

Daughter finds missing Houston mom after more than 50 years

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FOX 26's Damali Keith caught up with Cynthia Wardell in northeast Houston, where the family received bittersweet news. Her mom is deceased but was given the name of the cemetery where her mother is buried.

HOUSTON - A [Houston](#) woman who's been looking for her missing mother for more than 50 years is finally getting answers.

Patricia Thomas-Wardell was just 18 years old when she went missing way back in 1970. At that time the Beltway 8 Toll Road didn't exist. Her daughter Cynthia was just a year old, and she's been searching for her mother her entire life. Now DNA confirms a woman found dead in the woods near what is now the Beltway, was confirmed to be Cynthia's missing mother.

"It's been just like a bad nightmare," the grieving daughter says.

THE MISSING: What happens when a loved one goes missing?

FOX 26 Anchor Kaitlin Monte explains the pain families of those missing go through when their loved one goes missing.

With no real memories of her mom, Cynthia has been clinging to photos of her mother, preserving old newspaper clippings about her disappearance, and holding on to stacks of letters, like the one she showed me from *Unsolved Mysteries*, after years of begging for help to find her mom, to anyone who would listen.

"As I became an adult I was able to hire private detectives and things like that," Cynthia explained. "My family has been scammed by people who contacted us saying they have information about where my mother is, and they ask for money."

MORE MISSING PERSONS COVERAGE

Several family members gave DNA samples to Houston Police investigators in 2016 in hopes of locating Patricia.

"We're able to solve more missing person cases with the use of DNA, familial DNA." Houston Police Department Missing Persons Detective Darrin Buse explains

This past Friday, Detective Buse told the family DNA confirmed Patricia had been buried minutes from where they live, in a county cemetery as a Jane Doe, for years.

"It's hard to understand. It's hard to wrap your head around after all these years. She's been so close all this time," her brother Raymond Thomas, 82, who was a TSU student when his baby sister went missing. "It's been very, very difficult."

"It's been lots of nightmares, you know, wondering where she is," Patricia's 75-year-old sister Maxine McNeely added. "It's just been horrible."

The Missing: Cold case investigators working to close unsolved crimes

More than 250,000 murder cases across the country are considered cold, which doesn't even include those of missing persons, which is why people like Alex Baber and his wife J-Lynn have devoted their lives to fill in the gap.

"Even though it's a bad outcome, it's still a good outcome," 72-year-old Leroy Thomas concluded. "Now we know for sure where she is."

After more than 50 years, although it's her grave they're visiting, Patricia's siblings and her baby girl are the closest they've been to her in decades, but they were met by a locked gate at the cemetery entrance.

"I'm just ready to go in," Cynthia said. "The lock is like torturing me right now."

When Harris County found out, they immediately sent someone to let the family in. The key to unfasten the padlock couldn't turn, and the gates couldn't swing open fast enough.

"I'm glad to know she's here," Cynthia said. "I can't wait to just be next to her."

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There at her mom's grave for the very first time, 52 years of emotion spilled out.

"And now maybe I can really and truly be happy and that's what I'm trying to get to because I'm all messed up right now," Cynthia said tearfully.

Turns out, that after Patricia went missing in 1970, her skeletal remains were found in the woods near CE King Parkway in January 1971. Somehow it wasn't put together that it was the missing 18-year-old until now by a Missing Persons investigator, who has his fair share of cold and new cases.

"We work north of 9,000 cases a year," Det. Buse explained.

How public interest, awareness can help solve missing person cases

Unsolved missing person cases are getting new attention across America, as the Gabby Petito case proves how powerful public interest can be and helping to solve them. We have been speaking to local experts and parents about how Gabby's case has given new hope to those still waiting to find their loved ones. Simply sharing a missing person's flier that pops up can have such a great impact does that can reach millions of people all over the world.

So, how did she disappear? Cynthia says her father was questioned by police but was never charged but is determined to find out.

"The person who took my mom away, they ruined my whole life," she said. "I want my mom to know I'm going to find out who did this to her, and they will pay."

Meantime, the family is giving thanks for the gift of finally knowing.

"It means the world to me," Cynthia concluded.

RELATED: Detective uses crime fighting tool to track down his birth mother

The Harris County Sheriff's Office is now investigating the murder of Patricia Thomas-Wardell in hopes of bringing her killer to justice even after all these years. The family and Det. Buse has hopes that this story will bring encouragement to others who have missing loved ones.

"Families can come out and talk about their cases with detectives and other families of the missing," he explained. "If you haven't yet reported your missing person you can generate a case right there. We can collect DNA. It will really be helpful."

If you have someone who's missing the detective also wants you to know that May 14, 2022, is 'Missing in Harris County Day' from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Children's Assessment Center at 2500 Bolsover in Houston.

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