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TV's 'Disappeared' tackles Bogota case

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BOGOTA — More than 10 years after his wife, Patricia, disappeared from their Chestnut Avenue home, Jim Viola holds out hope someone has information to help police solve the mystery.

"You definitely want to find out what happened," Viola said last week. "You don't want to go the rest of your life wondering what really happened."

Patricia Viola, then a 42-year-old stay-at-home mom who volunteered at the Bixby School library, was last

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seen on Feb. 13, 2001. She left home without her pocketbook, keys, epilepsy medicine and cellphone, according to her family and the police.

Patricia Viola's story and her family's efforts to find her will be featured in tonight's premiere episode of "Disappeared," an hour-long show on the Investigation Discovery channel. It airs at 10 o'clock.

The show will include interviews with the family, the police and Gary Micco, a Hunterdon County private investigator who started working with the family this year.

Jim Viola said having a cable network devote an entire show to his wife is a major coup.

"We want to get tips, and we want to find out what happened to my wife," Viola said. "It's never too late to come forward with any information you have. People may not realize that the information they have is important. ... It's up to the police to figure it out."

Town's coldest case

Patricia Viola's disappearance is the [Bogota Police Department's](#) oldest unsolved case, said Capt. James Sepp, the lead detective in 2001.

Since then, four other detectives have overseen the case, and two have retired.

"It's frustrating," said Sepp, who was interviewed for the show. "I would love to be able to know what happened before I retire. I'd hate to leave the job with something like this open."

The leads have run cold, he said.

"We had dogs, we had crime-scene investigators, we had anybody you can think of come through and check. We stopped every bus, every taxi. We called the airports, we had divers in the rivers. ... We had helicopters with flares. ... Nothing. Nothing showed up anywhere."



THOMAS E. FRANKLIN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Buttons publicizing Patricia Viola's baffling disappearance.

Hoping for new leads

Micco, a retired North Jersey detective, contacted the family in January after reading a story in a Connecticut newspaper about the thousands of unidentified bodies at morgues across the country.

He ran a Google search for missing New Jerseyans and found the website dedicated to Patricia Viola. He offered his help free of charge.

Micco said he re-interviewed relatives, friends and acquaintances and, more recently, has been working with medical examiners in New York, Pennsylvania and Delaware to determine whether unidentified bodies in their jurisdictions could be Patricia Viola.

He also helped the family update Patricia Viola's file with the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System to include dental records and DNA samples from her children.

And he contacted the producers at "Disappeared."

"It's really just another way to shake the tree, so to speak, to see what falls out," he said. "It's just a way to get her name and face out there. ... We are just trying to help the police department."

Elizabeth Fischer, an executive producer at Peacock Productions, which produces the show, said viewers will see what happens to an ordinary family in an extraordinarily difficult situation.

Fischer said she hopes the show will generate some new leads. The show, now in its fourth season, has helped authorities find one missing person, she said.

"Even if we don't solve it — if we at least sort of kick up some dirt — then we feel like we have provided a bit of a service in the course of presenting a pretty compelling, investigative story," she said.

In some ways, the Viola family has moved on, but some things remain the same.

Michael Viola was 10 years old when his mother disappeared. He is now in his third year of college. The Violas' daughter, Christine Washington, now 24, is married and the mother of two children.

Outside the Viola home, posters bearing Patricia's photograph offer a \$10,000 reward for information.

Inside, Patricia Viola's dresser and clothing are the way she left them the day she vanished.

Near the living room mantel, Jim Viola still keeps the bag of Valentine's Day presents — including a box of heart-shaped chocolates — he brought home the day of his wife's disappearance. Over the years, the family has added greeting cards to the gift bag.

"We were expecting her to come home real soon," Jim Viola said.

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