

Sister's memories bring cold case back to life

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Donna Willing was last seen alive at her home on N. 33rd St., as she left for a nearby store in 1970. The home is no longer there, but the search for the 9-year-old's killer continues.

By Annysa Johnson of the Journal Sentinel

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Virginia Davis still remembers the details of that afternoon nearly 40 years ago.

She was just 4 then, snuggling on the sofa with her 9-year-old sister, Donna, the girls engrossed in their favorite book.

Their mother had told Donna to run to the bakery for bread, but Virginia kept pleading for her to stay.

"I remember my mom saying she had to go before it gets dark," Davis said. "She must have told her four times."

"I just kept asking her to read one more."

Donna read one last page, then headed from their house near N. 33rd and W. Lloyd streets to Grebe's Bakery a few blocks away.

She would never return.

Donna Willing was found less than two hours later, face down beneath a car in a garage on N. 51st St. Her body was scraped and bruised and bloodied. She'd been raped and strangled. It was Feb. 26, 1970.

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, from family members to neighbors to strangers on the street.

Detectives actively worked the case for more than a decade. But in time, the leads faded. Indeed, Donna faded, for all but the Willing family and friends, and detectives who worked the case, at least one of whom took copies of the case files into retirement.

Milwaukee police are once again investigating the murder of Donna Willing, in large part because of Davis, who after decades of silence, reached out for help.

"We don't want to get anyone's hopes up. We've told them the chances of solving this are slim," said Detective Katherine Hein, who with Detective Gil Hernandez make up the Milwaukee Police Department's cold case homicide unit.

"There are some good suspects. Maybe we can appeal to their sense of decency, if there's such a thing anymore," Hein said. "Or maybe their guilt."

Davis, 43, has always blamed herself for Donna's delay in going to the store.

"I can see it now. I can hear her voice," said Davis, a soft-spoken Milwaukee mother of three, who taps her lip as she speaks at her kitchen table, a tear rolling down her cheek.

No experience has shaped her life more than the rape and murder of Donna. Not her troubled teenage years. Not marriage or motherhood.

In the end, it transformed her from a timid casualty of her sister's killer into a guardian of Donna's memory who would encourage her family to finally voice their unspeakable pain and spur police to re-examine the case.

"I always think, will we ever know what it feels like not to have this grief?" Davis said. "It's so much a part of everything, the grief, the shame."

Brown-haired pixie

Donna Willing was the seventh of nine children born to Ruth and Robert Willing. Her dad worked maintenance at the Mitchell Park Domes; her mom was a part-time check processor at a bank.

Donna's third-grade picture, which was taken the day she died, shows a brown-haired pixie, a hint of freckles across her nose.

News accounts of the day described her as smart and quiet but friendly. One neighbor said she seemed lonely.

Donna sang and danced around the house, her sisters said. She liked to walk the family's new puppy and to run errands for her mom.

On the day she died, Donna read to Davis from a children's book on animals.

"I loved that book. She read it to me every day," Davis said. "Our favorite was a big mama pig and her five little pigs. We used to laugh and laugh because their little behinds were up in the air."

Donna left home around 5:15 p.m. Police believe she went one block north to W. Garfield Ave., then west to N. 34th St., where she would have cut across what was then the Kohl's grocery store parking lot. But they cannot be certain she made it that far.

Much of that evening is now a blur for Davis. There was a sense of unease, then panic after Donna failed to come home. Police officers were in the house, and Robert Willing rushed home from the neighborhood bar where he'd gone after work.

Davis remembers going to sleep that night, then waking to find her older sister Barb standing by the stairs.

"She said, 'Virginia, Donna's dead.'

"I said, 'No she isn't.' And I just went back to bed."

Memories of the funeral are comingled in her mind with those of her sister Susan's wedding a few months before. Riding in a taxi, wearing a "flouncy" dress, lots of relatives and introductions.

She recalls becoming hysterical after her teenage sister Jeanne was told to take her home.

