

Four decades later, Gary parole district renamed for slain officer Vanessa Cook

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Merrillville resident Irene Mitchell holds a plaque in memory of her niece, fallen state parole agent Vanessa Cook, as she and other family members pose for a photo during a ceremony to rename the Gary district parole office in Cook's honor on Monday, February 28, 2022. (Kyle Telechan for the Post-Tribune)

Forty-one years after her brutal killing, Indiana is recognizing Vanessa Cook's ultimate sacrifice as a Gary parole officer.

On Monday, state officials renamed Gary Parole District 6, at 569 Tyler St., in Cook's honor. She's believed to be the state's first Black woman law enforcement officer killed in the line of duty.

While police nabbed Cook's teenage killers quickly, it inexplicably took decades to establish a line of duty connection.



Family members of fallen state parole agent Vanessa Cook, sister Dana Cook-Anderson, on left, and cousin Valerie DaSilva, hug during a ceremony to rename the Gary district parole office in Cook's honor on Monday, February 28, 2022. (Kyle Telechan for the Post-Tribune)

Officials credited Jeffrey Williams, co-founder of the Indiana Law Enforcement Memorial, for his diligent research, which spanned 14 years and culminated in linking Cook's parole officer duties to her killers.

"Her death was due to her work in parole," said Gary Parole District Supervisor Eric Kruper during Monday's brief ceremony at the parole office attended by Cook's family, Gary Mayor Jerome Prince and Police Chief Brian Evans. "She was the supervising agent for one of the men," Kruper said.

Cook's family expressed gratitude in accepting a plaque in Cook's honor that will be hung in the district's main office.



Merrillville resident Irene Mitchell holds a plaque in memory of her niece, fallen state parole agent Vanessa Cook during a ceremony to rename the Gary district parole office in Cook's honor on Monday, February 28, 2022. (Kyle Telechan for the Post-Tribune)

Troy Keith, state director of parole services, said a sign will be erected outside the district office in May.

"I appreciate this research and acknowledgment from the Cook family. I miss my sister every single day," said Dana Cook-Anderson, of Clarksville, Georgia. "Vanessa was my older sister, we shared so much together.

"If you met my sister, you would automatically love her. She had that spirit of love about her. ... When this happened, I couldn't really believe it. Who would want to harm her, she was so gentle."

Cook-Anderson was just 19 and in college in Atlanta when her cousin, Arlene Mitchell-Pace, broke the news to her after a phone call from her own mother.



Indiana Parole services Director Troy Keith, on right, holds up a plaque created in memory of fallen state parole agent Vanessa Cook as parole district supervisor. Erik Kruper stands nearby during a ceremony to rename the Gary district parole office in Cook's honor on Monday, February 28, 2022. (Kyle Telechan for the Post-Tribune)

Irene Mitchell, Cook's aunt, identified her niece's body in the morgue because Vanessa Cook's parents were too overwhelmed by grief.

"I would never want another family to go through what we went through," she said. "Vanessa was a role model," said Mitchell, of Merrillville.

A graduate of East Chicago Roosevelt and Western Michigan University, Cook had served as a parole agent for three years, assigned to the Gary Parole District and handling juvenile cases in Lake County.

Cook's family reported her missing Nov. 12, 1980. An account reported she had been last seen at 6 p.m. driving alone in the 5300 block of West 21st Avenue. Police said she was abducted.



Family members of fallen parole agent Vanessa Cook pose for a photo during a ceremony to rename the Gary district parole office in Cook's honor on Monday, February 28, 2022. (Kyle Telechan for the Post-Tribune)

Three days later on Nov. 15, children playing in a wooded area, near 25th Avenue and Taney Street, discovered Cook's body. Earlier that same day, Cook's wallet was found near 21st Avenue and Madison Street with identification and credit cards, but without cash.

Her car, later seen being driven near the Dorie Miller Homes at 1722 East 21st Ave., was reported on fire Nov. 13 at the entrance to Waldheim Cemetery at 19th Place and Pierce Street.

Authorities said Cook's assailants shot her three times and raped her.

Cook was 25.

Three Gary teenagers were charged in connection with Cook's murder Nov. 24.

Two of them, Carl Crawford, 17, and Josea Carter, 16, both testified against the shooter identified as Lem Williams, 19, a parolee under Cook's supervision. Carter also pleaded guilty to rape.

Williams was spared the death penalty after Edna Cook told prosecutors she didn't want him put to death for killing her daughter. Williams then pleaded guilty and received a 55-year sentence in 1982.

He was discharged in January 2009 after serving 28 years.

Edna Cook died Jan. 20 on her daughter Vanessa's birthday.

In 2020, Cook's name was added the Indiana Law Enforcement Memorial.

Cook's slaying was one of 85 in Gary in 1980. Jimmy Carter was in the White House and Richard Gordon Hatcher was in his third term as mayor.

It's theorized by the Law Enforcement Memorial that authorities couldn't verify whether her murder came as a random violent crime at a time when Gary was becoming known as a "murder capital," or if her death was tied to her job.

Despite repeated attempts to make the link, research in the case was suspended in 2008.

Jeffrey Williams used newspaper archives reporting on the suspects' arrests to solidify the connection.

Kruper said the renaming of the district parole office honors Cook's legacy.

"Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God," he said.

Carole Carlson is a freelance reporter for the Post-Tribune.

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