

[Transcript] Casefile True Crime / Case 245: Sherri Papini

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34-year-old Sherry Papini knew the lyrics to everything by pop singer Michael Buble well.

Not only had she chosen it as her wedding song when marrying the love of her life,

Keith, it was also a great pace keeper when exercising.

In November 2016, the Californian mother of two had almost fully healed from a recent breast augmentation procedure. Finally feeling well enough to start jogging again, Sherry had started training for an upcoming 5K race. Still a bit rusty, she was using an app to track her progress. Wednesday, November 2 was a clear day. With her two young children in daycare

and her husband at work, Sherry got dressed in black leggings, a pink Nike hoodie and checkered tennis shoes. She headed outside. The Papini family lived in Redding, a small city in Northern California. Their home in the rural mountain gate area was surrounded by flat treeline roads and wide open spaces that provided a pleasant backdrop for a run. Sherry connected her earbuds to her iPhone and opened her fitness app. She pressed play on her wedding song and started jogging down her driveway.

Later that evening, an emergency services operator received a call from Sherry's husband, Keith Papini. He'd just returned home from work and said he was freaking out because his wife wasn't there. Officers from the Shasta County Sheriff's Office quickly arrived at the couple's home. Keith explained that it was just after 5pm when he pulled into the driveway of his family's two-story home. It was the same house that Keith himself had been raised in. With its sprawling backyard, leafy surrounds and a basketball ring in the driveway, it was the ideal place to raise a family. Keith approached the front door prepared for the usual warm welcome from his boisterous four-year-old son and two-year-old daughter. But as he stepped inside, it was oddly quiet. Sherry Papini typically kept the family on a tight schedule and always

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let her husband know if anything unexpected had arisen. But Keith said the last he'd heard from Sherry was around 11am when she texted asking if he was going to be home for lunch. It had been a busy day for Keith who worked at a Best Buy electronic store and he'd responded that he wouldn't be able to make it. Keith walked through their home. Everything appeared as normal except

for a half-wrapped present addressed to him from Sherry and the kids. Inside was a handmade American

flag pillow. Keith looked outside. Sherry's car was in the driveway but there was no sign of her or the kids anywhere. He sent Sherry a text but there was no response. He called the children's daycare provider and asked what time Sherry had stopped by. The daycare worker was taken aback. Sherry hadn't picked the kids up. They were still there.

Keith's initial confusion quickly turned to concern. He logged in to his Find My iPhone app which was also configured to recognize the location of his wife's device.

The icon confirmed that Sherry's phone was located less than one mile away at the corner of Old Oregon Trail and Sunrise Drive. Thinking Sherry might have gone for a walk, Keith drove to the specified location. There was no one there.

He called his mother to see if she had spoken to Sherry. She hadn't.

Keith tried to remain calm. He told himself that Sherry might have accidentally left her phone on the roof of her car and it had fallen off during the drive but that didn't explain why she hadn't picked up their kids. Sherry was an incredibly dedicated mother who doted on her children and it was completely out of character for her to leave them in daycare this late. Nor did she have any health conditions that could explain a sudden absence.

Keith got out of the car and started looking around. The intersection housed all the letter boxes for the neighborhood and it was just one and a half miles from the nearest highway. Other than that it was fairly remote. No houses were in the immediate vicinity and traffic wasn't busy. Just off the road Keith found Sherry's iPhone in the grass. It had a crack on the front screen but was still functioning. Sherry's headphones were still connected and Michael Buble's everything was playing on repeat. Wrapped around the headphones were several strands of long blonde hair. The same color and length as Sherry's.

Officers visited the location where Sherry's phone was found. They found no signs that a struggle had taken place. Similarly a search of the Pepini's home revealed that

everything was in order and nothing appeared to have been stolen. But there was no evidence to support the possibility that Sherry had taken off voluntarily. Her purse and belongings were all accounted for and she hadn't made any significant withdrawals from her bank account.

Police questioned whether Sherry could have run away to start afresh elsewhere.

Keith vehemently denied this possibility. He had known Sherry since middle school.

The two had shared a kiss as teenagers but it wasn't until years later that they reconnected and a romance blossomed. Keith was immediately smitten with Sherry, a bubbly blue-eyed blonde with a luminous smile. They married in 2009 and Sherry soon left her job as a telecommunications account executive to be a stay-at-home mum. It was a position she thrived in.

Sherry organized all kinds of projects and activities for her children while also being a doting wife and homemaker. She put great care and attention into everything she did, be it decorating a homemade pie, planning a birthday party for her children or maintaining her physical appearance. According to Keith, the couple had a very happy marriage. They fought

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occasionally but no more than any other couple. Their last argument had been a month prior over something as trivial as a messy room. Keith said there was no way that Sherry would ever voluntarily leave her children. It was a sentiment shared by others who described Sherry Papini as a super-mum.

In the lead-up to her disappearance, everything had been completely normal.

Sherry had given no indication that she was making plans to leave or wanted to escape her responsibilities. She had recently taken her children out trick-or-treating for Halloween and was already planning what to cook for an upcoming Thanksgiving dinner.

A background check revealed no known history of domestic abuse or any police call-outs to the Papini's property. In fact, Keith's record was squeaky clean. Still, police had to consider the possibility that Keith was involved with his wife's disappearance. What if he had killed her and then staged a kidnapping to deflect attention from himself?

Police looked into Keith's movements from Wednesday November 2 and confirmed that he was at work all

day. The last reported sighting of Sherry Papini occurred around 2 p.m. when a neighbor saw her jogging. There had been no suspicious vehicles sighted in the area nor had anyone heard cries for help. Sherry was considered to be an alert aware person. Had someone approached her, Sherry's loved ones believed she would have put up a fight.

It therefore seemed more likely that whoever took her had snuck up unsuspectingly. Either that or more than one person was involved. A team searched overnight covering a half-mile radius from the corner of Old Oregon Trail and Sunrise Drive where Sherry's phone was found. An aerial search was also conducted but nothing of interest was found. The discarded iPhone was the only clue police had to go by. The following day, Sherry's sister-in-law Suzanne discussed its significance in the press, saying that while it was good to have some sort of clue, it indicated that Sherry had been taken. Suzanne said she wouldn't just drop her phone if she was running away. At least it's giving us some kind of information but we're sick. This is a pretty sickening situation. The Reading community was in shock. Sherry had no known enemies.

