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Democracy Dies in Darkness

STYLE

After 16 years and a mystery caller, D.C. homicide commander still haunted by case

By Avis Thomas-Lester

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The first few times the man with the raspy voice called the D.C. police homicide branch looking for Sgt. Michael Farish, he was out. The man left messages indicating that Farish should call him back, but left no number.

Then, a few weeks after the first call, the man caught Farish at his desk. He wanted to talk about Dana Vonde Chisholm, 25, who had been found strangled in her basement apartment near Rock Creek Park.

“He said I knew why she was dead — because of her lifestyle,” Farish recalled. She went out to clubs, drank, had sex with a variety of men, and the caller wanted Farish to share those details with reporters covering the woman’s slaying.

Instead, Farish fed reporters a story about a naive young woman.

“I lied, I admit it,” Farish said. “He was so adamant that I put those details out there that I put out just the opposite hoping to draw him out.”

Two months and three very short, very testy conversations later, the man asked Farish to meet him to talk about the Chisholm case. Farish checked his gun, climbed into his unmarked police cruiser and drove alone to the spot east of the river that the caller had specified, hoping to meet a killer.

For hours, he sat in the cruiser and drank coffee, keeping his eyes peeled for approaching pedestrians and vehicles. His heart rate surged a little with each car that passed as the drizzly afternoon darkened into a wet evening.

“I waited for, like, three hours, and he never showed up,” Farish said. “He never called again. I would love to talk to him. I’ve been waiting for him to call back for 16 years.”

Farish had been assigned to homicide as a supervisor for three years in 1995 when Chisholm was killed in the basement apartment she rented in the 3800 block of Argyle Terrace NW. Her nude body was found lying in the hallway of the littered apartment, a cord wrapped around her neck.

In the years that have since passed, Farish, who has served as a lieutenant in the homicide unit and is now its commander, has supervised hundreds of investigations and been partly responsible for untold numbers of people getting locked up for murder.

Yet, when he looks back on almost 20 years of chasing killers, none of the cases has affected him as deeply as HO#95-258, Chisholm's slaying.

"To answer the question 'Is this the one I'd like to see closed before I leave?' — yes," said Farish, 49. "Part of that is because I would like to have some type of involvement in it. Part of it is because of the calls from the guy, the challenge to me, personally, when he called."

When he took over the homicide branch's cold case squad in 2007, two years before he was named commander of the entire unit, Farish pushed to get some of the older cold cases reexamined.

"One of the first things I did was retrieve the Chisholm file and start reading it," Farish said. "I had left it when I left homicide for a few years, so I immediately wanted to see it when I came back."

When he was named commander in 2009, a couple of detectives in the cold case squad who knew of his interest in the case offered to put fresh eyes on it.

"The case had been lying dormant for a while," Farish said. "In most homicide cold cases — 75 percent at minimum — the suspect is named in the file. They were interviewed or someone said, 'You might want to take a look at this person.' I think her killer is named in there somewhere, and over the last 16 years, we've missed it. Maybe if we shake the tree now, something will fall out."

Feb. 27, 1995

Farish was in a training class for the department's new online case management system when his pager buzzed about 6 p.m. on Feb. 27, 1995. He called back to learn that his squad had drawn a case — a young woman found dead.

As he floored his gray Plymouth Gran Fury, lights flashing and sirens blaring, Farish contemplated what he might find at the crime scene. After spending years on patrol and as a member of the tactical undercover unit, he had been sent to homicide as a supervisor without ever doing any time as a detective. He had always reveled in the job of supervising detectives, as depressing as it sometimes was.

He reviewed the protocol he employed at every scene, starting with an evaluation of the body: “Position: How the body lay, how did it fall, was it posed? Was there a bullet wound? If so, was it an entrance wound or an exit wound? If there was a knife wound, was it from a small blade or a large blade?”

The killing had occurred on a tucked-away street in the upscale Crestwood area. Former FBI director William Sessions lived four doors down. Sen. Jay Rockefeller’s estate backed up to the property. A foreign embassy owned a house a few lots over. Not your typical D.C. crime scene.

Pretty and vivacious, Chisholm had moved to the District from her home town of Rock Hill, S.C., about 18 months before she was killed. She was seeking new opportunities, if not fame and fortune. She aspired to be a professional singer.

Four months before she died, Chisholm had taken a job as a secretary at the Hudson Institute, a policy think tank on 15th Street NW. She had a reputation for being smart and resourceful but also for sometimes showing up late and seemingly upset, or not showing at all.

“She was a bright young woman with such intelligence and a thousand-watt smile,” said Michael J. Horowitz, her boss at the institute. “At the same time, I had a sense that there was some troublesome aspect to her life.”

Police had been called to Chisholm’s home by her landlord, Cynthia Ford, who lived upstairs with her teenage son. She had gone in to check on Chisholm about 6 p.m. after her office called to say she hadn’t shown up for work.

Ford has since moved out of state. Other neighbors said they never noticed anything amiss with Chisholm.

“Dana was a very nice girl,” said one neighbor. “I would see her out getting into her car as she prepared to go to work. . . . We were shocked when it happened.”

The current owner said she did not realize what had happened there when she bought the house.

“It was not disclosed to me,” she said. “If I had known a woman had been killed here, I never would have bought the house. I found out when [a boy in the neighborhood] said, ‘You bought the house where that lady was murdered.’ ”

Chisholm’s killing was shocking, even in a city then nicknamed the “Murder Capital of the World.” The year she died, the D.C. police homicide division investigated 361 new killings, 118 fewer than the 479 that were reported in 1991, the peak year of the city’s epidemic of violence. Last year, by contrast, the District logged 132 slayings.

