

Twenty-five years ago, as Hurricane Andrew bore down on northeast Mississippi, a teenage girl vanished without a trace in the town of Tupelo. She wasn't a casualty of Mother Nature. She was, according to police, a victim of a cold and calculating individual who took advantage of the chaos caused by the storm.

The hurricane, which was downgraded to a tropical storm by the time it reached Tupelo, left no permanent mark on the city, which is best known as the birthplace of Elvis Presley. However, the disappearance of 13-year-old Leigh Marine Occhi did, and it still hangs like a thick cloud over the city.

For more than two decades, authorities have dissected and combed through the evidence. Theories and suspicions abound, but the teenager has yet to be found.

Still, there is hope for resolution. The case is now being analyzed in a new podcast, titled "13: The Search for Leigh Occhi," which is being released episodically by local NBC affiliate WTVA News.

"There's a lot of apparent coincidence in this tale," WTVA's Jason Lee Usry says in the preview episode of the podcast, which can be found on iTunes or SoundCloud. "A lot of coincidence, a great deal of mysterious behavior, and somewhere within one of the players in this story, a terrifying level of cruelty."

The case, which this author first covered on the Criminal Report Daily blog nine years ago, began on Aug. 27, 1992. As torrential rains and gusting winds began to hit Tupelo, the alarm clock at the Yarbrough home went off at about 6:45 a.m.

According to Vickie Yarborough, she and her daughter, Leigh Occhi, had slept in the same bed the previous night because the girl was afraid of storms. The blond-haired, bright-eyed Leigh had recently celebrated her thirteenth birthday and was supposed to go to an open house at Tupelo Middle School with her grandmother that afternoon.

Yarborough had recently separated from Leigh's stepfather, Barney, and she told detectives it was just her and her daughter on that rainy Thursday morning. According to the police report, Yarborough said her daughter had been alive and well when she left for work at about 7:40 a.m. that morning.

Yarborough later said she'd heard there were tornado watches in the area and decided to call from work and check on Leigh at about 8:30 a.m. Nobody answered. Concern turned to worry, prompting Yarborough to drive home, according to the report.

"The door was unlocked, and I opened the house and it was all dark, so I didn't see Leigh anywhere," Yarborough told detectives. "I said, 'Leigh,' like that, and nobody answered me, and then I went in."

She added, "I saw blood right there splattered on the walls and then I screamed ... and dialed 911."

At about 9:00 a.m., Yarborough made a frantic 911 call to the Tupelo Police Department. She requested immediate assistance at her home on a cul-de-sac on the city's west side, telling the dispatcher that her daughter was missing and that she'd found traces of blood inside the house.

When police arrived on the scene, they observed blood stains in the hallway and bathroom, and a bloody stain containing strands of hair on a door frame facing the kitchen area. Authorities said there were indications that someone had attempted to clean up the blood in the bathroom. In Leigh's room, a bloody blue nightgown and bra were discovered. The only items missing were the teen's shoes, reading glasses and underclothes.

There was no sign of forced entry into the house, police said. Based on the evidence, authorities surmised Leigh had been killed inside.

The next day, the leading headline in The Daily Journal read, "Federal Troops Ordered to Fla." A much smaller headline, within a subsection of the paper, read, "13-year-old Tupelo Girl Reported Missing."

Police conducted multiple ground and aerial searches, but found no sign of Leigh. The case was coming to an abrupt standstill when, on Sept. 9, 1992, Yarborough contacted police and told them she'd received a package in the mail containing Leigh's missing eyeglasses. They'd been delivered in an 8-inch envelope, addressed in block letters to "B Yarborough." The return address was the same as the mailing address.

Authorities determined the package had been mailed from Booneville, a small city located roughly 30 miles north of Tupelo. The envelope was sent to the state crime lab in Jackson for handwriting analysis and DNA testing, but nothing of evidentiary value was found.

According to Tupelo Police Chief Bart Aguirre, investigators became suspicious and asked Yarborough to take a lie detector test. She was polygraphed three different times — once by a local polygraph examiner and twice by the FBI — and "failed it three times," the chief said in a 2009 interview with this author.

Yarborough was named a person of interest at the time, but no charges were ever filed against her.

In 2009, the same year the police chief revealed the alleged results of the lie detector tests to this author, Yarborough said she was well aware they'd considered her a person of interest.

"That has never been a bother to me," she told this author.

"It's never been about me. It's about finding Leigh, and I didn't care and I [still] don't care what anyone says about any of it ... I have never not cooperated with anybody [and] I am not fazed by what they say."

Detectives investigated Leigh's step-father, but ultimately cleared him, police said. Other suspicions — directed at a man who was known to Leigh's family and later incarcerated for similar crimes — failed to pan out.

Despite the police department's belief that Leigh was murdered, her mother was unwilling, in 2009, to give up the hope that her daughter was still alive.

"I am not going to accept anything for sure," she said. "I am not going to do that ... I have to keep focused on factual things ... or I wouldn't be able to cope very well."

It's unclear if she still holds that belief. Attempts by HuffPost to reach her were unsuccessful.

Leigh's father, Donald Occhi, says he believes his daughter is dead. A master sergeant in the Army, he and Yarborough had met and married while serving together in the military. Leigh was their only child. When the marriage ended, Yarborough left the service and made her way to Mississippi, while Donald Occhi was transferred to another base.

"I want to live to see her body located, so that I can see that she is properly buried," he said. "Then I will smile when the son of a bitch who did this dies in the Mississippi state death chamber."

In the last two decades, there have been plenty of "maybes" and "what ifs," but the complete portrait of the crime has remained blurred. Now, 25 years after the fact, WTVA News promises to "reveal new twists, turns and developments" in the long-dormant case, though it's unclear whether there will be any answers.

Anyone with information in the disappearance of Leigh Occhi is asked to contact the Tupelo Police Department at 662-841-6491