



**SHERRI PAPINI
ABDUCTION MYSTERY**

Police release suspect sketches and new DNA evidence in the puzzling case of a young California mom of 2 who vanished for 22 days. Inside the search for answers

THE VANISHING

**MISSING
SHERRI PAPINI**

Age- 34
Eyes- Blue
Hair- Blonde
Height- 5'3"
Weight- 100 lbs

MISSING FROM REDDING, CA

TAKEN AND RETURNED

Sherri (left, with Keith) told police that on day 22 of her ordeal, she heard her captors arguing and the sound of a gunshot in a nearby room. The younger suspect then took Sherri away by car, leaving her near I-5.

When California Highway Patrol officers found Sherri Papini near an on-ramp of Interstate 5 last Thanksgiving morning, the physical distress of the Redding mother of two was vivid and unmistakable. Dressed in sweats, Sherri, then 34, was 150 miles south of where she had gone missing 22 days earlier and was bound at the waist by a chain to which her left wrist was tethered with a zip tie. Hose clamps were fixed to her ankles in what the Shasta County Sheriff's Office later described as "pain compliance restraints." What medical personnel found when Sherri was next taken to Woodland Memorial Hospital seemed to testify to her ordeal. Her right shoulder bore the burn marks of a crude brand, and her body was battered all over. "She had bruises in various stages of healing," the sheriff's office said in an internal October statement obtained by *People*, "indicating she had been physically assaulted multiple times over a period of time."



SUSPECTS AT LARGE

Sherri told detectives she never got a clear look at her captors' faces because the two Hispanic female suspects (in police sketches) "made efforts to conceal their identities with face coverings." And, says the Shasta County Sheriff's Office, "Sherri would keep her head down when in their presence to avoid being battered by them."

It's been a year since Sherri's husband, Keith, dialed 911 on the afternoon of Nov. 2, 2016, to report her missing. Authorities, who say they combed through more than 600 tips, are finally releasing details of the case that has mystified both law enforcement detectives and crime watchers who were transfixed by last year's national headlines about the young mom who vanished while out for a morning jog. Police sketches of the two female abductors Sherri described to police were made public on Oct. 25, along with the most complete recitation to date of the evidence investigators have compiled over 12 months, including the audio of Keith's 911 call and the fact that both female and male DNA evidence was recovered from Sherri's clothing

COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: WENN, FBI (2)



FAMILY REUNITED

"My Sherri suffered tremendously," Keith (with Sherri and, from left, Tyler and Violet) said last year, describing his reaction to the sight of her injuries as "overwhelming nausea as my eyes and hands scanned her body."

and body. And yet, despite a year of what Sgt. Brian Jackson of the Shasta County Sheriff's Office calls "weekly contact with the Papinis" and "off-and-on-type interviews" with Sherri, authorities admit they have little new to go on. Because of her poor recollection, Sherri has produced information only "in pieces," the sheriff's office says.

Her spotty memory—combined with inconsistencies in her account—has only deepened suspicions and raised questions on true-crime Internet sites where armchair detectives debate the specifics of the case. "If it was truly an abduction, I am concerned for the people of Shasta County," says Trudy Nickens, founder of the Nor Cal Alliance for the Missing, which organized last year's mas-

'THAT SHE'S HAD DIFFICULTY BEING AROUND STRANGERS SAYS IT ALL'

—FORMER REDDING MAYOR MISSY McARTHUR

sive civilian search for Sherri. "Why would it take a year to release a composite of the presumed kidnappers? I don't understand it."

For their part the Papinis have kept quiet and out of the public eye. In a statement Keith thanked "all of the many people who have publicly and privately supported us over the last year, [whose] well-wishes have helped beyond measure," and said he hopes the new information released by police will lead to the swift capture of Sherri's kidnappers. Beyond that, he begged for privacy for them and their children—son Tyler, 5, and daughter Violet, 3—"as Sherri continues to heal and we work towards putting our lives back together."

On these facts, Sgt. Jackson and the Shasta County Sheriff's Office are definitive: Sherri resurfaced after 22 days badly battered, with her long

hair chopped short. She said she had not been sexually assaulted in captivity, and her medical exam confirmed as much. Yet-unidentified male DNA was found on Sherri's clothing, which was given to her by her captors. Unknown female DNA was collected from a swab of Sherri's body. Prior to her disappearance, Sherri had been texting with a "male acquaintance" in the Detroit area about meeting while he was due to be in California on business days before she went missing. "We went to Michigan and ruled him out as having any part in her disappearance," Jackson says. As for whether Sherri and the man *did* meet last fall, Jackson says they did not. But he won't address speculation that the two may have had a romantic relationship. "We aren't ready to release that," he says, adding of the mystery man, "It was a prior contact that she had years before. Somebody she met and kept in contact with."

As far as Keith's involvement goes, police say he submitted to a polygraph test that found "no deception" and has volunteered for additional lie-detector tests. "Detectives utilized all resources to determine if Sherri Papini's disappearance was voluntary or involuntary," the sheriff's office said. "The investigation is still continuing."

The puzzles that remain? For starters, a motive. There was never a demand for ransom, and Jackson says initial speculation about a sex-trafficking abduction has been dismissed by Shasta County police. Joe Giacalone, a retired New York Police Department sergeant and professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, agrees. "I wouldn't buy the sex-trafficking thing. Those guys are professionals. Putting her in the car, letting her go on the side of a highway—none of it adds up," says Giacalone.