Keith Pepini said there had been no strange activity such as suspicious calls or emails in the lead-up to his wife's disappearance. So who would abduct an innocent mother of two so brazenly in broad daylight just one mile from her home? The Milton Gate area was considered a safe place to live but like any other town, Reading had skeletons in its closet. Back in August to 1998, 16-year-old Tara Smith set out for a jog down Old Oregon Trail and was never seen again. While Tara's case remained unsolved, the people of Reading had never forgotten it.

Some were quick to point out in eerie coincidence. Tara Smith and Sherry Pepini had attended the same high school at the same time. They also shared a similar look, with some noting they could easily pass for sisters. Although the pair weren't known to be friends and despite 18 years passing between the two disappearances, it did spark some questions. Was it possible the same perpetrator had struck again?

Four known sex offenders lived within one mile of the location where Sherry's phone was found. 50 more lived in the five miles beyond. Police began looking into each individual, but one by one they were all ruled out. Meanwhile, Keith Pepini agreed to participate in a polygraph test. It concluded he was telling the truth when he said he wasn't involved in his wife's disappearance.

This, along with Keith's confirmed alibi and the lack of physical evidence linking him to the

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crime scene, gave police the confidence to conclusively rule him out as a suspect. Being publicly cleared provided Keith with little relief. He told People magazine, That is not where my head has been this whole time. My head has been trying to find my wife. Police continue to explore all avenues, including the possibility that Sherry might have voluntarily run away. But as the days passed with no breakthroughs, local residents became consumed by fear. They rallied behind the Pepini family, setting up a GoFundMe account to help with expenses. Missing person posters were plastered around town, urging people to be on the lookout for the 34-year-old.

At a fence on the corner of Old Oregon Trail and Sunrise Drive, concerned citizens hung a bunch of helium balloons with the words Bring Sherry Home written on them. A \$50,000 reward for information was announced. The Pepini family hired a private investigator who began working on the possibility that Sherry had been abducted as part of a human trafficking ring. The Pepini's house was only a few miles from the Interstate 5 freeway, an area known to be used for criminal activity by Mexican cartels. A trailer near their house was also a known drug den. Maybe someone frequenting the trailer had spotted Sherry and recognized her as an easy target. Police were quick to dispel this theory. Victims of sex trafficking are typically young and childless. But as others argued, Sherry looked notably young for her age. At five foot three inches tall with a petite 105 pound frame and long blonde hair, some believed Sherry could pass for 18. Had she been targeted at random, it was possible the perpetrator had mistaken her for a much younger woman. By November 17, Sherry Pepini had been missing for 15 days. The FBI became involved as the local rumor mill swung into overdrive. Some theorized that Sherry could have been taken by a stalker. What if someone had been watching her movements closely and knew exactly when she'd be alone on the remote running trail? There was also talk of a possible affair. Some speculated that Sherry could have been involved with the married man, whose scorned lover had abducted her as part of a revenge plot. Despite Keith Pepini being publicly cleared, many members of the public continued to cast suspicion on him. Keith Pepini did his best to hold it together for the sake of his young children. He held onto hopes that Sherry was still alive and being held somewhere. Making a teary appeal to his wife on television, Keith said, If Sherry is listening, I want to say that we are trying. We're trying the best we can, and I'm so sorry that I'm not there. I love you. Addressing the perpetrator directly, Keith told People Magazine, I just want her back, and I want her back safe. Just bring her home. Please bring her back. The sooner, the better. A wealthy businessman was passing through Reading when he learned of Sherry's disappearance and heard Keith's heartfelt pleas for her safe return. Something about the case struck a chord with the man. Even though he didn't know Sherry or the Pepini family, the pain they were experiencing seemed unimaginable. He began thinking about ways that he could help out. That's when the idea struck him. What about a reverse ransom? After reaching out to Keith Pepini and getting the go-ahead, the businessman who chose to remain

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anonymous created a website titled SherryPepini.com. He made a bizarre offer to whoever had abducted

Sherry, return her safely and receive an undisclosed six-figure reward with no questions asked.

The donor wrote,

I am willing to pay you in whatever way you can creatively think about where you feel safe and where nothing can be tracked to you. I will not communicate with the police and sheriff's department regarding any details about this offer.

Law enforcement were firmly against this tactic for several reasons.

For one, there still wasn't enough evidence to unequivocally confirm that Sherry Pepini had been abducted. If she had, her kidnapper had made no attempt to demand any kind of ransom.

Two, releasing an offer like this left the Pepini family vulnerable to scam artists.

And thirdly, financially rewarding someone for their criminal activity only served to encourage future copycats.

The anonymous donor was undeterred. He hired an independent hostage negotiator named Cameron Gamble to act as his spokesman and gave a deadline of 100 hours, writing on his website, once I leave town, this offer is off the table.

Public reaction to the offer was mixed. Some viewed it as a novel way to help solve missing person cases. Skeptics believed it was nothing more than a publicity stunt for Cameron Gamble to promote his hostage negotiation business. Either way, the 100 hour deadline came and went without anyone coming forward. The donor withdrew the controversial reverse ransom offer.

But said the unclaimed money would be added towards the existing \$50,000 reward offered by law enforcement. By November 23, Sherry Pepini had been missing for three weeks.

Investigators had chased over 400 leads and executed 20 search warrants to obtain data cellphone records, social media accounts, banking information and emails.

A check of Sherry Pepini's cellphone revealed she had recently deleted a text message exchange with

a female contact. But when police looked into this contact, they realized it wasn't a woman at all.

Sherry had been conversing with a man from Michigan named Donovan,

but had hidden his number under a woman's name.

The two had been texting between October 29 and November 1, the day before Sherry went missing.

Donovan had been in San Francisco for a work conference, and the two discussed the possibility of meeting up in Reading. However, it was a five hour drive between the two cities,

which Donovan deemed too far. Their rendezvous didn't eventuate, but for investigators, this was a solid lead. What if Donovan had decided to swing by Reading after all?

They obtained Donovan's travel records and confirmed that he had returned to Michigan on November 2, the day of Sherry's disappearance. Investigators flew to Michigan to visit Donovan's apartment while he was at work. They searched the premises, but found no sign of Sherry Pepini or anything else incriminating.

When police arrived at Donovan's work for an interview,

he seemed shocked. According to Donovan, he had met Sherry Pepini in 2011,

when she was in Michigan for a work trip. He later told the Sacramento Bee that he found her to be, quote, drop dead gorgeous. Donovan said there was something pretty magical about her.

Sherry made no mention of the fact that she was married, and the two had spent the weekend together.

