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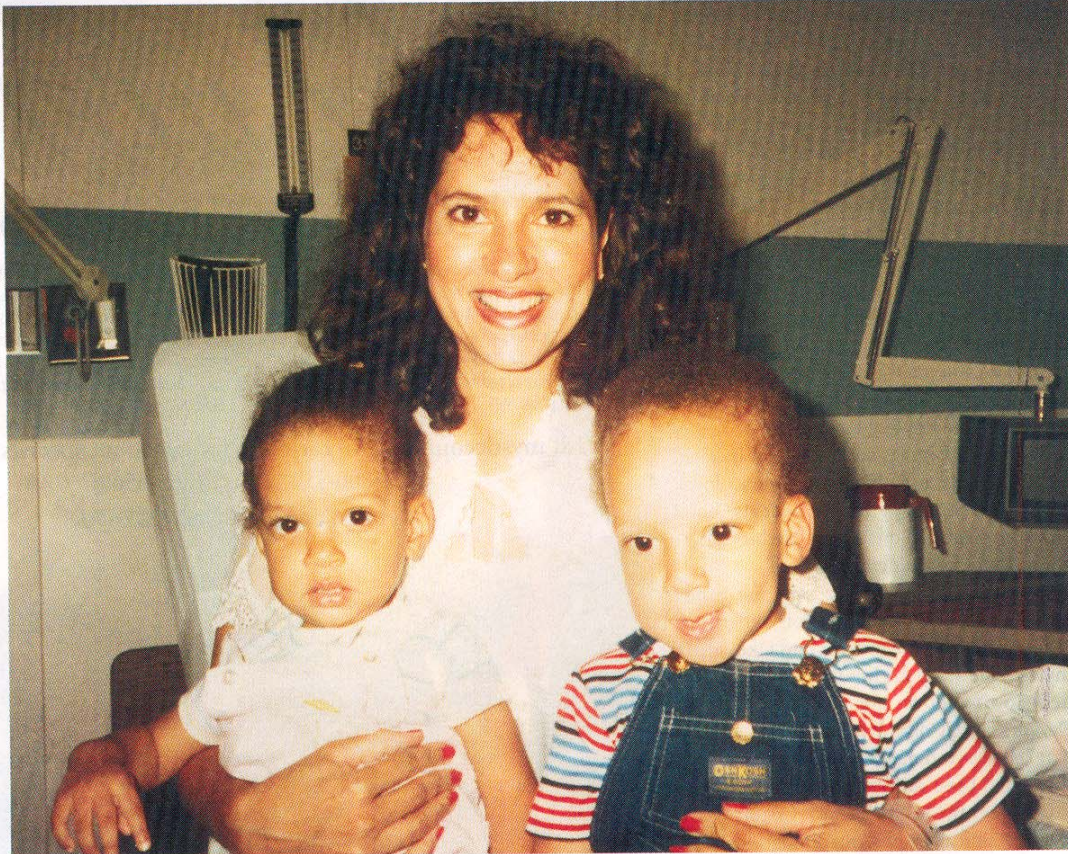
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By Lisa Peterson

# 20 Years Gone

Regina Brown's disappearance still baffles Newtown police.



**Brown with two of her three children, Reina, left, and Nicholas. They were raised by her parents.**

Every police detective has a haunting case that never goes away. For two retired Newtown detectives, Regina Brown is their ghost.

On March 26, 1987, Brown, a 35-year-old American Airlines flight attendant, drove to LaGuardia Airport from her home in Newtown to put her infant child and a babysitter on a plane to Texas. She was sending them to her parents' home, where she had just sent her other children, Nicholas, 4 and Reina, 3. After she kissed her 18-month-old daughter, Ashley, goodbye, she simply vanished.

A few days earlier, Regina had confided to her friend Hope Lambert that she feared her husband, Willis Brown, Jr. then a 52-year-old pilot, also with American Airlines.

