

POLICE DON'T BELIEVE THIS WORKING MOM DEVOTED TO HER KIDS WOULD HAVE VOLUNTARILY

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GULFPORT -- To give a tip

Anyone with information about the disappearance of Robin Michelle "Robbie" Smith is asked to call:

- Gulfport Police Department: 868-5959.
- CrimeStoppers: 1-800-433-TIPS (8477).

The petite single mother who disappeared when she left work late one night at Memorial Hospital in 1998 has been missing 10 years.

Missing-person reports listed her as Robin Michelle Smith, but to friends and family she was Robbie, the youngest of 10 siblings, mother of two children and a floor clerk at a nurses' station. She vanished without a trace Sept. 2, 1998, four days before her 29th birthday.

"We really want to give her family some answers," said Detective Lt. Craig Petersen of the Gulfport Police Department.

Her disappearance is under investigation as a possible homicide.

"People reported missing usually return home or call someone after a few days or weeks," Petersen said, calling it out of character for Smith to disappear. "She is classified as a low-risk victim. She had a stable job, children and a large family. The picture painted of her is not someone who would disappear."

Leads in the case have grown cold, but that could change.

"Maybe somebody saw something back in 1998 that didn't strike them as important then but maybe it would be important to us now," said Petersen. He has taken over the case since the lead investigator retired.

Smith's relatives want to know what happened to the loved one they remember as easygoing, dependable and friendly.

"All the nieces and nephews from the siblings just loved her," said Alma "Cookie" Holloway, a sister, of Gulfport.

"When she wasn't working she was with her kids or the nieces and nephews. She would take them to the Coliseum to hockey games. She would take them to the grocery store. She could take a bunch of kids anywhere and they would mind her."

Smith's children were about 5 and 8 when she vanished.

Relatives said Smith worried about her children when she wasn't with them.

"If one of the siblings watched the kids, she would call to check on them," Holloway said. "We would tell her, 'they're fine. Don't worry.'

There's no way she would leave her children."

Smith had broken up with her boyfriend two weeks earlier and had moved in with her mother, Thelma Smith, in Pass Christian. She went to work that afternoon with a grocery list in her purse. Her mother needed the items to care for Robbie Smith's grandfather, who also lived in the home.

Robbie Smith planned to stop by the Sav-A-Center in Long Beach after work. Investigators found no evidence she ever made it to the store.

What they do know is she called her mother from the hospital to check on the children at the end of her shift. Smith and a coworker walked together to the hospital parking lot around 11:25 p.m. Smith got in her black 1997 Mitsubishi Galant with tinted windows and Hancock County tag and drove away.

The 120-pound, 5-foot-3 woman was black with a light complexion, brown eyes and black hair. She was wearing blue pants, a white blouse and a white lab coat.

Police issued a missing-person bulletin and posted fliers in stores. Family members feared foul play. Police began to agree. They considered Smith's ex-boyfriend a person of interest, but found no evidence against him, Petersen said.

Someone, perhaps a stranger, could have been hiding in the back seat of her car and abducted her.

Smith's car turned up eight weeks later, Oct. 28. A Gulfport police officer who lived at Southern Pines Apartments on St. Charles Street noticed the Mitsubishi in the parking lot. The car was backed in to a parking space. Police canvassed the area, but no one claimed to have seen her or to know her.

A crime-scene unit processed the car for evidence.

"Some physical evidence was collected and it is preserved for DNA testing," Petersen said. "We have nothing to test it against. There's no evidence to point to one particular person or to what happened. She just basically disappeared."

Smith's children, now teenagers, live with their father.

Since her disappearance her mother's home was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina and one of her sisters and some other relatives have died.

"Talking about her and what may have happened is more than my mother can handle," Holloway said, "and I miss her so much. My sister was my best friend."

Stanley Vance, who was lead detective in the case until his retirement in April 2003, has told police officials he's willing to help with the Smith case if new leads come in.

"Out of all the cases I worked in 28 years, it's the one that sticks in my mind," Vance said. "I kept the file on my desk for nearly five years. I picked it up to several times a week. Even now there's hardly a day goes by that I don't think about it. I run different scenarios through my mind, trying to figure it out."

Vance, now a security officer at the federal courthouse in Gulfport, said he became convinced early on Smith wasn't the type to disappear willingly.

"Everybody I ever talked to said the same things about her: She was a good person, a loving mother. She really loved her kids," said Vance.

He agrees with Petersen that detectives need new information for a major break in the case