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LONG ISLAND / CRIME

Hempstead woman's specially equipped van recovered



Detective John Liston return a minivan that had been stolen in May to Claire Helfenbein on Wednesday, June 14, 2017, in Hempstead. Photo Credit: Howard Schnapp

By Miya Jones

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Updated June 14, 2017 6:57 PM

A Hempstead woman was reunited with her specially equipped van Wednesday, more than three weeks after it was stolen from her driveway, Nassau County police said.

Claire Helfenbein, who uses a wheelchair, woke up on May 21 to see that her van had disappeared from her driveway. She had been able to buy the van, which is equipped with a lift and special driving seat, thanks to an anonymous donor at her church and other community efforts, she said.

"I didn't think I would see my little van again, because even the police said to me they think it's gone," Helfenbein said.

But on Sunday, Helfenbein received a call from police stating they had possibly found the van, she said. Later that day, police confirmed the van, which Helfenbein affectionately calls "Lucky," had been recovered.

Helfenbein said the media played a significant role in the van's return.

"It was just a couple of days after we talked to the media and shortly thereafter, Lucky is back," Helfenbein said.

Nassau County detectives brought the freshly washed van to her house Wednesday, she said. The only things taken from the vehicle were a tire and her CDs, so a donated spare tire is being used for now, said Helfenbein, who has two children.

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"I'm happy we have it back," said Helfenbein's daughter Maghan, 19. "My mom always teaches me that in bad situations we should continue to pray and that God will always shed light on any dark situation, and I feel like he really did."

Police said officers recovered the van on Sunday at 9:25 a.m. in front of a house on Sally Court in East Meadow. The investigation is ongoing.

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