The crack epidemic was showing signs of slowing in 1995, but the drug was still cutting a swath of death through some neighborhoods. The abiding concerns of police and politicians were drugs, guns and the homicides that resulted from both.

Not surprisingly, the killing of a young woman in a house backing up to the property of a multimillionaire left a lot of people feeling vulnerable. An autopsy determined that Chisholm had died of asphyxiation by strangulation. She had been dead about 20 hours when her body was found.

As Farish's squad investigated, they turned up surprising details about Chisholm's behavior. She had sung in the church choir and been a cheerleader in high school, but she had also had a drug problem and had run away from home. She frequented bars and ran and answered personal ads, police said.

"She lived two very separate lives," Farish said. "We all think about the small-town girl who comes to the big city, meets predators who prey on her and that leads to her demise. But that is not the case here. Dana was very savvy."

Chisholm kept records of her encounters with men, police said. Detectives found telephone numbers and even workplace references. Her dates ranged from 50-something married businessmen who lived in the outer suburbs to sports-car-driving club-hoppers to police officers.

"She ran those 976-DATE-type ads," Farish said. "We talked to several of the men. She'd sleep with these guys then say things like, 'My roommate moved out, and I could really use some help with the rent.' It wasn't blackmail, exactly, but the message was definitely that it might be in their best interests to pay her."

A week before she died, Chisholm called and told her parents, Jogary and Johnny Chisholm, that she planned to come home within two weeks because she had something she wanted to tell them. When the weekend came and went and they didn't hear from her, they didn't worry. She lived an active life.

Then, just after 1 a.m. on Monday, Feb. 27, three hours after Chisholm was strangled and 17 hours before her body would be found, her parents were awakened by a phone call.

"A man said: 'Is this Mr. Chisholm? Is this Mrs. Chisholm? Your daughter is in jail,'" Johnny Chisholm recalled. "This is the Washington, D.C., police department. This is Lt. Lewis Douglass. Your daughter is one of the women we arrested tonight, and we locked her up."

Johnny Chisholm said the man's tone didn't sound appropriate for a police officer delivering such bad news.

"He said: 'She didn't want me to call you at first, but I changed her mind. She was pretty upset, but I talked to her. We had a sting operation going at the Omni Hotel, and your daughter was one of the women we arrested for prostitution. She'll be arraigned in the morning. She should be out sometime later tomorrow. Don't worry. She'll call you.'"

Johnny Chisholm said the man seemed "excited" and "edgy" and spoke loudly. Detectives later discovered that the call was made from a pay phone at Fourth Street and Massachusetts Avenue NW, a few blocks from D.C. police headquarters.

Later that day, the Chisholms called the number the caller had left. When they asked for Lt. Lewis Douglass, Officer Lewis Douglass answered. Douglass said he had not made the call and wondered how the man had gotten his office number. Unbeknown to the Chisholms, Douglass had met Dana Chisholm weeks earlier when she reported the theft of her television to police. Detectives on the Chisholm case believe that the officer gave her a business card, which she kept along with many others. The killer found it as he ransacked her place and, playing police officer, assumed Douglass's identity for the call.

Johnny Chisholm, 60, said he told Douglass he had been unable to reach his daughter.

Douglass asked where she worked. “I said, ‘I don’t want you to call her job,’ ” Chisholm said. “He said: ‘Mr. Chisholm, don’t you want to find your daughter? I’m not going to get her in trouble on her job.’ ”

Meanwhile, the Chisholms tried to reach their daughter. “Her boss was rude,” Johnny Chisholm said “He said, ‘No, she’s not here,’ and hung up the telephone.”

Then they called a friend. “She’s not here, and she didn’t call in,” the co-worker said. “I don’t know why she didn’t call in.”

That afternoon, the Chisholms called Douglass back. He had gone home but had left a note on his desk indicating that he had been to their daughter’s apartment, leaving business cards on her door and car when she did not answer his knocks.

“I never heard from Mr. Douglass again,” Johnny Chisholm said. The D.C. police department refused to allow a reporter to speak with Douglass, now a captain recently assigned to the youth division.

About 1 a.m. on March 1, 24 hours after the mysterious caller contacted Dana’s parents, two police officers came to their front door. “The dispatcher from Rock Hill called the house to say, ‘There are two police officers at your door. Will you let them in?’ ” Johnny Chisholm said. The officers gave the Chisholms a number at the D.C. police department to call. That’s when they learned that the oldest of their three children was dead.

And their first grandchild. They learned from the autopsy report that Chisholm was four weeks pregnant when she died.

16 years later

Farish thinks the Chisholm case will be solved. He hopes it happens before he retires.

“I’ve got 28 years and two months on, and while I love this job, I don’t want to be carried out of here,” Farish said.

Since Chisholm was killed, Farish’s son has started kindergarten and then graduated from high school; Farish has gotten divorced and remarried, and he lost his father. Two years ago, Farish prepared a PowerPoint presentation on the case, which he has used a half-dozen times when speaking at investigative conferences to demonstrate how, even when detectives employ sound investigative techniques and work hard, a killer can remain unidentified. He thinks the killer was likely a spurned lover.

There are aspects of the case that are particularly bothersome, like how it could be that in such a quiet neighborhood nobody saw or heard anything suspicious? A key to Chisholm's door was found by a television reporter down the street the night she was found dead. Was it a spare that she kept hidden outside that was found by the killer, or had she given it to a lover who discarded it after killing her?

And, what was up with the cop wannabe who called Chisholm's parents?

Was he the same man who called Farish?

On the 16th anniversary of Chisholm's death, the homicide commander spoke with a reporter who calls him every few years around Feb. 27 to chat about the case. The reporter asked if there were any new developments.

"Just that we're reexamining it," Farish told her. "If you write something, make sure to put in there that I'd still like to talk to the guy. Tell him I hope he gives me a call."