

‘She’s alive’: Family responds after 2001 disappearance of Eden woman takes unexpected turn

After 24 years, Barbara Byrd learns her cousin Michele, missing since 2001, is alive but wishes for privacy. The revelation offers relief but leaves questions.

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EDEN, N.C. — For [24 years](#), Barbara Byrd lived with a question.

Was her cousin gone forever, or still out there somewhere?

On Friday, she got an answer.

“I kind of want to go outside and scream, ‘she’s alive, she’s alive,’” Byrd said.

The Rockingham County Sheriff’s Office confirmed [Michele Hundley Smith](#), who disappeared in December 2001 after leaving her Eden home to go Christmas shopping, has been found alive in North Carolina. Deputies say she is safe but, at her request, her location will not be released. Officials also said no charges are expected.

Smith was 38-year-old mother when she vanished. Her vehicle was never found.

Over the years, her disappearance drew regional and national attention. In 2021, her daughter spoke with WFMY News 2 about growing up without answers, saying the family never stopped hoping for information.

Byrd said the uncertainty shaped nearly a quarter-century of her family’s life.

“For years, we didn’t know if we were grieving or waiting,” she said.

They gave interviews, asked for tips and kept Smith’s name in the public eye. Her case was featured on national television and true crime podcasts. But the central question remained.

What happened in December 2001?

“My biggest question is to her ... what happened all those years ago in December? What made you leave? What happened?” Byrd said.

Learning that her cousin is alive brought overwhelming relief. But Byrd acknowledged that hearing Michele does not want her location shared adds another layer of emotion.

“I understand and respect that she doesn’t want any of us to contact her,” Byrd said. “I’m not angry.”

Instead, she said she is choosing gratitude.

“The biggest answer I had today was she was alive. Nothing else matters right at this moment,” she said.

Byrd said she never believed her cousin was dead.

“I never thought Michelle was dead. I knew she was alive. It’s just a feeling that I had my whole life,” she said.

Years ago, Smith’s youngest brother asked Byrd to promise they would find her. He has since died.

“He asked me to promise that we would find her,” Byrd said. “I’m going to say this out loud, she’s OK, Brian.”

While she respects Smith’s request for privacy, Byrd said she hopes one day Michele may choose to reach out, especially to her brothers and daughters.

“I would love to hear you say I’m OK, but when I’m ready, I’ll talk to you,” Byrd said.

Smith’s daughter, Amanda, told WFMY News 2 she is still processing the news, having only recently been informed. She plans to release a statement in the coming days and thanked those who supported the family over the years.

For Byrd, the mystery of 2001 remains unresolved. But after 24 years of not knowing, one truth now outweighs everything else.

“She’s alive,” she said.