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Suspect identified in 1983 abduction, killing of 8-year-old Watts girl

LAPD cold-case detectives use DNA evidence to link a man imprisoned in Mexico in another girl's murder to the sexual assault and strangulation. Prosecutors issue an arrest warrant for his extradition.

By Andrew Blankstein, Los Angeles Times

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An arrest warrant has been issued in the 1983 abduction and slaying of an 8-year-old Watts girl, the Los Angeles Police Department said Tuesday.

Detectives with the Los Angeles Police Department's cold-case homicide unit said prosecutors have filed murder charges against Luis Garcia Villalvazo, a Mexican citizen who is serving time in a Mexican jail for the unrelated killing of another girl.

In March 1983, Victoria Denise Brown was walking home from Graham Street Elementary School in the Florence-Firestone area of South Los Angeles when a blue van pulled up next to her.

The 8-year-old stopped to talk to someone in the van. Moments later, the van peeled away from the curb, and the girl had vanished.

Police conducted an extensive search, looking for any sign of her in storm drains, vacant lots and alleyways.

Twenty-six hours later in nearby Wilmington, Victoria's body was discovered inside the lidless trunk of an abandoned car in a gritty industrial corridor bordered by oil fields and auto wrecking yards.

Victoria, who had been snatched just half a block from her home in the 9600 block of Anzac Avenue, had been sexually assaulted and strangled.

Authorities circulated leaflets that included a drawing of the van and a sketch of an unidentified Latino man 29 to 30 years old, 6 feet tall, 190 pounds with brown curly hair and a light complexion. The Los Angeles Unified School District offered a \$5,000 reward for information leading to an arrest.

At times, the anguish almost overwhelmed Victoria's father, Ernest Brown.

In an interview Tuesday, he said he thought of committing suicide, and turned to alcohol and other substances to try to dull the pain of his loss.

Brown described Victoria as "a delightful little girl" who loved playing with her friends, picking flowers and perching herself on her daddy's lap on family road trips.

Despite his struggle to come to terms with his loss, Brown said, he drew strength from his faith.

"My grandmother, before I lost my baby, set me aside and said, 'Son, the hardest thing in the world for a person to do is bury one of your own,' which meant one of your children," Brown said. "The Lord sent me a child that was pure and he took her back to heaven with him."

The mystery of who killed Victoria lingered for decades before time, technology and dogged detective work provided police with a suspect.

Det. Elizabeth Estupinian of the LAPD's cold-case homicide unit said DNA evidence from Victoria's case was analyzed in 2004, but it did not initially appear that there were enough genetic markers to upload to the national DNA database.

The detectives reexamined the evidence in 2009, and submitted it to a national DNA databank. In November, the genetic material collected from the crime scene indicated a genetic profile matching Garcia Villalvazo and would show up in one in every 2 trillion people.

Garcia Villalvazo is serving a 92-year prison sentence for the murder of 7-year-old Airis Estrella Pando in May 2005. He also was found guilty in the sexual assault of three other young girls in Juarez, Mexico, in 2004.

Garcia Villalvazo committed those crimes after having served 10 years, beginning in 1994, of a 19-year federal prison sentence in the United States after being convicted in Illinois of drug trafficking.

On Tuesday, the Los Angeles County district attorney's office filed a request to extradite Garcia Villalvazo under the treaty that exists between the United States and Mexico.

Estupinian and her partner, Det. Luis Rivera, said the lingering question is whether there were additional victims in the Los Angeles area.

"You have to ask yourself about what he was doing from puberty to 43 years of age" — the year Victoria was killed — Estupinian said. "We have an obligation to see if there are other cases."