Over the years, they continued to send the occasional flirty message,

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but it never went beyond that. Donovan assumed the recent contact from Sherry was due to her seeing his social media post about being in San Francisco.

Donovan denied being anywhere near Reading on the day Sherry went missing.

He had data on his cell phone to prove he was in San Francisco at the time,

and others were able to confirm his alibi. For investigators, this was a major blow.

It was back to the drawing board.

Thursday, November 24 was Thanksgiving Day. What was typically a day of celebration for the Pepini family was now a stark reminder that 22 days had passed with no sign of Sherry.

Before her disappearance, she'd been enthusiastically making plans with her in-laws about the day. She'd intended on making sweet potatoes, her children's favorite.

Instead, members of the Reading community planned to gather later in the afternoon to show support for Sherry's loved ones.

Keith Pepini got up before dawn to begin his day.

He was in the bathroom shaving when his phone rang.

On the other line was one of the detectives working on his wife's case.

They finally had news.

Sherry Pepini had been found.

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CASEFILE team member Jess tells me that it was the online coach who really helped her achieve her weight loss goals. She says just knowing she had someone to chat with who had her back was invaluable. Combined with short lessons and healthy recipes on the new map, Jess says she had everything she needed to lose weight and stay fit.

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She demanded that Sherry drop her phone and to get into the car, reassuring her, we don't want to kill you. Thinking quickly as she removed her headphones, Sherry purposely pulled out several strands of her hair to leave behind as a clue. Sherry got into the vehicle and the women put something over her head. One of them struck her with something. Sherry thought it might have been a taser. From there, everything went hazy. She tried to stay awake but kept losing consciousness. The next thing she knew, she woke up in a strange room that had its windows boarded up from the inside. There was nothing in the room except for a bed, a dresser and a closet. All of her clothes were gone and she'd been redressed in a plain t-shirt. Sherry stood on the bed and tried to look out the window, only to discover it had also been boarded up from the outside. She attempted to dislodge one of the boards, but the two women came in and caught her in the act. They yanked her down by her hair and hit her so hard that she saw stars. When Sherry came to, the dresser was gone and the bed was in its place. A chain had been tied around her waist which was bolted to the ceiling and hooked to a metal pole in the closet. Over the coming days, the two women came and went from the room. Sherry was mostly kept locked in the closet. She was given a bucket full of kitty litter to use as a toilet and fed once daily with small portions of bread, gritty rice, porridge and the occasional apple or fad off a piece of meat. Outside her door, a speaker blasted what Sherry described as, quote, that really annoying Mexican music, a majority of the time. The two women yelled at her in Spanish, which Sherry didn't understand, and the older of the two occasionally beat her. Anytime Sherry made a sound, she was physically punished. She was sometimes burned with heated up kitchen utensils. When she accidentally made a clanging noise with her chain, one of the women rushed in and cut off her ponytail, threatening, I'm going to send it to your mother. Sherry wasn't particularly close with her mother, so this comment led her to believe that her captors didn't know her and had taken her at random. When Sherry questioned why they were doing this, one of them said, we sell you. The other added, your buyer is a cop. The women read Sherry news articles about her disappearance. One of them laughed as she said, no one believes you. Everyone thinks you ran away. Guess what? The buyers are cop. They're never going to find you. Sherry had no idea what to do. She tried to engage with her captors by offering to cook or clean for them in the hopes they would give her more information. But the women remained tight lipped. With Sherry's limited knowledge of Spanish words, she thought she heard mention of traffic, cameras, medicine, and a delivery date. Fearful of what that signified, she began making plans to escape. At one point, Sherry's captors forced her into the shower at gunpoint and told her to wash herself. As Sherry lathered herself with coconut centered body wash, the women became engaged in a conversation and lowered their guns. Recognizing this as an opportunity, Sherry jumped on the younger woman and smashed her head into the toilet. She slipped and cut her foot in the process. The older woman dragged Sherry back to her room by her hair, forcing an unknown substance down her throat. When Sherry made another attempt to escape, the women tied

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her

to a table and slashed her t-shirt off from behind. Already in agony from her healing breast implants, that's when the women branded her. Sherry's captors told her this is what her buyer wanted.

Along with the immense pain, Sherry heard her skin make a sizzling popping sound.

Too scared to make a noise, she kept her eyes clenched shut until it was over.

While it was unclear what the word said, Sherry believed it said Exodus, which she described as a really confusing Bible passage. To maintain her strength and sanity, Sherry spent

some of her spare time doing yoga. She scratched away at the dry wall inside the closet in the hopes she might chip a big enough hole to escape. She thought about her children constantly.

Over time, Sherry sensed that the younger of her captors was starting to soften.

Sometimes when the older woman beat Sherry, the younger one would drag her off.

Then one day, Sherry was sitting on the bed when she heard a gunshot. Terrified, she hid in the closet.

It sounded like someone was gathering up keys to leave the house. Then came the blasting mariachi music. Sherry started screaming and yanking on her chains until she eventually fell asleep.

When she woke up, the younger of her captors came in and gave her a plate of food.

Sherry ate it, but soon started to feel nauseous and dizzy. She could barely stand.

The younger captor came back in and hit Sherry in the face.

She had laid a fresh sweatsuit out on the bed and insinuated that Sherry get dressed into it.

Sherry did so, after which the woman hit her again and placed something over her head so that she couldn't see. Sherry was then let outside and into a vehicle. Sharp restraints were secured

around her ankles and wrists, one of which was secured to the vehicle. Sherry didn't know who else was in the car. There were no voices, only the sound of the radio.

Sherry tried to keep track of how far they drove by counting the number of songs, but she kept falling asleep. Eventually, the car stopped.

The younger captor ordered Sherry to get out. Sherry was terrified. She started crying.

The woman cut her restraints, pushed her out the door, and drove off.

Sherry removed her head covering, realising it was a pillowcase.

She looked around at her rural surroundings and had no idea where she was. She began to run.

Eventually, she came to a building, but it was locked, so she started running down the dark highway, waving the pillowcase and screaming at the top of her lungs. She screamed so hard that she could taste blood in the back of her throat. Car after car sped past without stopping.

Sherry wondered if they could see her restraints and were deterred from stopping because they thought she was an escaped prisoner. She tried to hide them under her clothes until a trucker eventually stopped. Safe in hospital with her husband, Sherry was thoroughly examined.

She was adamant that she hadn't endured any form of sexual assault. This was supported by medical exams. Toxicology tests came up clean for narcotics, ruling out the possibility that

Sherry had been drugged. Her clothing was sent off for DNA testing.