As for Bill Garcia, the San Diego private investigator who worked pro bono for the Papini family

in the search last year, one discrepancy that has since emerged nags at him. On his 911 call Keith said he had found Sherri's phone on the ground along her jogging route—with torn pieces of her hair tangled in the headphones as if she had been grabbed. "If she was forcibly taken," asks Garcia, "why were her earbuds rolled up in a little coil and placed on top of her phone?"

Detectives also still struggle to identify what they call the "obscure letters" branded on the back of Sherri's right shoulder. And they have no explanation for why Sherri told an FBI forensic interviewer that at one point she fought back against her younger captor—slamming the woman's head into the toilet in an altercation that left Sherri with a cut on her foot—and yet hospital photos from the day of Sherri's recovery show no evidence of a cut, although it could have healed. "That could be construed as inconsistent," says

A HUSBAND QUESTIONED

Keith (making a TV appeal during last year's search) was investigated and given a polygraph, the sheriff's office says, with no evidence found against him.



The Sherri Papini Abduction Mystery: A Timeline

NOV. 2, 2016

Sometime between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Sherri Papini, who is reportedly training for a 5K charity run, takes her cell phone and earbuds and heads out on a jog in her Redding, Calif., neighborhood.



NOV. 2, 2016

5:51 p.m.

Keith Papini, Sherri's husband, arrives home. The house is empty, Sherri has not responded to texts, and she has not picked their young children up from daycare. Using his Find My iPhone app, he tracks Sherri's phone to a location about a mile from their home, where he finds the phone and her earbuds on the side of the road.



NOV. 2, 2016

7:51 p.m.

Keith calls 911 to report Sherri missing. The Shasta County Sheriff's Office launches an extensive investigation, looking into the Papinis' personal life and canvassing the area for witnesses or video surveillance.

NOV. 7, 2016

Keith takes a polygraph and passes. Police say, "No deception is indicated about [his involvement] with Sherri's disappearance."



NOV. 24, 2016

Around 4 a.m. Motorist Alison Sutton spots Sherri near Interstate 5 in Yolo County and calls 911. Sherri is wearing restraints, is covered in bruises and is branded on her right shoulder.

OCT. 25, 2017

Police release sketches of Sherri's two alleged Hispanic female captors and reveal that unknown DNA was found on Sherri and her clothes. The FBI offers a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the identification of the suspects.

'STILL HEALING'

McArthur, who had the Papinis to her home after Sherri was recovered, described her as suffering from trauma: "Her psyche was really damaged from the horrific experience she went through."



Burning Questions

1 | Why would Sherri have been taken and then released?

Sgt. Brian Jackson of the Shasta County Sheriff's Office says police haven't found a motive for her abduction. "It is hard to keep someone in captivity for 22 days," he says. "Why would someone go to that length?" Adds San Diego private investigator Bill Garcia: "I don't know of anyone who would go through that amount of effort to gain so little."

2 | Why was there no ransom request?

"I think that is what is really perplexing the police," says Joe Giacalone, a retired New York City police sergeant

and professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, who is not connected to the case. "There is no rhyme or reason for [the kidnapers'] never making a request for money."

3 | Why did it take nearly a year to produce suspect sketches?

Though police worked closely with Sherri after she was located last Nov. 24, they say it took time for her to come to a place in her recovery to work with a sketch artist.

4 | Will a DNA hit solve this case?

"I am holding out for that," says Sgt. Jackson. "Nothing has come back yet, but when it does, that will be a good day."

Jackson. "If there is no clarification [from Sherri], we take it for what it is worth and go on with the investigation." As for his own gut, Jackson points out that he was one of the first to interview Sherri last year. "There is no information that would indicate it's not true," he says. "I have invested almost a year of my career in this case, and we will continue on until we get some answers and hopefully get some people in custody soon."



For all the unanswered questions, those closest to the case are as certain that Sherri was brutally victimized as they are of her great fortune to have somehow survived. Missy McArthur, who was mayor of Redding at the time Sherri disappeared, met with her and Keith shortly after Sherri's homecoming—just the three of them, at McArthur's home. "She was really afraid of people and strangers," McArthur says. "She wanted to be right next to Keith. I think their relationship is real, and hopefully it can withstand this kind of trauma. They are a team and were at that time. I just believe them both." And then there's the most fundamental fact: "She was beat to a pulp," says McArthur. "You don't do that kind of thing to yourself. I absolutely believe she was kidnapped." Even Garcia, the P.I. so uneasy

'THE POLICE ARE STUCK WITH A CASE RIGHT NOW THAT LOOKS UNSOLVABLE'

—RET. NYPD SGT. JOE GIACALONE

about the coiled earbuds, says the open questions haven't changed his bottom line. "I think it was real, just based on what I saw. There didn't seem to be tension between Sherri and her husband."

Friends of the Papinis' also say that no one outside of Sherri and Keith truly understands the horror of what she has faced. "Society crucified her and made her out to be a horrible person when she is a victim in the entire thing," says Lisa Jeter, a friend of the couple's. "I just would like people to leave her alone and let them heal."

But for Nickens, her community's sense of safety hangs in the margin. "If we had a young woman jogging on a road in Shasta County abducted in broad daylight, how can this not be a public-safety issue? I have five daughters under the age of 22," Nickens says. "If it did not really happen the way it was presented, the citizens of Shasta County should know."

By **Sandra Sobieraj Westfall** and **Christine Pelisek**, with reporting by **Diane Herbst**