"I just remember this panic, not wanting to leave my mother," Virginia said. "I knew Donna wasn't coming back, and I thought maybe she would go with Donna" and never return.

Family withdrew

In the months and years after Donna's death, the Willing family would turn inward and shut down. They drew the drapes, in their home and on their lives. For a few years, pictures of Donna were put away.

The family spoke Donna's name less and less, though she remained an object of morbid speculation in their neighborhood.

It was not uncommon, Davis said, for the Willing girls to be jumping rope in front of their home and hear passers-by ask, "Is this the house where that little girl who was killed lived?" or "Did your sister get raped?"

Every move in the house seemed calculated to protect their mother from her overwhelming grief.

Davis recalls that when she was 6 or 7, her older sister Eileen picked up a photograph and asked her, "Who's this?"

"I said, 'That's Donna,' and then she smacked me hard in the face. She said: 'Don't ever mention her name again. Do you want to make Ma cry?' "

But Donna was always under the surface - when a little girl was murdered trick-or-treating in Fond du Lac in 1973, when her brother Eddie died of cancer in 1981, when their father followed from a heart attack five years later.

After the slap, Davis rarely spoke of Donna to her siblings, but she tried over the years to broach the subject with her parents. As a teenager, she mustered the courage to ask her father, whose booming voice had always frightened her, to tell her about Donna.

"He looked down and then up, and said, 'Why do you want to ask about that?'

"I don't know if it was ever OK to talk about her. We weren't supposed to mention her name."

In high school, Davis borrowed a bus pass and ventured downtown to the public library, where she looked up the news stories about Donna's murder on microfilm.

It was her first real look at the case and how it shocked the city, at leads that emerged but never panned out.

"I didn't know about the car, the man who was seen in the alley, the man who found her," Davis said.

"I copied it all down in my notebook, I even traced her picture that was in there."

Davis always meant to go back, she said. "But part of me couldn't face it."

Donna's death continued to consume her into adulthood.

Even motherhood has been tempered by the experience. She keeps her children close; she's overcome nightly with a sense of dread at twilight.

"I can't help myself," Davis said. "I try not to; I don't want to pass it on to them. But I get afraid."

Her anxiety increased as her daughters neared the age of 9.

"I always had this crazy fear that I would lose my child when she turned 9. That I'd see how my mother feels."

At the same time, Davis felt a renewed closeness to Donna.

"I kept thinking, this is how old Donna was. These are the kinds of questions Donna would ask, the books she'd read, the things she'd have done with her little sister."

First step in 2004

Virginia Davis took the first step toward reopening Donna's case in 2004. She'd seen a newspaper article on an old cold case solved by DNA evidence and called the Journal Sentinel, asking whether the same could be done for her sister.

A reporter began asking police about the case, and Homicide Capt. David Zibolski had the boxes of evidence pulled from storage.

Homicide detectives were willing to meet with her, but Davis couldn't bring herself to set anything up, fearful that her family would be angry.

In 2007, the department created a cold case unit to reopen unsolved cases. Detective Hein first called Davis at work June 9, 2008.

Hein's initial question - "Are you Virginia Davis, and did you have a sister named Donna Willing?" - knocked the wind out of her.

"I was in shock," said Davis, who paced the hall that morning with her cell phone glued to her ear. "The rest of the day, I tried not to cry."

Over the years, Davis and her family assumed that police had lost interest in Donna, that no one cared anymore. Nothing could have been further from the truth, according to the cold case detectives.

"This was worked on for many, many years," said Hernandez, Hein's partner.

When they reviewed the case, the two were struck by how much effort had gone into it at the time.

More than 100 officers, including three dozen detectives, were assigned to the investigation, records show. They blanketed the streets, every lead, every tip pursued. And in the weeks that followed, anyone picked up for offenses remotely sexual - adultery, even kissing in public - was brought in and questioned.