On Thanksgiving afternoon, members of the Redding community gathered in Sherry's honour as plant,

unaware that she'd been found alive. When the good news was revealed a few hours later,

Sherry's sister Sheila thanked their supporters, saying,

Everyone's tireless efforts have made our family whole again this Thanksgiving.

News of Sherry's escape gripped the nation. The public were hungry for details,

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but the Papini family requested privacy during this time of healing. Over the coming days, investigators gently probed Sherry for any more details she could remember that might help them catch her abductors. While Sherry tried to keep things light-hearted, her trauma was obvious. She hugged her knees to her chest, her eyes mostly cast downward, as she did her best to provide every possible piece of information. The two women had worn masks over the bottom halves of their faces, so Sherry never got a complete look at them, but she remembered other details. The elder of the pair had a long, straight dark hair that was showing signs of graying. She had dark eyes and thick, bushy eyebrows. She was roughly three inches taller than Sherry, heavy-set and spoke with a raspy voice. Her breath smelled like sweetened coffee. The younger woman had dark curly hair that had been smoothed with product, thin, over-tweezed eyebrows and wore large hoop earrings. She was a bit shorter than Sherry with a slightly muscular build and hairy arms. Sherry struggled to record details about the clothing either of the women had been wearing, other than the fact they always wore leather gloves. The pair fought often, and Sherry regularly overheard the older woman hit the younger one. As for the location where she was held, Sherry had no idea. She sometimes heard birds outside, but because of the speaker outside her door, she never heard anything else. It was always cold, possibly raining every night, and she could smell a fireplace. Anytime she made a noise, her captors came in and took her blankets away as punishment. The bathroom had a unique layout which Sherry was able to describe in detail, right down to a crack in the shower tile. She never saw the outside of the building. To maintain the integrity of the investigation, police made the strategic decision to withhold details about Sherry's time in captivity, including the branding. But this silence led to speculation from cynics that the whole kidnapping had been a hoax. If the police were so vocal about seeking answers when Sherry went missing, why go quiet when she was returned safely? Was it possible the whole thing had been a publicity stunt by Cameron Gamble, the hostage negotiator, after all? Or perhaps Keith and Sherry had crafted the elaborate plot for financial gain and fame. Investigators had considered this possibility, but unless they had evidence to prove otherwise, they had no reason to treat the abduction as anything other than a legitimate crime. It was a lesson learned the hard way by Vallejo Police, just 180 miles south of Redding. The year before Sherry Papini's abduction, a Vallejo man named Aaron Quinn called police to report a home invasion. He claimed that a gunman had broken into his home and forced him and his girlfriend, Denise Hoskins, to drink tea laced with sleeping pills. They were blindfolded and tied up in the closet, where the gunman played a pre-recorded message. It explained that the couple had been targeted by a criminal group who were going to hold Denise captive, unless Aaron paid an \$8,500 ransom within 48 hours. When Aaron woke up hours later, Denise was gone. He reported the incident to police, but the story was so outlandish that they thought he was making it up. When Denise resurfaced two days later claiming to have been held captive and raped,

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both law enforcement and the media palmed it off as a wild hoax.

Three months later, police were investigating an unrelated home invasion when they uncovered evidence linking the perpetrator to Denise Hoskins and Aaron Quinn. It turned out the couple had been telling the truth. The perpetrator, a disbarred attorney named Matthew Muller, was tried and sentenced to 31 years in prison.

Vallejo police were forced to publicly apologize to Denise and Aaron, who were awarded a \$2.5 million compensation payout.

Investigators in the Sherry Papini case were determined not to make a similar mistake.

Keith Papini released an exclusive statement to national news program

Good Morning America to address the rumors surrounding his wife's case head-on.

He acknowledged the quote, double-edged sword that is social media.

While modern technology had allowed news of Sherry's disappearance to spread quickly, those same people who helped spread the word now expected answers instantly and became angry when they didn't get the gory details.

Keith said,

Those people should be ashamed of their malicious subhuman behavior.

We are not going to allow those people to take away our spirit,

love or rejoice in our girl found alive and home where she belongs.

I do not see a purpose in addressing each preposterous lie.

Instead, may I give you a glimpse of the mixture of horror and elation

that was my experience of reuniting with the love of my life and mother of our children.

Keith went on to provide a harrowing account of Sherry's ordeal,

complete with the details of her injuries, including the branding.

He remarked,

Nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to see upon my arrival at the hospital, nor the details of the true hell I was about to hear.

Acknowledging the tireless support of law enforcement and the public, Keith said,

Thank you to the many incredible humans that have never known Sherry that facilitated in sharing our heartbreak across the globe. Sherry has always captured my heart, and it is no surprise that she has captured hearts not only through the country, but throughout the world.

The following day, police held a press conference to acknowledge Sherry Papini's courage.

They released brief details about her two captors and appealed for anyone with information to come forward. The fact that Sherry had overheard the perpetrators talking about a buyer and getting paid gave weight to the human trafficking theory. Maybe the women had kidnapped Sherry at random,

thinking she was much younger. When they realized she was a 34-year-old mother,

they didn't know how to proceed, hence why they held her captive for so long and were constantly bickering. But if this was the case, it would be highly unusual. In the United States, white women are rarely abducted for sex trafficking. Victims usually know their exploiters, who are often tricked into willingly going with them after being promised a better life.

Perpetrators involved are typically professionals. It would be highly unusual for someone involved in trafficking to let a victim go, as it risked exposing the entire ring.

The fact that Sherry was branded also raised questions.

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Some believed this type of torture was typical for traffickers who wanted to maintain control over their victim, while others questioned why a sex trafficker would want to taint their own product.

Based on the description that Sherry had provided of her time in captivity, investigators began working on the theory that she had been held somewhere in the mountains. They obtained cell phone data from the area where Sherry was abducted and the area where she was found, on the lookout for any numbers that pinged off phone towers at both locations. As reported by the Sacramento Bee, six numbers came up. Among them was a 21-year-old woman. Police visited her home, discovering that she had dark hair like Sherry's young captor. But she wasn't Latina and had an alibi for the abduction period.

Tip-offs continued to come in from the public.

One woman reported having seen a pair of Latina women who matched the suspect descriptions in a Walmart store. They were looking at her and whispering. The caller had blonde hair similar to Sherry Papini. She was scared that she might be next.

By December 3, Sherry Papini had been home for a week and a half. Hundreds of Reading locals gathered to celebrate her safe return and stand in solidarity with their community. Wearing pink in Sherry's honor, they posed for a photograph underneath a large pink banner that read, Welcome Home. Despite this warm response, Sherry struggled in the aftermath of her abduction.

