



Husband of missing Bogota woman asks for help

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STAFF WRITER

In the nearly three years since Jim Viola's wife vanished, the Bogota father of two has created a Web site dedicated to finding her, canvassed New Jersey with fliers and video CDs, and pleaded for help on radio and television programs.

Not finding a single clue, he has now turned to a psychic.

Which raises a question: Can a stranger he spoke with for less than an hour solve Pat Viola's disappearance?

"I think it's possible," Jim Viola said. "We have to follow up on everything."

Dead ends will sometimes lead family and friends to psychics for help in locating a missing loved one. Those who claim the ability to see what others can't have become a staple of television talk shows - and a source of hope for those desperate for answers.

Yet people seeking closure need to be careful, say those with experience.

Cindy Brown of Browns Mills consulted a psychic after her 29-year-old son disappeared in March 2003. He was with an older woman in California or Florida, she said she was told.

Shortly after Christmas, the psychic told Brown that she soon would receive news about him.

On Jan. 9, a hunter in the woods found the badly decomposed corpse of Jimmy Lee Brown. He had hung himself with a shoelace about 48 feet up in a tree - five miles or so from home.

"A lot of things she said were wrong," Brown said.



TARIQ ZEHAWI / THE RECORD

▲ Jim Viola flanked by his children, Michael, 13, left, and Christine, 16, in their Bogota home.

ON THE WEB:

www.patriciaviolamissing.homestead.com

After 12-year-old Polly Klaas was abducted in California, psychics flocked to the family, offering all kinds of information.

"They were all off the mark, every last one of them," said her father, Marc Klaas.

Two months after the abduction, a parolee with a long criminal history confessed to killing Polly. He led police to her body.

"I look at these people as a second wave of predators," Klaas said of psychics.

Noreen Renier disagrees.

Renier says she has used her psychic ability to help police throughout the country - and even in Japan - find missing people.

"I usually touch something that the person used, like a toothbrush, or a shoe, to get me connected," she said.

Renier said she then "hovers over the body" to see as much as she can, and relates as many details as possible about her "surroundings."

"Missing person cases take a little longer. You have to get so many details right, you have to be exact," Renier said. "There are a lot of frauds, a lot of charlatans ... who know all the right things to say."

She could not offer any specific examples of people she has found.

Law enforcement officials say psychics will often offer help in finding missing persons and other cases. Most said they usually decline, however.

"We believe in good old detective work," said Trooper Stephen Jones of the New Jersey State Police.

"We don't utilize psychics," said Special Agent Bill Carter, an FBI spokesman in Washington. "It's not recognized as a science."

"We haven't had a case that's been solved as a direct result of psychic activity," said Kym Pasqualini, president of the Nation's Missing Children's Organization and Center for Missing Adults. "We've experienced psychics who emerge who we've never heard of before. They'll start telling the family that they have information - but that they need money."

People who have lost a loved one will often turn to a psychic for help after exhausting other

means of information, said Mike Abrams, a Clifton psychologist.

"When all else is failed, even a rational person will turn to magic," he said. "People want an easy solution. We all do. And when you're desperate, you want it more."

But, he warned, psychics can offer "false hope that leads to a greater sense of despair and disappointment."

On Friday, it will be exactly three years since Jim Viola last saw his wife. He still has the Valentine's Day cards he bought her, along with other holiday cards, in a bag under the mantle in his home. Several framed photos of Pat adorn the living room, and downstairs Viola has installed shelves next to his computer to hold binders of notes and video equipment for his Web site.

The morning of Feb. 13, 2001, was pretty much like any other, Viola said. He left for work, the kids headed to school, and his wife went to her volunteer job at the library in her son's elementary school. Pat returned later, set the house alarm, and locked the door. Then she was gone.

Pat, then 42, apparently took no personal items, including medication for epileptic seizures that her husband said were becoming more frequent.

Detectives brought in helicopters, boats, and dogs. Viola canvassed the area with fliers. As time wore on, Viola created video CDs, as well as cards and mailing labels with information about his missing wife.

The search held no tangible signs of hope for Viola until recently, when he directed a private investigator to Akron, Ohio. The source of the tip: psychic Sylvia Browne.

Browne told him that Pat "left the house voluntarily and had a major seizure." Browne also claimed Pat has been suffering from amnesia and may have been picked up by a grocery truck driver, Viola said. She said he should concentrate his search efforts in Akron, he said.

"Going in, I was a bit of a skeptic," Viola said. "But I did research, and talked to a private investigator, and learned that she is very well-known. That gave me a better feeling."

Viola has contacted nearly every hospital in Ohio, as well as Akron city police. He's trying to have a composite drawn of his wife that shows what she would look like now, and is considering renting billboard space for a month on Route 80 - a major truck route only a few blocks from his home - to post her information.

A friend whom Viola met through the missing children's organization made a connection for him with the producers of "The Montel Williams Show."

Browne has taped an appearance with Viola and five other families with missing loved ones for

an episode of the show scheduled to air locally Wednesday.

Browne is a member of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists and earns a minimum of \$847 for each appearance on a talk show, a spokeswoman for the union said. Despite several attempts to reach her by phone and e-mail, her business manager last week said that Browne "does not have time" for an interview.

Anthony Urciuoli of Poughkeepsie, N.Y., estimates he has spent \$50,000 to find his missing son, Tony, including fees to some 10 or so psychics. Authorities are still investigating the case, and the family has offered a \$100,000 reward.

Tony Urciuoli, 31, left home on Jan. 24, 2001, saying he was going to play pool and would be back in a couple of hours. His car later turned up in a nearby baseball park.

Since then, his father said, nearly all of the psychics, including Browne, have told him the same thing: Tony was tricked out of his house, killed, and then dumped into a body of water. They also have given him enough reason to believe they may be right.

Six months ago, one of them said: "Your son tells me you just put new tires on your car," Urciuoli said. "I had There's always something these psychics come up with that is right on the mark."

Some psychics will employ "retrofitting," in which they will match predictions or observations to facts in the case and discard the rest, said Joe Nickell, a former magician and private detective who is now with the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal in Amherst, N.Y.

Through 30 years of research, "we don't have evidence of anyone using ESP to solve a crime," Nickell said. "If you want to be a psychic, just make lots of guesses. Once in a while you get lucky."

Marc Klaas agreed.

"They throw enough stuff at you, so that once your person is located, some of the elements they gave you will be incorporated," he said. Despite the criticism, Viola remains hopeful.

"I've always thought that Pat may have had a seizure, and now Sylvia comes out and says that," he said. "It kind of validates what I've been thinking."

"I've always thought that she's in a hospital out there," Viola said. "It's just up to me to find her."

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