case in 2007, dug out the files, reached out to Davis and began talking with Hill in 2008 while he was serving a 10-year prison term on the sexual assault charges.

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

Detectives never amassed enough evidence to bring a case against him for Donna's murder, in part because the DNA evidence was destroyed in a purge of old homicide files in the 1990s.

Hill's commitment, ordered by Milwaukee County Circuit Judge Timothy Witkowiak, was the closest thing to justice the Willing family could get.

Retired cold case Detective Gil Hernandez said he was confident Hill killed Donna.

"He had details only a homicide suspect would know," said Hernandez, who worked the case with now-retired Detective Kathy Hein.

"We always knew it was him," said Hernandez, who called the cold case work he did some of the most rewarding of his career. "When you can go back and look at that mother and say, 'We got him,' there is nothing better."