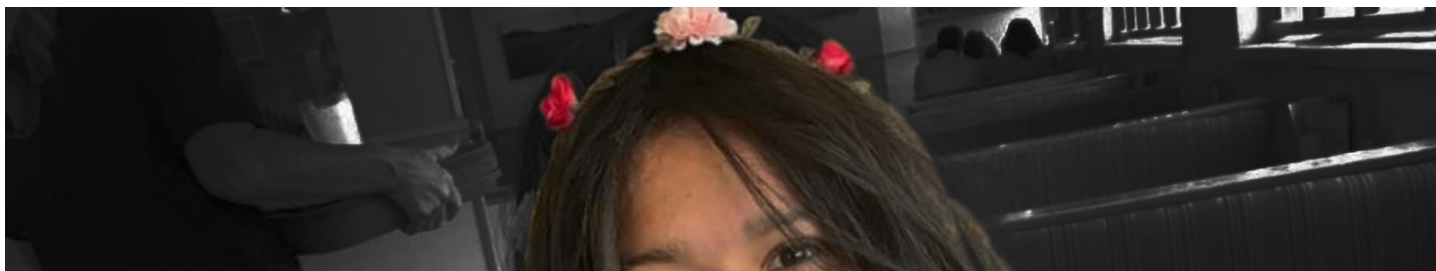


# Searching for Sophie

After six years, teen's relatives critical of Fort Lauderdale police



Patrick Reeder is shown in the fall of 2022 in his missing daughter's room. Sophie Reeder was reported missing six years ago. mike stocker/south florida sun sentinel



This photo of Sophie Reeder, then 15, of Fort Lauderdale, was taken by her mom, Nicole Twist, at a restaurant five days before Sophie disappeared on May 20, 2017. courtesy

“Just leave it there till I die,” he answered solemnly, when asked his plans.

Sophie Reeder left her home at just after midnight on May 20, 2017, and is now believed to have been a victim of child sex trafficking.

As the anniversary of her disappearance approached this week, Fort Lauderdale police and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement recirculated Sophie’s missing child poster. Despite offering a \$25,000 reward last year, investigators have announced no big leads or suspects. A new private investigator hired by family said he has not uncovered any promising leads and has had little cooperation from police.

And yet Reeder and Nicole Twist — Sophie’s estranged parents — each holds onto a whiff of hope.

“I mean, there’s a possibility she could be alive,” Reeder said this week.

“We can never give up on Sophie and her return,” Twist said in an email. “Miracles do occasionally happen.”

Sophie’s story — a lonely teen lured into the dark world of sex trafficking — was featured in the South Florida Sun Sentinel’s Innocence Sold investigation and accompanying Felonious Florida podcast late last year. Her case illustrates what experts say is a nonchalance toward missing girls of color, whose disappearances can be shrugged off by law enforcement and ignored by mainstream media.

Young people run away or go missing frequently, and they are among the most vulnerable to sex traffickers, experts have found. In just the last year, 177 kids — mostly teens — went missing in Florida, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Sophie, who was known to go for long walks, had left the house in the evening, after her father went to sleep. He found her room empty the next morning, but thought she might be at friend's house. He figured she'd be back soon.

But by Monday morning, Sophie hadn't come back and Reeder reported his daughter's disappearance to Fort Lauderdale Police. He said a woman at the station reassured him that "they usually come back within a week."

A few days later, the police department put out a missing child poster. In it, the agency hinted that Sophie was troubled, saying she "suffers from undiagnosed depression and anxiety."

Fort Lauderdale police have declined to reveal what efforts they made to find Sophie. Mike Fisten, a former Miami-Dade sergeant hired by family recently to investigate her disappearance, said the department wouldn't share more than a two-page report with him.

"I've never been stonewalled like this before on a cold case," Fisten said. "It's just strange."

Sophie's aunt, Kirsten Reeder Milhorn, asked the Broward Sheriff's Office to assist with the investigation, hoping it would give the case a fresh look. This week, BSO Capt. Jonathan Brown told Milhorn he had offered to help and will "stand by if needed." But, he told her, they would not be involved in the case.

BSO "reviewed their investigative actions and spoke with them about their plans moving forward in the near future," Brown wrote to Milhorn. "We have confidence that the Fort Lauderdale PD has followed up with any potential leads so far and will continue to do so."

When police examined Sophie's social media accounts, they found evidence she was sexually exploited – trafficked for sex.

"Observed within the Instagram application on the cell phone was a lengthy conversation between Sophie and her best friend where they were discussing prices related to performing commercial sex acts," a police record says.

The agency said evidence showed Sophie walked that night to an apartment at 1725 SW 11th Court in Fort Lauderdale where Leonard "Jay" Jennings, a 37-year-old felon, was staying with family. His phone number was one she had often called, they said.

When reached by phone by a reporter in February 2022, Jennings denied knowing Sophie. Fort Lauderdale police said he is not a suspect.

When Sophie went missing, two detectives and an aide were handling more than 2,000 missing persons cases a year. In September 2022, the department announced the creation of a new Endangered Persons Unit, where missing person cases like Sophie's would benefit from a team of experts in human trafficking and child exploitation. The unit would consist of seven detectives and a sergeant.

John Rode, a former Miami-Dade police detective who has worked on Sophie's case as a private investigator, is among the critics of Fort Lauderdale's investigation. The agency, led now by Chief Patrick Lynn, has been largely mum about the case, declining to release the case file even to family members. Twist has been privy to very little information and treated "like a nobody" by the agency, Rode said.

"They didn't want any outside help at all," Rode said. "The only time they called back was to tell me to back off what I was doing."

Twist said "it still hurts very bad at this time of year" but she was heartened to hear that the Florida Legislature passed new laws — signed earlier this week by Gov. Ron DeSantis — to address issues related to child sex trafficking. Among the new laws is a requirement that all police recruits receive four hours of training in detecting and investigating trafficking.

"I am glad that this subject is being taken more seriously, and hope more young girls can be saved," Twist said.

If you have information on the disappearance of Sophie Reeder, contact Fort Lauderdale police at 954-828-6677 or email [sophietips@fortlauderdale.gov](mailto:sophietips@fortlauderdale.gov).

The agency is offering up to \$25,000 for information that leads to her recovery.

You can also call Fisten's private investigation firm Blue Line Investigations at 954-960-6900.