The couple's five-year marriage was about to end in divorce. She instructed Lambert to notify authorities if she didn't get in touch with her once she arrived in Texas in the coming days.

On the night after Regina was last seen at LaGuardia, Newtown Police received a call at approximately 2 a.m. from her next-door neighbor complaining that her dog had been barking for hours.

"The police told us they didn't respond to barking-dog complaints in the middle of the night," recalled the neighbor recently. "It was a shrilling bark. It was unusual because the dog never barked." This event later provided police with the first clue, a starting-off point for the investigation into the disappearance of Regina Brown.

"We should have sent someone to the house on the

COURTESY OF CARLIOTTA COOPER

barking dog complaint—it might have made a huge difference,” says retired Police Chief Michael DeJoseph.

Indeed, the complaint should have touched off an alarm somewhere within the department. Four months earlier, detectives there had been presented with an identical scenario: a missing flight attendant, mother of three, who was getting a divorce from her pilot husband.

That was the case of Helle Crafts, the blonde Danish Pan Am flight attendant whose fate is well-known to residents of Connecticut. Her dismembered body was disposed of along the shore of Lake Zoar with the grizzly aid of a woodchipper. Her Eastern Airlines pilot husband, Richard Crafts, was later convicted of her murder.

The Crafts’ probable-cause hearing, giving the public its first dose of the sensational details, concluded two weeks before Regina Brown, an African-American of Creole descent, disappeared.

“When the first call came in on this other missing flight attendant, our first response was ‘Oh no, here we go again,’” retired Newtown Detective Sergeant Robert Tvardzik says.

The local detectives were determined to investigate this case by the book since they were under scrutiny for mishandling the Crafts investigation, eventually having the case removed from their jurisdiction. They knew every move they made on the Brown case was going to be looked at with a magnifying glass.

A week after the barking-dog incident, an official missing-person report was filed by a neighbor, Linda Van Horn, who had entered the house and noticed Regina’s purse, make-up bag and a \$1,000 check left behind. Willis Brown called police later in the day to report his estranged wife missing after her employer notified him she had not shown up for her last two flights.

During an interview with police, Willis Brown suggested they look for his wife’s missing car in New York City in an area known to be frequented by drug dealers. Soon afterward, her Honda Accord, with two child seats still strapped in the back seat, was found on 104th Street in Manhattan, its keys in the ignition.

“There was a lot more personal domestic history in the Brown case than in the Crafts case,” Tvardzik says. Because of Regina’s calls to a battered-women’s shelter, Willis’ previous arrest for assault, and a restraining order based on testimony from Regina that on several occasions her husband had tried to strangle her—once to the point of unconsciousness in front of their children—Willis Brown became the prime suspect in her dis-

appearance.

Police searched the Brown residence on Whippoorwill Hill Road. They found no evidence of a crime being committed there—no blood, no struggle, nothing out of the ordinary except a few deer hairs, which police speculated the dog may have brought inside. Some months later, Newtown police conducted a search of the area surrounding the Brown residence with help from Connecticut State Police dogs. But that search, too, turned up no evidence.

“In retrospect, there was a lot more we should have done, but the resources, the manpower and even the forensic tests weren’t available back then,” says DeJoseph.

Police continued their efforts, but several months after the search, Willis Brown told them in a taped interview that he was done with the questioning, and that detectives had to work through his lawyer. He also said that he would not agree to take a polygraph test because “it didn’t do Richard Crafts any good.”

In the woodchipper murder case, Crafts passed his polygraph exam.

Six months after Regina’s disappearance, in September 1987, a divorce hearing to determine custody of the Brown children and allocation of assets began in Danbury Superior Court. The procedure, which was to last 25 days, quickly took on the appearance of a criminal case trying to connect Willis Brown to Regina Brown’s disappearance.

Judge Howard J. Moraghan, who had also presided over the Crafts murder trial until he ordered a change of venue, says now that he had never seen a divorce hearing quite like it during all his years on the bench.