While her physical injuries eventually healed, the emotional scars remained.

She became afraid of people, particularly strangers, and wanted Keith by her side at all times.

Neighbours noted that she rarely left the house and her children hardly ever played out in the yard.

Sherry began extensive therapy to treat post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety.

She met with investigators from time to time and officers checked in on the Papini's weekly.

But Sherry's recollection of the events became hazy and she was unable to provide any new insights.

The search for her abductors continued, but police failed to come up with any solid leads.

A year went by with no major breakthroughs. To mark the upcoming anniversary, a police artist worked with Sherry to create composite sketches of her two captors,

Ben Danners covering the bottom half of their faces. These were released to the public along with the first detailed account of Sherry's experience in captivity.

Keith Papini released a statement on his family's behalf, thanking their supporters and requesting privacy, as his wife continued to heal and they focused on putting their lives back together.

But for all the support, Sherry still had her fair share of critics.

Following her safe return, an online blog post was released.

Following her safe return, an online blog post had surfaced from 2007 that had some people asking questions. The post had originally appeared on a white supremacy website called skinheads.com.

It detailed the author's adolescent years, during which her high school experience suffered because she was, quote, defending myself against the Latinos. The chief problem was that I was drug

free, white, and proud of my blood and heritage. This really irked a group of Latino girls who would constantly rag and attack me. The author detailed an incident at one of her volleyball games. One of the Latina girls had apparently called her dad a Nazi, which enraged the teen and provoked her to launch an attack. It took three full-grown men to pull her off.

By then, she had broken the nose of one of her tormentors. The author used this event to explain

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why girls shouldn't fight, stating, we are just too fragile and break easily. She spoke proudly of her German heritage, concluding, Being white is more than just being aware of my skin but of standing behind skinheads who are always around in spirit as well and having pride for my country. The author was credited as Sherry Graf. Sherry Papini's maiden name. An old account on social network site Pinterest also surfaced that was attributed to a user named Sherry Papini. The user had posted several images with pro-white and racist undertones. Sherry's critics immediately started speculating that she had made up the story of her kidnapping to ignite a race war. Latinos only made up 10% of Shasta County's population, and since Sherry's kidnapping, the minority group had faced ongoing scrutiny. According to the Sacramento Bee, local women of Latin American descent were advised not to go out in pairs, avoid driving dark-colored SUVs, and avoid going out in public unless they had a witness. Sherry's loved ones firmly denied the allegations that she had written the blog post. Sherry had been briefly married in 2007. Her ex-husband, with whom she had an amicable divorce, told reporters that Sherry wasn't racist and had a very diverse group of friends. He said the blog had been maliciously written by someone who hated Sherry in high school and that she had unsuccessfully attempted to have it removed at the time. When questioned by investigators, Sherry described the blog post as awful. She confirmed that she'd hired a lawyer to try and have it taken down. Investigators looked into the claims that Sherry had written the post herself, but were unable to ascertain its true origin. Regardless of who wrote it, they confirmed too much time had passed for it to be of any relevance to Sherry's current kidnapping case. Police openly acknowledged that there were puzzling details about Sherry's abduction, but stated they had no reason to doubt Sherry's story. On the one-year anniversary of the abduction, one of the lead investigators told People Magazine, There is no information that would indicate it's not true. 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. Case file will be back shortly. Thank you for supporting us by listening to this episode's sponsors. This show is sponsored by BetterHelp. Getting to know yourself can be a lifelong process, especially because we're always growing and changing. Things that happen to us, whether good or bad, change who we are. Therapy is all about deepening your self-awareness and understanding, because sometimes we don't know what we want or why we react the way we do until we talk through things. BetterHelp connects you with a licensed therapist who can take you on that journey of self-discovery from wherever you are. At case file, we know how important it is to look after our mental health. Even when we're feeling great, we have found therapy to be so beneficial in goal-setting and planning for our futures. We also love that BetterHelp is entirely online. We can find time to talk to a therapist that fits with our schedule and can do so from the comfort of our homes. To get started, all you have to do is fill out a brief questionnaire and you'll be matched with a licensed therapist, and you can switch therapists anytime for no additional charge. Discover your potential with BetterHelp. Visit [betterhelp.com/casefile](https://www.betterhelp.com/casefile) today to get 10% off your first month. That's BetterHelp, H-E-L-P dot com slash case file.

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For investigators behind closed doors, unanswered questions were stacking up. For starters, a motive still hadn't been established. Sherry Papini's captors had never demanded a ransom and there was no conclusive evidence to support the human trafficking theory. So why had this unassuming mother been targeted? Her abductors were seemingly part of a wider network, but there had been no other recent crimes that fit the same bill. It therefore seemed strange that they hadn't struck again elsewhere. Over time, other small inconsistencies had started to mount.

Sherry had told investigators that she had cut her foot during an altercation with her younger captor, yet there had been no evidence of such a cut when she was first taken to hospital. She'd also given conflicting accounts of when the branding had happened, first saying it had happened early on, and then changing her story and saying it happened later. Sherry had initially told investigators that she was forced to wear an adult diaper, but never mentioned this detail again. Sherry said that when she first woke up in captivity, her hands had been tied behind her back with zip ties. She explained that she'd managed to chew through the bindings, but had never explained how she managed to get her hands from behind her back.

While investigators knew it was entirely possible that Sherry's memory had been distorted by trauma, the inconsistencies raised some major red flags. Perhaps most perplexing was the fact that when Sherry was found safe, her clothing was sent off for DNA testing. Traces of unknown male DNA was found on both her underwear and sweatpants, but there was no female DNA. Investigators ran the profile through the National Codex database, in which DNA profiles from crime scenes and known offenders are stored. There were no matches. But if Sherry had been taken by two women with no one else involved, this didn't explain the DNA discrepancy.

Investigators learned early on that Sherry had a history of lying. Several of Sherry's friends had described her as a crazy and wild youth who often ran away and made up stories, including that she suffered from a heart condition. An ex-boyfriend described her as a tension-hungry. He said Sherry fabricated stories of being abused by her family and even accused him of abuse once their relationship ended.

The director of a youth program that Sherry had once participated in said that Sherry was, quote, good at creating different realities for people so that they would see what she wanted them to see, which got her really good attention.

