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# The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## STYLE

# From Post archives: D.C. killing ends quest for new life; S.C. woman called All-American type

By Avis Thomas-Lester

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**Editor's note:** *This story was originally published March 12, 1995.*

Dana Vonde Chisholm was an aspiring singer who came to Washington last year from Rock Hill, S.C., in search of a more exciting life -- new job, new friends and new adventures.

Now police are trying to determine whether that quest for excitement led to her death: Two weeks ago, she was found strangled in the hallway of her small basement apartment in Northwest Washington.

“She was one of those all-American type girls, the cheerleader, the kind of girl that any mother and father hopes their son brings home,” said D.C. police homicide Sgt. Michael Farish.

The nude body of Chisholm, 25, was found about 7 p.m. Feb. 27 by her landlady, who had been asked to check on the young woman. Chisholm was found lying face up in the hallway with a cord wrapped around her neck. She had been dead less than 24 hours, Farish said.

Chisholm was the 50th person slain in the city this year, but in several ways her death is unusual.

The Crestwood neighborhood where she lived, with lush Rock Creek Park nearby, is home to people such as Sen. John D. “Jay” Rockefeller IV and former FBI director William S. Sessions, and the sound of police sirens is rarely heard.

And there are odd aspects to the case. Someone claiming to be a D.C. police officer telephoned Chisholm’s parents the weekend she was killed and falsely told them their daughter had been arrested for prostitution.

On the door of Chisholm’s apartment there was a handwritten note bearing this message: “I’ll be back -- MPD,” an abbreviation used to designate the Metropolitan Police Department. Police believe that Chisholm’s killer made the call and left the note.

Police said the apartment appeared to have been searched, and they are investigating the possibility she had been raped.

“It’s a real whodunit,” Farish said.

A woman who described herself as a close friend of Chisholm’s said she last saw her about 7 p.m. Feb. 24 at Chisholm’s office at the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank on 18th Street NW where she was a secretary.

“She said she was going to be in for the weekend because she hadn’t been feeling well,” said the woman, who asked that her name not be used “because the murderer is still out there.” Chisholm, the woman said, said she might miss work on Monday.

“I hugged her and she kissed me on the cheek, and we said, I love you,” the woman said. “That’s the last time I talked to her.”

The woman said she began to worry when Chisholm did not call her on Saturday or on Sunday. Her calls to Chisholm’s home were answered by a machine.

On Monday, the woman said, Chisholm’s office manager came by about 9:30 a.m. to ask if she had talked to Chisholm. Her parents had been unable to reach her. Supervisors in Chisholm’s office called police, she said.

Johnny Chisholm said he last spoke to his daughter on Feb. 16, when he telephoned her at work to thank her for the Valentine’s card and money she had sent as a gift. “I told her I got the money and said, I love you,” he said.

Growing up in a middle-class section of Rock Hill, Chisholm would read anything she could get her hands on to satisfy her curiosity about the world, said William Chisholm, her uncle.

“She was a real bright girl, and she always liked doing adult things,” he said.

At Northwestern High School, she was a cheerleader, a member of the homecoming court and sang in the chorus. “She sounded just like Whitney Houston,” Johnny Chisholm said.

But there also was a troubled side to her teen years, experimentation with drugs and “growing pains” that led her to run away from home, police and relatives said.

In 1987, she enrolled at King’s College in Charlotte, N.C., where she studied business. Relations with her parents improved.

Last year, on her parents’ 25th wedding anniversary, Chisholm organized a surprise party where she sang and praised them “for sticking by her,” relatives said.

Her family thought all was well, but friends said she had been disturbed lately. The woman who was Chisholm's close friend said Chisholm sat at her desk crying about a week before she was killed and later told her she was pregnant. The friend said Chisholm planned to go home Feb. 24 to tell her parents.

As they continue to interview acquaintances of Chisholm's, police also have looked to the apartment for clues. Farish said detectives are combing Chisholm's diaries, notebooks and computer files.

Investigators also found a copy of Washington's City Paper in which several personal ads from men were circled. Police and acquaintances said she regularly received telephone calls at work from men and dated several men, including two D.C. police officers. Farish said investigators have not yet determined if Chisholm dated through the ads.

The close friend of Chisholm's said police have questioned her extensively about Chisholm's social life. Police and acquaintances said Chisholm was a regular at some nightspots.

was . . . a really nice girl," said Surya Sharma, the head bartender at the Ascot at 17th and L streets NW, where Chisholm would come with friends for happy hour on Thursdays and Fridays. "She'd walk around and talk to people. She knew a lot of people."