“I was accused by him [Willis Brown] of conducting a murder trial,” Moraghan says.

Testimony was heard that placed Willis Brown in Newtown on the day of Regina’s disappearance. In addition, his failure to account for most of his whereabouts that day, as well as a bizarre house visit a week earlier, in violation of the restraining order, to drop off a bag of dog food he purchased on a whim for a dog he didn’t own only served to fuel speculation.

In Moraghan’s 43-page decision, the longest he’d ever written, he stated, “He [Willis Brown] had physically and mentally abused her and reduced her existence to a living nightmare.” Moraghan also characterized Regina Brown’s life with her husband as one of “figurative bondage” and noted that she lived in “terror.”

In granting custody of the children to Regina’s parents, Moraghan said he was most

troubled by the way Willis Brown continued to deny paternity of his children, despite blood tests proving otherwise.

"Whatever happened to her, I hope she didn't suffer, because she had suffered so much already," says Moraghan now.

Almost a year after Regina's disappearance, in March 1988, Willis Brown's stepmother, Margaret Brown, was found dead of gunshot wounds in the Albany, N.Y., apartment she shared with Willis Brown Sr. The medical examiner there ruled the death a suicide. A year after that, Margaret Brown's son from a previous marriage called Newtown police to report a strange discovery among his late mother's possessions, a hand-drawn map of what appeared to be an area on Block Island. On the map were scrawled the words, "Regina, O God."

Willis Brown owned The Moped Man, a moped-rental business on Block Island. Based on the map, police obtained a search warrant for a location where Willis Brown, his father and stepmother spent the summer of 1987 shortly after Regina's disappearance. This search, complete with dogs from the Rhode Island State Police, drew media attention but nothing else.

"We were so sure that we would find her," DeJoseph recalls. "But then again," he adds, "the dogs could have missed her. She still

may be out there somewhere."

Tvardzik continued to work the case for years after Regina Brown's disappearance, even enlisting the help of FBI profiler Gregg O. McCrary. He continued to call Regina's family, friends and co-workers with periodic updates.

"Despite limited manpower, I was always trying to recontact people, to keep tabs on the case," he says.

In 1995, Regina Brown was officially declared dead in Newtown's probate court, listing March 26, 1987—the last day she was seen alive—as her date of death.

Hoping to rekindle a cold case, Tvardzik traveled to Block Island in 2003 to pass out fliers and talk to locals. But no one seemed interested anymore, he says.

"Perhaps we weren't persistent enough," Tvardzik says. "But then again, the case didn't get enough attention in the press back then either. If the Crafts case and Regina's disappearance happened today, Fox News would be camped out in our parking lot."

David J. Krajicek, a former Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism teacher and author of *Scooped! Media Miss Real Story on Crime While Chasing, Sex, Sleaze and Celebrities*, is an expert on how the media these days drives law enforcement's reaction to crime. His take on the

Crafts and Brown cases is that "the Brown case would still get just lip service and then the media would focus on the missing young, white, blonde woman."

"Crime is all about politics, and politics can play a huge role in decisions about which crimes will get the full attention of police," Krajicek adds. "Elected officials can feel increased pressure from the public to solve certain crimes—a high-profile murder, a child's disappearance, a celebrity crime. They in turn put pressure on law enforcers. These cases, almost invariably, are those that have drawn the white-hot lights of the media. That is how and why some cases languish and others move to the top of the law-enforcement priority list."

The Regina Brown case is still an "open" investigation. Just before his recent retirement from law enforcement after 33 years, Tvardzik, with evidence officer Sgt. Darlene Froehlich, reviewed the case notes and organized several boxes of materials. Froehlich, one of the few people left at the department who witnessed some of Regina's domestic history, holds the key to those boxes locked away in the basement of the Newtown Police headquarters.

What might prompt another resurrection of this case? Says Krajicek, "Someone, somewhere, says her end was not just. We call it criminal justice, don't we?"