Sherry's first marriage had been one of convenience. Her first husband was in the military and had agreed to marry Sherry so she could take advantage of his health insurance. While Sherry had told her second husband, Keith, this was due to a heart murmur, she had told her first husband it was due to complications from regular egg donation. Sherry had also told her first husband that her family was abusive. It was only after their divorce that mutual friends warned him that she had a history of lying. Investigations conducted by the Sacramento B newspaper revealed that in 2003,

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Sherry's mother Loretta had called the local sheriff's department to lodge an incident report. Loretta claimed that her daughter was harming herself and then blaming the injuries on Loretta. A deputy had provided Loretta with advice, but no further action was taken. This wasn't the only time a member of Sherry's family had reported her to the police. In 2000, Sherry's father Richard accused her of burglarizing his home. That same year, Sherry's sister Sheila had her back door vandalized. When she reported it to the police, she named Sherry as a suspect. Three years later, Richard alleged that Sherry stole money from his checking account. Although investigators had been aware of these issues, it didn't prove that Sherry was lying about her kidnapping. The hunt to find her abductors continued, but the years passed by with no arrests. By 2020, the case had long faded from the headlines, but it hadn't been forgotten by the Reading community who still wanted answers. Skepticism remained rife, while fears that kidnappers were on the loose continued to haunt locals, some of whom had been too scared to let their young daughters walk alone ever since Sherry's attack. Sherry continued to work intermittently with the police. Whenever she remembered something new that could help with the investigation, she or her husband would call to make a report. Sherry looked online to find photos of anything that shared similarities to details from her abduction, from the hairlines of her kidnappers, to the coffee table she was tied to during her branding. On August 13, 2020, Sherry and Keith Papini met with two detectives from the Shasta County Sheriff's Department who had been working the case from the beginning. They had some photos of potential suspects they wanted to show Sherry. She studied them carefully, looking at them from different angles and honing in on small features. Here is what's drawing me to this photo. But like you were saying, if someone were to lose weight, that would change. You're drawing to photo number five? Features of photo number five? Correct. And again, just for the record and for when you go back, number one is when you say three is similar, she's similar to the younger female that we've always described in everything. This part right here doesn't really match what I'm remembering. The hairline doesn't match? Smaller one, older one. And just because it's been a long time, can you remind me what number, what the younger one did, like the main parts of it compared to the older one just for the last clarity and stuff, so for the record. The younger one is the one that let me go and was the nicer of the two. The older one was really abusive and really mean and is the one that did all the really terrible things. The detectives then showed Sherry some photos of coffee tables similar to the ones she had described. Focusing on one of them, Sherry enthusiastically exclaimed, excuse my language, but it's pretty fucking similar. You said it looks very similar. What's similar? I mean, this is what I'm remembering, that feeling, you know, grabbing it and feeling that feeling, but this part is different. This part is different. That doesn't definitely. You're saying this male part looks the same as what you remember,

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but this piece right here. This part doesn't look the same, right? And what was the difference in it? That there was a lot more. There was a lot more. I don't think the picture really showed. Sherry had always described her captain's bathroom as having a unique layout. The detectives showed her some photos of bathrooms with similar designs to the one she'd described.

Sherry acknowledged the layouts were similar, but that was all.

She'd previously said there was a crack in the shower tile.

Showing a photo of a shower with a crack in it, Sherry couldn't say whether it was the same one.

After all these years, she was struggling to remember.

The detectives made it clear they weren't trying to overwhelm Sherry. There was actually a good reason for the probing. They had found the house that Sherry was held in, and they knew who was responsible. Keith Papini was elated. He pumped his fists in the air and rubbed his hands together in glee. But Sherry's reaction was surprising. She became strangely defensive.

Over the years, investigators had continued to run checks on the DNA found on Sherry's clothing in case someone new had entered the CODIS database during that time. No matches were ever made.

Then came the rise of genealogy testing, where users voluntarily submitted DNA to trace their family trees. In 2018, familial DNA had led to the apprehension of the notorious Golden State Killer, as covered in episode 53 of case file. Investigators wondered whether the same technique could be applied to identify Sherry Papini's captors. In March 2020, they ran the DNA from Sherry's clothing through an Ancestry DNA database. This time, there was a match.

The DNA in the database belonged to an individual who had two biological sons.

One of those was James Reyes, a man in his mid-30s who lived in the Californian city of Costa Mesa, 585 miles south of Reading. Reyes appeared to be a law-abiding citizen.

A check of his background revealed no major criminal record save for a drunk driving charge.

But, as police dug further, they discovered some interesting details.

James Reyes had once shared an email account with Sherry Papini. In the past, the two had made joint financial transactions. Furthermore, Reyes had once listed his address as a residence owned by Sherry's parents. Investigators searched through social media.

On an account owned by James Reyes's brother, they found a picture of a coffee table that looked exactly like the one Sherry had described being tied to while she was branded.

They went to Costa Mesa and kept a covert eye on Reyes's property.

After seeing him discard some trash, they retrieved a bottle of iced tea and sent it to the lab for testing. There was no doubt about it. The DNA on Sherry Papini's clothing had come from James Reyes. Two detectives knocked on Reyes's door and asked him a few questions about himself and his relationship with Sherry Papini. A former professional hockey player, Reyes had recently quit his job at an ice skating rink to take care of his aging grandmother. He met Sherry through a youth group as a teenager. In late 2002, the two reconnected and started dating.

They were together for several years and lived together in Costa Mesa,

but the relationship eventually crumbled. They ended things on good terms and stayed in vague contact for a few years, but Reyes said he hadn't seen Sherry in around a decade.

All he knew about her abduction was whatever was reported on in the media.

The detectives cut to the chase. They told Reyes his DNA had been found on Sherry's clothing the day she escaped her captors. Reyes seemed perplexed. He maintained the two hadn't seen one

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another

since around mid-2006. He had no explanation for how his DNA could have gotten on Sherry's clothes.

Asked point blank if he was involved in Sherry's abduction, Reyes said no.

The investigators reiterated that there was no way his DNA could have gotten on her clothing if they hadn't been in contact. They gave him several opportunities to change his story, reminding him it was a crime to lie to law enforcement, but Reyes maintained he had nothing to do with the abduction. After almost an hour of questioning, Reyes cracked.

I didn't kidnap her, he said. A friend in need asked me for help.

According to James Reyes, he was cleaning out his house in 2015 when he came across some of Sherry's old belongings. He sent them to her parents' house. Not long after that, Sherry contacted him out of the blue. She needed his help.

She said her husband had been beating and raping her and she didn't know what to do.

