

10 YEARS LATER: PATRICIA VIOLA

Family, community ride the winds of hope

BY DARIUS AMOS
Staff Writer

A lot has changed in the nearly 10 years since Patricia Viola was last seen at her Chestnut Avenue home. When she mysteriously vanished from a Bogota neighborhood on the eve of Valentine's Day in 2001, her children were just 13 and 10 years old. Her eldest, daughter Christine, is now married with children. Only son Michael is grown, having graduated high school two years ago, and is now in his early stages of adulthood.

And then there is Patricia's husband, Jim. A man of patience and persistence, Viola personifies what has remained the same in the family's household for the past 10 years. That's hope.

Joined by friends, neighbors and other members of the community, the Viola family last Saturday afternoon renewed its unwavering hope that Patricia, Christine and Michael's devoted mother and Jim's beloved wife, will return home. They also got a boost from the Community United Effort (CUE) Center for Missing Persons, a North Carolina-based non-profit that strives to locate missing persons and advocate for their causes. CUE volunteers stopped at the Viola home as part of their On the Road to Remember Tour, a 10-day, 10-state rally intended to revive missing persons cases.

"The cases we feature are a small number compared to the NCIC statistics 700,000 to 800,000 cases reported annually, but I'm confident we will make a difference in those we represent," said Monica Caison, CUE founder. Caison was one of the handful of volunteers at the Viola home last week.

To the Viola family, CUE's 2010 tour took an extra special meaning after they learned that Patricia was this year's honoree. In receiving that designation, the Viola family was granted one of the most needed tools in a locating a missing person: exposure and attention.

"This is very important because when they make up the posters [for the tour], they use a large image of Pat on the posters, the bumper stickers, the van that's going around the East Coast. The honoree's information is in the beginning of the DVD that's in all the packages distributed to the media," Viola said. "Getting the information out there and having her image in the public eye as often as possible is important."

Viola added that garnering media attention and the dissemi-

Patricia Viola file

Missing since Feb. 13, 2001

Age when missing: 42

Height: 5-2

Weight: 125 pounds

Hair: Brown, short and wavy

Eyes: Brown

Three birthmarks on front right neck.

Any tips and information should be directed to the Bogota Police Department at 201-487-2400. For more information, visit www.patriciaviolamissing.homestead.com.

nation of information has become painstakingly more difficult as his wife's case grows older, so he's hoping that having Patricia's image prominently displayed on CUE's posters leads to new tips.

"Pat's name is in lights on the big banner," he told the small crowd that had gathered at the foot of his property. "Hopefully someone knows something and will come forward. No tip is too small. Police put the information together, you never know if it's a good tip or a bad tip, and they go forward with it."

The Bogota Police Department, which was also at the Viola home last Saturday offering fingerprint identification cards for children, has worked side by side with the family ever since Patricia first went missing. According to the official police reports, Patricia was last seen at noon on Feb. 13, 2001, leaving the Bixby Elementary School library, where she volunteered while her children attended class.

Viola said his wife was on her way home, which was a mere two blocks from the school. When she reached home, Patricia returned a voicemail message, which was left by her mother, at approximately 1:30 p.m., then likely left the Chestnut Avenue house soon after. Patricia, who suffered from epileptic seizures, left behind her pocketbook, wallet, medication and cell phone.

When Jim Viola returned home from work at 4:30 p.m., he believed his wife had only gone shopping. He didn't realize anything was wrong until later that evening.

Viola notified Bogota Police at



ROY CARATTOZZOLO III/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jim Viola talks about his wife, Patricia, who disappeared from her Bogota home in February 2001.

11:30 p.m. of his wife's disappearance. Officers searched and conducted interviews, and family members and friends hung posters and checked familiar places.

"Bogota Police has done everything that they can do. The case is still open and they've re-interviewed people," Viola said, adding that Det. Sgt. James Lemakos has returned as the lead detective on the case.

Lemakos said that throughout the years investigators have followed leads both locally and nationally, going as far as Califor-

nia. Most recently, tips led police to Atlantic City; however, those clues were unsuccessful.

"We have an active participation in the case. We follow all leads. No matter who or where they come from, we won't just throw leads away," Lemakos said.

The Police Department's persistence goes hand in hand with the Viola's belief that Patricia will come home. They hope that the media attention received from the CUE rally and the subsequent tour generates additional leads that ultimately bring the family closer to

Patricia.

In one final gesture of hope last Saturday, the Violas and their friends released 37 yellow balloons, each toting a card containing all of Patricia's vital information. At first try, all but one balloon successfully cleared the trees and power lines and lofted into the air.

But it didn't take long for a soft gust to lift the final balloon off a tree limb and into the sky.

"Let the winds of hope take them wherever they may go," Viola said.

Let them bring Patricia home.

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