

Melissa Highsmith, missing for 51 years, found in Fort Worth

BY ALEX KELLER, NICK STARLING
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FORT WORTH (CBSDFW.COM) — It's an early Christmas miracle for one Fort Worth family. A woman who disappeared over five decades ago was found in Fort Worth this week, her family announced Sunday.

Melissa Highsmith went missing when she was kidnapped by a babysitter at her parents' Fort Worth home in 1971. She was just 22 months old at the time of her disappearance.

Over the next 51 years, Highsmith's family and police searched diligently for her, even following up on recent tips about possible sightings in North Carolina.

In the end, however, Melissa was found living in Fort Worth under the name Melanie Walden.



Melissa and her family.WE FOUND MELISSA VIA FACEBOOK

The Highsmith family said that a DNA test ended up being the key that led them to Melissa.

"Our finding Melissa was purely because of DNA, not because of any police or FBI involvement, podcast involvement, or even our family's own private investigations or speculations," Sharon Highsmith wrote on Facebook.

Melissa's parents met her for the first time in over five decades on Saturday.



Melissa Highsmith, middle, with her mother and father in Fort Worth on Nov. 26, 2022. WE FOUND MELISSA VIA FACEBOOK

Making Up For Lost Time

After 51 years of separation, Melissa and her family are making up for lost time and getting to know each other.

"It's good to see what I looked like as a baby," Melissa says as she sits next to her parents, looking at photos of herself she's never seen before.

Melissa, now 53, is back with her parents for the first time since she was kidnapped at just 22 months old.

"It's overwhelming, but at the same time, it's the most wonderful feeling in the world," Melissa says.

Her mother, Atla Apantenc, is still processing it all. "I just couldn't believe it. I thought I'd never see her again."

Jeffrie Highsmith, her father, recalls the moment he heard his daughter had been found. "They said 'Dad, she's alive,' and I started crying... after 51 years, it's so emotional."

The family spent years searching for Melissa and her disappearance has been on their minds for decades, but it wasn't until September this year that a tip came in from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reporting she had possibly been seen in Charleston, South Carolina.

That tip ultimately did not pan out, but it put Melissa's story in the national spotlight and gave the family the strength to keep looking.

Eventually, a DNA test from 23AndMe connected Melissa's children with their family. When her family reached out to her on Facebook, Melissa thought it was a scam at first. "My father texted me on messenger and he told me, 'You know, I've been looking for my daughter for 51 years.'"

This whole time, Melissa never knew her real family was searching for her.

"The person that raised me, I asked her, 'Is there anything you need to tell me?' and it was confirmed that she knew that I was baby Melissa so that just made it real," Melissa said.

She then agreed to take a DNA test and on Thanksgiving, she was reunited with her brother and parents.

A Holiday Miracle

Apantenc said it was the best day of her life. Her brother, Jeff Highsmith, said it was "a dream come true."

Melissa's sister, Victoria, was also overjoyed to see the sister she'd never known. "I'm thankful to have her back," she said. "Welcome back sissy, welcome to the family."

Melissa says she feels the love from a family she never knew but was never that far from. She spent most of her life in Fort Worth. "My heart right now is just full and bursting with just so much emotion. I'm just really, really happy." She says she plans on changing her name back to Melissa.

So far, no information has been released about her kidnapper.

Source: <https://www.cbsnews.com/amp/dfw/news/melissa-highsmith-missing-for-51-years-found-in-fort-worth/#app>