She'd reported the abuse to police, but her husband had connections with law enforcement and nothing had been done. At a loss, Sherry told Reyes she'd hatched a plan. She was saving money and was going to run away to stay with him. Reyes was taken aback, but more than willing to help a friend in need. Sherry asked him to get a prepaid burner phone so they could speak without fear of her husband finding out. The two maintained regular contact from that point on.

In the summer of 2016, Sherry gave Reyes a set of instructions.

Rent a car and to drive to Reading to pick her up. Tell no one.

James Reyes's drink driving charge prohibited him from renting a car.

Instead, he organized a co-worker to hire one for him.

It was a dodge-challenger sports car, not an SUV as Sherry had described her kidnappers as using. On November 2, 2016, Reyes set out on the nine-hour drive.

When he got to Reading, Sherry texted directions on where to pick her up near Old Oregon Trail.

When Reyes got there, Sherry was wearing jogging clothes and sweating.

She jumped into the back seat and laid low. Reyes didn't see what she did with her phone.

The two drove back to Costa Mesa, rarely stopping except for gas.

Sherry laid down and napped for the entire journey, while Reyes struggled to keep his eyes open after

so many hours behind the wheel.

Reyes lived in a suburban neighborhood in Costa Mesa.

Once they were at Reyes's apartment, he claimed they both did their own thing.

Reyes went about his normal routine, going to work each day and sometimes playing hockey at night.

He slept on the couch while Sherry took his bedroom.

He left Sherry to her own devices, assuming she was doing whatever she felt necessary to do.

Assuming she was doing whatever she felt necessary to deal with her situation.

Reyes claimed he had no input in any of Sherry's plans. He simply went along with whatever she told him to do. He bought her new clothes, cleaning supplies, food and chains. He bought it up the window. At no point did Sherry leave the house, nor did anyone else come over.

Reyes did confide in his cousin that Sherry was there, explaining that he was helping protect her.

But all this didn't explain Sherry's extensive injuries. When asked about those, Reyes responded.

She did all that while she was here.

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Reyes claimed that Sherry hid herself to create bruises, and that at her request, he agreed to help. While he never outright touched Sherry, Reyes admitted to hitting hockey pucks at her. At one point, he held up a hockey stick so that Sherry could purposely run into it, breaking her nose in the process.

Sherry cut her own hair and limited her food intake. She told Reyes to visit the local hobby store and purchase a wood burning tool. She willingly removed her shirt and sat down with her back to Reyes, handing him individual letters that she wanted burned into her skin. He didn't know what the word meant or why she had chosen it. All he knew was that it was a bible verse.

Reyes didn't own a TV, so he didn't know the full extent of the media coverage Sherry's disappearance was receiving. The detectives asked if he kept any kind of insurance, something that would prove his story if Sherry had been found in his home and denied that it was all consensual. Reyes said he hadn't felt the need to. While he didn't know what Sherry's intentions were for when the whole situation was over, he thought there was a chance they might end up together in the end. This wasn't a motivator to Reyes either way, as he wasn't really in a place to start a romantic relationship. Regardless, Reyes said that nothing remotely sexual occurred between the two. Eventually, Sherry said she missed her children and wanted to go home. Reyes had his co-worker hire him another car. In the early hours of Thanksgiving morning, Sherry gathered up a pillowcase of items, including chains. The pair drove to Yolo County, where Reyes dropped Sherry off on the side of the road. From there, he returned home to retrieve his car, then continued to his aunt's house for Thanksgiving lunch. He hadn't spoken to Sherry since. Reyes admitted he'd looked Sherry's case up from time to time. He didn't know what possessed her to

blame the abduction on two fictional Hispanic women. He had considered whether he'd get in trouble,

but justified his involvement to the detectives. Quote, When it comes down to it, I was doing an old friend a favor.

When investigators saw James Reyes' bedroom, it was exactly as Sherry had described. The only difference was that there was no chain in the closet. They questioned Reyes' cousin and his wife, who confirmed that Sherry had willingly stayed with Reyes during her so-called timing captivity. Blonde hairs found in his bedroom were tested for DNA and confirmed to have come from Sherry Papini. Other data, including car rental records and cell phone data, also confirmed to James Reyes' version of events. He agreed to a polygraph test and passed. Friends of Reyes told detectives that he was the nicest guy alive, to a fault.

Armed with this information, the detectives repeatedly reminded Sherry who was a crime to lie to federal agents. When they told her they'd identified the house where she'd been held captive, she was visibly caught off guard. She seemed reluctant to receive the information, which confused her husband, Keith. The detectives told Sherry they'd found DNA and uncovered several inconsistencies in her story. Still, Sherry seemed perplexed. She asked to have a moment alone to speak to her husband.

Alone, Sherry and Keith began speaking in whispers. Sherry explained the reason she is hesitant to have her captor's identity revealed was because she didn't want the younger woman to be arrested.

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When the detectives came back into the room, Sherry admitted that she didn't want the younger of her captors to be punished. It was clear that she wasn't going to budge from her version of events. Detectives gave it to her straight, saying, the DNA that was on you belongs to James Reyes.

The reason why the brand is because he went to the store and bought the brandy tools and branded you. The reason why your nose was broke is because of a hockey stick.

I know all of those things, and I know there was no sex. I know all of that because he passed a polygraph test. That said, it's not an abduction. She asked me to come together. I rented a car, drove up and picked her up. He passed the polygraph test, Sherry. That's not what happened. What didn't happen, Sherry?

I don't know. No, there's no way. It's James. There's no way. There's no way. The DNA doesn't lie. His DNA was on you. There's no way. Robert saw you in the house while you were down there. While everything was out of control, his cousin. Why everything ran out of control on the initial. There's no way. It's 100% Robert's DNA. You even collected blonde hairs from the room.

There's no way. It's James. There's no way. Why are you saying it's not James?

Why are you saying it's not?

He approached me. What's up? We were friends. There's no way. And he came and got you because you asked him. Don't. When was the last time you had contact with James?

Sherry sat with her head in her hands sobbing. Confronted with the truth about how she received her injuries, she acted confused. She said she hadn't seen James Reyes in over 10 years. Confronted again and again with evidence, Sherry continued to play dumb. The detectives asked Keith to leave the room. Alone with Sherry, they asked her whether she was trying to escape an abusive marriage or teach Keith a lesson. Sherry sobbed even harder. She tearfully admitted to speaking with other men when she shouldn't have. Why would I do that? She sobbed almost incoherently.

I don't want to leave my husband. I love my husband.

