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## 10-year anniversary of her disappearance

*Missing Jersey City native leads to DNA law, long search*

by E. Assata Wright

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For the family of Jersey City native Patricia Viola, the morning of Feb. 13, 2001 began just like any other Tuesday. Pat's husband, Jim, left for work. The Viola children, Christine and Michael, headed to school. And Pat, a 42-year-old stay-at-home mom who volunteered regularly at a school library, left home for her usual volunteer assignment.

But some time between that ordinary morning and later that afternoon, an extraordinary event turned the Violas' world upside down. Pat, an epileptic who had moved with her family to Bogota, N.J., went missing around midday.

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## Part of the search has involved Hudson County.

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Her epilepsy medication, purse, wallet, cell phone, identification, credit and debit cards, and house keys were left at the house. When Pat vanished, it seems the only thing she took was herself.

For the remaining Viola family members, particularly Jim, that day began a 10-year search that continues to this day.

"I've probably spent tens of thousands of hours ... just trying to figure out what may have happened to her that day," said Jim last week.

A website created to find her, <http://patriciaviolamissing.homestead.com/>, noted that last Sunday, the day before Valentine's Day, marked the 10th anniversary of her disappearance.

"Did she met up with trouble or have a seizure as a result of her epilepsy?," asks the site. "Did she end up a hospital or similar facility around that time? Did she get into a car in front of our home in Bogota, NJ? Was she picked up by a taxi or board a bus? Remember, Pat did not have access to a car that day. If someone gave Pat a ride that day, we would like to talk to you. We have lot of questions, but still no answers."

### Details of a disappearance

Pat did, in fact, make it to her volunteer assignment at the school, where she was on duty from about 8:30 and 11:30 a.m.

Based on records from the family's security alarm company, when Pat set the house alarm that morning she inadvertently left the door to the home slightly ajar. This caused the house alarm to be triggered after she left. Police were dispatched to the house, but believed everything to be fine, and left.

Pat returned home at about 11:45 a.m. and, based on phone records, made a call to her mother at around 12:30 p.m. Her mother was the last person to ever hear from Pat.

Based on additional information from the alarm company, Pat reset the house alarm at 1:11 p.m. The alarm was still set when Jim returned home at 4:30 p.m. and deactivated the system.

Police believe this to be the window of time when Pat disappeared.

"We're still trying to verify her activities and movements that afternoon," said Jim.

Based on information obtained by one of her friends, there was speculation that Pat, who did not have access to a car that day, may have walked to a nearby pharmacy to buy a Valentine's Day gift.

### One theory

While foul play cannot be ruled out, Jim has been steadfast in his belief that his wife is alive and is still missing. He talks about her in the present tense.

"She has epilepsy. I think it's very possible that she left home, had a seizure, and was hospitalized," said Jim. "I've been told that if someone has a particularly bad seizure it is possible that they can have amnesia. So, she could be in a hospital or some other medical facility registered as a Jane Doe. She may be very ill and perhaps she isn't able to communicate to the medical staff who she is or where she came from."

Jim and Bogota investigators have reached out to several medical facilities in Northern New Jersey, including hospitals in Hudson County. Pat still has family in the county and is very familiar with it, so Jim believes she may have wandered here sometime around the time of her disappearance.

But no Jane Does matching Pat's description have been found.

Still, Jim remains undeterred. He said he draws encouragement every time he hears of a missing persons case where the individual is found, years after the disappearance, stuck in some far-off hospital with a stranger-than-fiction story of how they got there.

### **Cold case leads to 'Pat's Law'**

Since Pat's disappearance, several investigators have been assigned to the case. But cold cases are notoriously difficult to solve.

"As more time goes by, the investigators get assigned to other cases," said Jim. "Solving a cold case, a lot of times will depend on some new piece of information or some new piece of evidence being found that was overlooked before."

When police investigators lack either time or new leads, it is often the family who can jump start an investigation, Jim said. So for years, while still working his full-time job, Jim and other members of Pat's extended family have tried to re-investigate her case.

This has involved obtaining phone records, re-interviewing old witnesses, getting Pat's story told on TV programs such as "America's Most Wanted," and employing the use of DNA technology.

Jim in 2009 pressured lawmakers in New Jersey to adopt a DNA profiling law that had already been passed in other states. Under the law, police are required to obtain DNA profiles from missing people so those profiles can be entered into a centralized database and matched with corpses and unidentified hospital patients.

The law, signed by Gov. Jon Corzine, was ultimately named after Pat.

### **Time marches on**

Despite this victory, Pat's file still remains an active unresolved missing persons case.

Since 2001, some things haven't changed. Jim still lives in the Bogota home Pat left a decade ago. But many other things have changed. The two Viola children – Christine and Michael, who were 12 and 10 when Pat vanished – have grown up without their mother. Pat's own mother passed away in 2009 without ever seeing her daughter again.

A new investigator from the local police department has been assigned to the case.

"We have some fresh eyes taking a look at the case," said Jim. "They're looking at all avenues. I'm looking at all avenues. We're all keeping an open mind as to what may have happened, because we really don't know."

### **Theories**

The website attempts to find anyone who may have clues about Pat. One section says, "If you were a patron or worker in any of the New Jersey RiteAid stores on 2/13/01, you may be able to help us. Pat was in the market for a Valentine's Day Gift, a 'singing monkey in a cage,' carried by Rite Aid. She may have asked you about it that day. You may have referred her to another RiteAid store. You may have a clue to what was on Pat's mind that day or where she was headed."

Anyone who has any information regarding the disappearance of Pat Viola is encouraged to call (201) 871-7523. For more information regarding her case, visit <http://patriciaviolamissing.homestead.com>.

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