"There was not a lot of follow-up left undone," said Hein, though they've found that one potential suspect appears never to have been interviewed. "They investigated everybody they could have thought of."

Some of the early detectives never let it go; after the cold case unit was formed, retirees called asking that Donna's case be reopened.

Not all the evidence remains. Though the file is voluminous - two large boxes of reports, photographs, inventory lists and laboratory reports - some evidence has been lost or accidentally purged over the years.

Hein and Hernandez have spent months poring over the files, interviewing family members, tracing Donna's footsteps in the neighborhood and zeroing in on a handful of suspects, at least two of whom are in Wisconsin prisons for sex crimes against children.

In addition, they're having slides of genetic material that was taken during her autopsy examined for DNA evidence.

The passage of time, they said, has brought some original suspects more sharply into focus, in part because of the crimes they committed in later years.

"When you read that file, you knew who the detectives were targeting and for very good reason," Hein said. "They definitely were on the right track with some of the people."

Hein and Hernandez are focusing their investigation on the four-block area between the Willings' home and the bakery.

Witnesses at the time reported seeing a green car cruising Donna's street as she left her house. A woman on N. 51st St. saw a man in her alley - stout with dark blond graying hair - 30 feet from the garage where Donna was found less than an hour later. She said he turned up his collar to hide his face, then walked through the alley toward the street. He so unnerved her that she ran into her house frightened.

Police at the time speculated that Donna might have been killed in a garage near her home, then taken to the garage in the 2400 block of N. 51st.

Hein and Hernandez believe the child fought her killer.

"When you read these reports, you get a feel for your victims, and I think Donna was a little scrapper," Hein said.

"How that happened in such a short distance, without someone seeing it, it's just amazing."

After Hein's telephone call in June, Davis knew she'd have to tell her family that police would want to talk to them.

Davis knew she could not speak the words, so she returned to her desk and started typing a letter. She called her sister Eileen and asked if she could come over.

At Eileen's house, they sat on the couch. Virginia handed her sister the letter, and she read it, over and over, in silence.

"Then she put her arms around me and said, 'Do what you have to do.' "

Little of the world the Willings knew on N. 33rd St. remains today. Their home is now a vacant lot; the old Grebe's bakery, a barbecue and fish restaurant. Even the garage where Donna's body was found, 22 blocks away, was razed long ago.

Now 83, Ruth Willing lives in a modest ranch-style house on Milwaukee's south side. She and her children have by now all spoken to Hein and Hernandez, emotional interviews that have given detectives a clearer picture of the neighborhood at the time and people who lived there.

Some of Davis' family declined to be interviewed for this story. Her oldest sister, Susan McGlothin, who lives in Arizona, sobbed as she spoke of her shock in learning the case was reopened.

"All these years, we didn't talk about it," she said. "We just resigned ourselves that it would never be solved."

On a snowy afternoon in February, just weeks before the anniversary of her daughter's death, Ruth Willing sat in her living room in her housedress and sweater.

Asked to share her memories of Donna, she breathed as if to catch her breath, and tears rolled down her face. In the end, no words came.

Davis wept to see her mother so grieved. She'd mistaken her steely demeanor all these years - a wall erected just to keep living and raise her other children, detectives speculated - for apathy.

Ruth Willing carried her own guilt, the detectives said, for sending her daughter to the store, as did some of the other siblings, for not accompanying her.

"Virginia was so worried that they'd be angry with her" for reopening old wounds. "She thought they'd all put it behind them. But they hadn't," Hein said.

"They were all haunted in some way. Each of them carried that burden in their hearts."

The family is grateful, she said, that detectives are reinvestigating Donna's murder. Davis, the sister who made it happen, feels some comfort in that.

"I don't want to say there's peace, because we don't have peace yet. It's just such a relief to know they are working on it," she said.

And if Donna's killer is never found? If the case remains ever cold?

"At least I'll have the peace of knowing they tried," she said. "Otherwise, I would have agonized over this for the rest of my life."