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Missing For 2 and 25 Years



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Tragedy has bonded two displaced Canarsie natives, but fate is what may help them find their missing loved ones.

Audrey Lyn Nerenberg, an 18-year-old schizophrenic, left her Ryder Street home in the middle of New York City's 1977 heat wave with only a few dollars in hand to buy cigarettes. She never returned.

Patricia Viola, missing since 2001, and Audrey Nerenberg, missing since 1977. Viola's husband and Nereberg's father have joined forces in the search for their lost loved ones.

Over 30 miles away and 24 years later, Patricia

Viola, 43, apparently walked out of her Bogota, New Jersey, home and simply vanished on Feb. 13, 2001. The mother of two mysteriously disappeared without her keys, pocketbook, cell phone and epilepsy medication — and had no access to a car.

Their stories are eerily similar, and the array of possibilities surrounding their disappearances are equally impossible to conceive.

Patricia's husband, Jim Viola, and Audrey's father, Milton Nerenberg — both formerly of Canarsie — met on the Nation's Missing Children Organization & Center for Missing Adults' online Support Group "HOPETOSUPPORT," which brings together people searching for lost loved ones.

Nerenberg, now living in Florida, and Viola, a New Jersey resident, have recently begun talking every day, brainstorming on innovative ideas for finding Audrey and Pat.

Both have faith that their precious family members will be returned to them safely. Nerenberg has been waiting over 25 years to see his little girl's face again — Viola has been waiting two years — but by no means are these men waiting patiently.

The two have taken the initiative, and are working diligently to find their missing girls.

"We've been doing a lot for each other — trying to help each other out. It's pretty amazing," Viola said. "I

feel like I've known him for years. We have so much in common it's unbelievable.”

Viola, who used to live on East 102 Street, was practically neighbors with Nerenberg before both men moved out of Brooklyn.

“He's lived in three different houses each within half a mile of my house,” Viola said.

Adding to the list of coincidences, their long-lost loved ones were born just a month apart from each other, Audrey in September and Pat in August, 1958. Recently, Viola's mother died at Brookdale Hospital — where Audrey was born. Where Viola's mother is now buried in Pinelawn Cemetery, much of Nerenberg's family members have been laid to rest.

“The more I talk to him it's like we're talking about the old days in Canarsie, it seems,” Viola said. “It's really something how our paths have crossed because of what's happened.”

Since the two met online a year ago, they have begun a support group of over 100 people nationwide who are also searching for a missing family member.

Each have their own web sites (www.patriciaviolamissing.homestead.com and www.angelfire.com/ak/403/page10.html) and send mass e-mails and fliers through regular mail. Pictures of Audrey and Pat are plastered on every piece of mail the friends send out, and Viola has been distributing over 500 CDs featuring the most recent video clips of Pat. He even made a similar CD with old photos of Audrey for Nerenberg.

Just last week, Viola received a promising tip from police in Montana after a truck driver recognized a woman closely resembling Pat hitchhiking at the intersection of US Route 2 and Route 56. He had seen Pat's flier at a diner, proving the mailings have reached as far as the West Coast.

“He had an excellent look at her,” Viola said, adding that he has hope in this latest lead.

The truck driver described the woman as wearing a brown jacket, jeans, sneakers, with a black backpack.

According to Viola, the truck driver said “if it's not her, it's her twin sister.”

But why would Patricia Viola, the mother of 15-year-old Christine and 12-year-old Michael, walk away from her life?

Viola suspects his wife may have had a breakdown or a seizure which could have caused amnesia.

Pat disappeared the day before Valentine's Day, 2001. In the weeks prior, she was showing some signs of stress, and on the day of her disappearance, had uncharacteristically snapped at family members and friends.

She had not been diagnosed with any mental disorders, but her husband fears she may have been approaching a state of depression.

The day before she vanished, Pat's doctor had told her to wait three more months before driving because of her epilepsy, which threw Pat into a downward spiral.

"This really upset her a lot," her husband said.

But the next morning, Pat went on with life as usual, walking to her volunteer job at the local library and returning home in the early afternoon.

In her absence, the house's alarm had gone off, and her mother was automatically telephoned. When Pat returned home, she called her mother at around 11:40 a.m. to let her know things were fine.

"According to her mother everything seemed pretty normal," Viola said.

The alarm was reset from inside the house at around 1:11 p.m. and it is assumed that is when Pat left for the last time.

"She walked out the back door and who knows what happened from there," Viola said.

When Viola came home, arms full of Valentine's gifts, he knew something was wrong. His wife was nowhere to be found.

"I'm looking for a note trying to figure out what's going on," Viola said. That's when he noticed his wife's purse and keys were on the counter.

"She locked herself out, which I thought was very odd," he said.

He wondered if she had gone shopping for a last minute Valentine's gift — friends later told him she wanted to buy a singing monkey in a cage, which was being carried by Rite-Aid drug stores.

He then began to ponder if Pat decided she needed a break from family life and left voluntarily for a few days.

"I was trying to keep things calm even though there was no note and it looked pretty weird what was going on," Viola said.

But by 11:30 p.m., Viola could not deny something things had gone disturbingly awry.

After calling a neighbor to watch the kids, he drove around Bogota with his high-beams on, hoping to find some trace of his missing wife.

“I don’t even remember what time I went to bed that night, if I even did,” he said.

Because Pat had seizures at least once a year, Viola searched the entire house half a dozen times to see if she passed out in a closet while hanging up clothes or in the basement while doing the laundry. He called taxi cab companies. Still, no sign of her.

As for the possibility Pat was taken against her will, “They [the police] really haven’t ruled anything out, there’s just no evidence to point them in the right direction,” Viola said.

“I definitely think she’s alive,” he added.

In the meantime, the Violas are living in a way they never expected — a family suddenly transformed into a single-parent household, with two growing children wondering where their mother may be and if she could still be alive.

Michael, 12, plays floor hockey and basketball in his spare time.

“That kinda takes his mind off things,” Viola said.

He is also an altar server at St. Joseph’s, where Viola is an usher.

Older sibling Christine is a certified baby sitter and is very involved in the church’s youth group, recently giving a testimonial about her mom.

“Christine has gotten a lot closer to God, so have I, but she even more,” Viola said of his 15-year-old daughter. “She’s been to several retreats and has gotten much closer to God and her faith.”

“They’re holding their own,” Viola said of the kids. “They’re doing all right — better than expected.”

The Valentine’s Day gifts from the holiday that almost was are still sitting beneath the mantle in the house. In the two years that have passed, Viola and his children have placed presents for Pat’s birthday and Mother’s Day in the original bag from 2001.

Viola is seeking individual therapy for himself and his kids, since group therapy seemed more of a chore for them than a relief. He also makes sure to bring the kids to the family’s timeshare in the Poconos. Their first trip there had been for their mother’s birthday in the summer of 2000.

Viola keeps his website for Pat up-to-date, with photos, video clips and easy-to-download fliers which can be printed out and disseminated. He is also currently working on compiling a list of hospitals nationwide which may house Jane Does and will continue to work with Nerenberg on HOPETOSUPPORT.

“It helps me to help other people as well and that’s another way that I cope,” Viola said. “It feels good to help people out.”