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Without a trace

By MARGARET BAKER

BILOXI — My-Dung Thi Tran was looking forward to a trip to Vietnam to visit relatives the same year she disappeared without a trace.

The 52-year-old mother of four vanished shortly after arriving by bus in South Mississippi to play baccarat at a Biloxi casino. She'd planned to stay here a couple of weeks, then return home to Pensacola.

On Oct. 3, 2008, Tran called one of her children on her cell phone. She said she'd been gambling at Beau Rivage Resort & Casino and was about to catch a taxi to the IP Casino Resort & Spa.

Biloxi police detective Christopher De Back said investigators tracked Tran's cell-phone use. The last call she made was around 3 a.m. Oct. 4, 2008. He said investigators were unable to track Tran through video-surveillance footage at area casinos because the family had waited to see if she'd return home before calling police a couple weeks later.

"It wasn't unheard-of for her to come to the casinos for a week or two," De Back said. "The night of Oct. 3, 2008, is the last time the family heard from her. She later made a call to a friend and then it's like she fell off the face of the earth. Because she didn't use credit cards there was no way for us to try and track her, other than through her cell phone."

Biloxi police called on gaming officials in Louisiana, another area Tran reportedly liked to visit. Police sent information on Tran to see if there had been activity on any of her casino player's cards throughout the area or in other states; there hadn't.

"We checked with the taxi business and they had no record of anyone picking her up," De Back said. "As far as we know she never made it to that casino (IP Casino). We had a tip that she might have relocated to Lake Charles, La., but so far we have nothing to suggest she's there. Right now we don't know what happened, and we have no real evidence at this point to suggest foul play other than how unusual it is for her not to get in touch with her family. They were very close, from what we understand."

Investigators determined the last call she made, to an acquaintance, went unanswered. The man later told police she was trying to get a ride.

For Tran's family, getting some answers can't come soon enough. She left behind three sons, including a 14-year-old; a daughter and granddaughter; as well as a long-time companion and father of one of her children. None of it makes sense to her relatives.

Prior to her disappearance, Tran's children said, she was enjoying her retirement since she sold a nail salon she'd owned for years in Pensacola. She had money to spend and usually made her trips to South Mississippi with a good bit of cash in hand. She didn't use credit cards.

"After she retired, she just wanted to rest," her son Vu Tran said. "She liked to go to the casinos. She was very friendly. She'd talk to anybody. She'd usually stay two weeks and come back home and then go back to Biloxi again."

Since her disappearance, two of her sons have stayed in their family home in Florida. Vu Tran said that's about to change because the home is now in foreclosure. He said he and his brother are unable to keep up the mortgage payments.

"We keep getting notes in the mail," he said. "They haven't told us to get out yet. We know it's going to happen."

That's just one of the issues facing Tran's children. They worry constantly about whether their mother is alive or dead.

"Holidays are hard," Vu Tran said. "Before, we all stayed at home (in Florida) and had Thanksgiving and Christmas together. Now she's not here, and it's so hard. We just want to know if she's OK."

"We try to stay positive and hope that nothing unfortunate happened to her," Vu Tran said. "Hopefully, we'll find her safe and sound, and she'll be able to return to her family. She never even got to meet her granddaughter."

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