

Family clings to hope of finding woman

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Staff Writer

The glossy red and pink gift bag that Jim Viola bought his wife for Valentine's Day two years ago hasn't moved from beneath the living-room mantle. Next to framed wedding photos, it has begun to bulge with cards from him and their two children, marking the holidays and birthdays that Patricia Viola has missed.

"That bag is going to be waiting for her," Jim Viola says.

It was two years ago tomorrow that he bought the bag. It was also the last day Jim Viola saw his wife. Feb. 13, 2001, began like any other day in their Bogota home.

Viola left for work, the kids headed to school, and Pat, then 42, went to volunteer at the local school library. Returning later that day, she set the house alarm, locked the door, and, it seems, disappeared.

Since then, detectives have used helicopters, boats, and dogs to search for the missing homemaker. Information has been carried on radio stations, television shows, billboards, and numerous fliers. Viola also established a Web site, created wallet-sized cards, and began distributing video CDs.

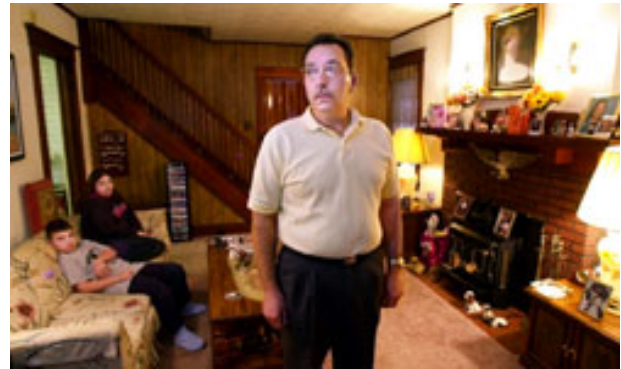
He even drops the cards into every piece of mail he sends out - anything to spread the word.

"Somebody had to have seen something," Viola says, sighing.

Still, not a single clue about where Pat Viola went or where she is has emerged.

"We have nothing. We can't lean in any one direction," said Bogota Detective James Sepp. "We're going to need one piece of the puzzle to come forward before we can make the rest of the pieces come together."

Viola has balanced the search for his wife with working as an engineer for Honeywell in



▲ Jim Viola is confident his wife, Pat, who disappeared two years ago, will return to him and their children, Michael, 12, and Christine, 15.

Teterboro and being both dad and mom to Christine, 15, and Michael, 12.

Their routine, for the most part, has remained the same. Michael is still active in floor hockey and basketball. Viola continues to bowl Wednesday nights. And the family still attends St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Bogota together every Sunday.

Michael is more mature and independent now, although it's still difficult for him to express his sadness. Christine, meanwhile, has become more active in a church youth group, finding guidance and support in retreats.

"Sometimes I really wonder about her," the teenager says of her mom. "Other times I don't know what to think. ... I think that wherever she is she's safe, because God is with her."

Viola said he, too, has become more religious. He also has begun taking more responsibility for his own well-being - learning to cook and spending more time with a handful of very close friends.

Besides regular day trips, he has twice taken Michael and Christine to the family's Pennsylvania time-share in the Poconos. They're planning to return again this summer.

"I can't take that away from the kids, or myself. We still need to have that," he said.

The Violas tried family counseling in the first six months after Pat left, but Christine and Michael were unable to share their feelings. Since then, each has pursued individual ways of coping, although Viola said he is looking to arrange more counseling to help his kids navigate adolescence with only one parent.

Around their cozy Bogota home are bittersweet reminders: a plaque in the dining room that lists "Mom's Rules," dozens of photographs, and a closet full of untouched belongings. Pool parties, Jersey shore vacations, and romantic dinners on cruise ships around Manhattan are now memories.

"She was my first real love," Viola said, purposefully twirling his gold wedding band. "I fell in love with her right away."

The two met about 20 years ago, when Jim Viola walked into Honeywell for his first interview. Patricia was working in the personnel section. He was taken with her sweet nature and soft voice. They were married in 1986.

Viola says he and his wife had planned to celebrate Valentine's Day 2001 with a special dinner later that week. At 6:50 a.m. on Feb. 13, he said goodbye and rushed off to work. At 11:30 a.m., she returned from the library and called her mother to say that everything was fine at home, even though the house alarm had been activated, police said. She then reset the house alarm at 1 p.m., they said.

What happened next is anyone's guess.

Investigators say they have no evidence that Patricia Viola was taken against her will or harmed in any way. They have nothing that connects the activated alarm with her disappearance. A search of the house has turned up nothing of consequence, they said.

Viola said he got home from work at 4:30 that afternoon and assumed his wife was out shopping. Then he noticed her pocketbook on the counter and no note telling him where she was, he said. Pat, who has epilepsy, also left behind her keys and essential medication.

As the hours passed, Viola said, he checked with Pat's mother, her friends, even the local bus company. Her epilepsy prevented her from driving, so perhaps she had taken a bus to the mall, he said.

At 11 p.m., he finally called police.

About 1,650 New Jersey residents were listed as missing in December, according to state police statistics. About half are juveniles, including runaways and those believed abducted.

Nationwide, about 96,000 people - most of them under 18 - are listed as missing this month in the FBI's National Crime Information Center database. Officials do not know how many missing spouses comprise that number, or why any who have vanished voluntarily would do so.

"It's not a crime to be missing. The only problem is that your family wants to know where you are," said Angela Bell, an FBI spokeswoman in Washington, D.C. "Nobody can say why a woman would leave her family. I don't know of any agency that would be able to tell you that. There's no comprehensive reason."

Detectives continue to look for Pat Viola but they say there is little ground they haven't covered.

In May, a spot on the Channel 11 television show "Missing" led to two tips. One woman said she thought she saw Pat Viola getting into a car outside the Butler Diner with an infant and a man. Bogota officers immediately went to the diner with a photograph, but neither the owner nor the patrons there recognized her, Sepp said. Police said the caller couldn't describe the car or its license plate, and has not reported seeing her again, he said.

Another caller, from Rockville Centre on Long Island, said she saw a woman who looked like Pat Viola - seemingly disoriented and possibly having a seizure - in the area. Detectives reviewed all aid calls in Rockville Centre from the day Pat Viola went missing but found none that matched the description.

"Everyone was accounted for," Sepp said.

Jim Viola believes his wife may have had a seizure that could have caused amnesia. She may

now be hospitalized as a "Jane Doe" somewhere, he said, adding that he plans to send the CD to hospitals in the area. He said he also is sending it to New Jersey State Police and to the Prosecutor's Office, Sheriff's Department, and county Police Department in Bergen, and to every municipal police department in the county. Missing-persons clearinghouses in New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Connecticut will get the CD as well, he said.

Meanwhile, he is maintaining his Web site: patriciaviolamissing.homestead.com.

Viola has recently become good friends with a Florida man who has been searching for his daughter for 25 years. The two now work together to get the word out about their loved ones.

The search simply has to continue, no matter how long it takes, Viola says.

"I feel like we're going to find her," he said. "I still feel that the right person hasn't seen her picture."

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