The detectives made it very clear that James Reyes had confessed to his part in the whole ordeal. They gave Sherry numerous opportunities to come clean, letting her know they couldn't help her if she continued to lie. Nobody else. You got nothing out of this. And you're welcome to go home, Sherry. But right now is your opportunity to tell the truth. And...

Excuse me.

Are you saying that it was two females that picked you up?

What's that?

Every time I ask that question, it seems like you don't answer.

You sat in a room. You drew out two people on a sketch, Sherry.

Or what was two people, the ones that took you, that said yes or no?

Well, you were pretty clear when I asked you earlier, what did the younger one do?

You said the younger one pointed a gun at you.

She wasn't. It was just James.

James was two hours late. We have the rental records from 2016 for the vehicle that you used.

Because we wouldn't look for it, because he told me...

Because I was talking to him.

Wait, that's clear. You were talking to him. I don't...

We have to control what we can control.

No.

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We're to the point that the younger female that you've always described, is she the one that put a point of gun at you? Is that true or not?

I don't know.

You do know. You told me earlier. So earlier today, when we were talking, I asked you what did the younger one do? You told me the younger one pointed a gun at you. And let you go. That's what you said.

You let yourself go. You let yourself out of the backseat.

Never even said bye to James. Never thanked you, never enough, just to now.

Yeah, that's what James told me. Until you can start telling me that James is a liar, and start pointing things out, James passed a polygraph.

My fault that I was fucking taking this. My fault that I was flirting with other men.

It was such a stupid thing to do.

You love my children. I love my children.

That's understandable.

Here's the deal, though, Sherry.

Flirting with other men, not a crime.

Lying to me today, yes, a crime.

When asked if a female pointed a gun at her, Sherry said she couldn't remember.

She said she refused to get anyone in trouble, crying,

I know you know who she is.

The detectives told Sherry that at this point, the only person who was going to get in trouble was her.

Sherry responded tearfully.

I didn't do anything wrong. I don't understand. There's no way that it's James.

With no admission, Sherry was free to go home.

Investigators continued building their case against her for a year and a half.

It was determined that all up, law enforcement spent more than \$150,000 in resources investigating Sherry's so-called abduction.

Concerned community members who rallied behind the Pepinis had raised \$49,000 in a GoFundMe account.

The Pepinis used this money to fund a private investigator, pay off credit card debt, and other personal expenses.

In total, Sherry had received a little over \$30,500 from the California Victim Compensation Board, which had been spent on therapy, ambulances, and blackout blinds.

She also received \$127,000 in disability benefits.

By early March 2020, over five years had passed since Sherry Pepini went through with the hoax.

She was attending a piano lesson with her two children when a man burst in and said her car outside had been hit. It was all a lure by detectives. As soon as Sherry walked out,

she was placed under arrest. Given that she'd received some of the compensation payments via US Postal Service, she was charged with mail fraud, as well as making false statements.

A spokesperson for the Shasta County Sheriff's Department made a post on Facebook that read, Today is a great day for the Shasta County Sheriff's Office and for all law enforcement in this county. Not only did this Sherry take valuable resources away from real criminal investigative matters, but in a time where there are serious human trafficking cases with legitimate

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victims, Sherry Pepini used this tragic societal phenomenon to gain notoriety and financial gain. James Reyes was never charged for his involvement in the so-called abduction. It found guilty Sherry Pepini faced a possible 25 years in prison. In mid-April, she pleaded guilty to the charges in the hopes of receiving a lesser sentence. Her defense team blamed Sherry's actions on a painful upbringing and, quote, chameleonic personalities, which they said drove her to simultaneously crave family security and the freedom of youth. They said she inflicted the injuries on herself as penance, and her lies spiraled out of control when she realized what she'd done. The defense argued for one month in prison followed by seven months of home detention, stating, It is hard to imagine a more brutal public revelation of a person's broken inner self. At this point, the punishment is already intense and feels like a life sentence. The prosecution debated this, stating, Pepini's planning of her hoax kidnapping was meticulous and began months in advance. It was not merely the reaction to a traumatic childhood. They said it was important to acknowledge that, quote, an entire community believed the hoax and lived in fear that Hispanic women were roving the streets to abduct and sell women. Ultimately, Sherry Pepini was sentenced to 18 months in prison and ordered to pay restitution of just over \$300,000. She admitted to the lies but offered no explanation for her actions, telling the judge, What is done cannot be undone. It cannot be erased. I'm sorry, Your Honor. I'm sad. I feel very sad. Keith Pepini had always stood by Sherry's side. His unfaltering loyalty had seen him and his children be the victims of hate mail and threats. But as soon as the truth about Sherry's part in the kidnapping hoax came to light, Keith filed for divorce. He applied for full custody of the children, releasing one final public statement that said, The events of the past two months have been shocking and devastating. My current focus is on moving on and doing everything I can to provide my two children with as normal, healthy, and happy of a life as possible. Sherry didn't admit the truth about her lies to her family until the day before she pleaded guilty in court. In a Facebook post following Sherry's sentencing, her sister Sheila wrote, That Sherry could intentionally mislead her own beautiful children, her devoted husband, Keith, our families, the authorities, and all of you for so long is beyond comprehension and was done for reasons for which only she is aware. Sadly, despite what she has expressed to the media, she feels no remorse or guilt for the untold damage she has caused, nor for taking advantage of critical criminal, financial, and mental health resources that should have gone to help real victims in need. It deeply pains me to say this, but my sister is very disturbed, and I hope for her children's sake, once she is released, she will finally get the treatment she clearly so desperately needs. To this day, no one knows for sure what motivated Sherry Papini to stage such an elaborate hoax. Some believe she was a narcissist who craved attention, or that she wanted to be viewed as a hero. Others blame mental health issues, but various experts have struggled to come up with a diagnosis that would explain Sherry's actions. The fact that she was capable of planning and organizing such a ruse ruled out various conditions. One forensic psychologist who studied the case said, it is a mistake to assume mental illness is the cause of unusual behavior. Regardless of Sherry's motivation, this wasn't a victimless crime.

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Financials aside, Sherry's actions had a detrimental impact on others.

A spokesperson for the Shasta County Latino community told the Sacramento Bee that Sherry's false narrative deeply impacted Latina women who were unfairly treated with suspicion.

They said, this incident instilled that fear in people, and it didn't need to happen.

As the sentencing judge stated, this case is serious and there have been very real harm to society. Victims of crimes may not believe they will be believed by law enforcement because of this hoax. Sherry Papini is a manipulator. It's not as if she has seen the error of her ways.

If she had not been caught, she'd still be living the lie.