

# Two years of pain, struggle in search for missing paperboy

By MARGARET STAFFORD  
Associated Press Writer  
WEST DES MOINES, Iowa — They sold candy on street corners to raise money. They sent posters around the country. They hired private eyes. They testified before Congress. And still their boy is missing.

Wednesday will mark two years since Noreen and John Gosch's 12-year-old son Johnny set out to deliver his Sunday newspaper route and never returned.

"Wednesday's going to be a terrible day ... a long, awful day," Mrs. Gosch said in an interview. "You always remember, but on Sept. 5, it hurts a little more."

The Gosches have been leaders in a growing nationwide effort to educate Americans about missing children but, Mrs. Gosch said, "The bottom line is that my son is still missing. That's what it all boils down to for me."

Gosch has said he and his wife would not cease their search "until our bones are dust and we can't move."

Their search took on extra incentive in August when another Des Moines newsboy disappeared, under eerily similar circumstances.

Eugene Wade Martin, 14, had gone to a street corner early Aug. 12 to pick up his copies of the Des Moines Sunday Register for delivery. Witnesses saw him talking to a man.

It was almost a carbon copy of Johnny's disappearance. He had also gone to a street corner to pick up his papers. Witnesses reported seeing him talking to a man who

seemed drunk or high on drugs. Despite searches, reward offers of more than \$100,000 and quick police action, there are no solid leads in the Martin case.

The major difference in the cases, said Mrs. Gosch, was how police and townspeople immediately responded to Eugene's disappearance. The Gosches' have been bitterly critical of law officers for refusing to treat Johnny's disappearance as an abduction until the trail was cold. They said police didn't start looking for their son for 72 hours.

"It was an atrocity that they didn't look for Johnny Gosch like they did for Gene Martin," Mrs. Gosch said. "At least the Martins didn't have to go through what we did, at least they didn't have the added burden of fighting the system."

One reason for the quick attention in the Martin case was "Johnny Gosch bill," an Iowa law passed this year making it mandatory that police search for missing persons as soon as they are reported.

Law enforcement officials say they are continuing their search for Johnny.

"We absolutely are still involved in that case," said FBI agent John Evans. "Whenever we receive any information, it's covered. We are doing everything humanly possible to get that child returned to his parents."

Both Evans and Sgt. Lyle McKinney of the West Des Moines Police Department said they were working on the assumption that Johnny is alive.

"I can't afford the luxury of theories about whether he's alive or dead," McKinney said. "We're still working on it. Obviously, the tips have slowed down, but we still get information from all over and we check on it."

Reported sightings of Johnny Gosch still come in. The boy was reportedly seen in Florida and Corpus Christi, Texas, last year. In February, his mother said a boy who sounded like Johnny called three times in one night, sounding drugged or injured. The calls were too brief to trace.

Mrs. Gosch said the descriptions of the boy believed to be Johnny say he now has long hair, walks with a limp, has slurred speech and is almost 6 feet tall. Each time a sighting is reported, the Gosches' private detective responds. So far, the closest he's come is within four days of the boy — and a man who is with him all the time.

"It's good on the one hand because we know he's alive," Mrs. Gosch said. "But it's frustrating because we can't be there at the same time. Someday, we will be."

The Gosches believe their son was captured for a national child pornography ring. Law officers have told her "stringers" are sent to get young children for pedophiles.

"We've been told these creeps

get \$12,000 to \$20,000 a head, depending on how satisfactory the children are," Mrs. Gosch said. "Hey, the risks are pretty high if they get caught, so the pay has to be good."

The authorities have not officially linked the cases of the two missing paperboys, but the public has. Hundreds of volunteers helped search for both boys after Eugene disappeared.

Mrs. Gosch said she was torn between gratitude for the help and anger that it didn't come sooner. Mostly, she's angry.

"You bet I'm angry," Mrs. Gosch said. "Some people helped us, but a large percentage of the people in Des Moines condemned us. We faced a lot of narrow-mindedness and apathy in this town. It left a bad taste in my mouth."

Dallas Davis, a neighbor, shares the family's anger.

"Noreen Gosch has been force-feeding this state for two years about missing children," Ms. Davis said. "But people still sit on their fannies, they still won't believe their children are in trouble."

There are two other Gosch children — Joe and Kristy, both grown — who have also felt the ordeal keenly.

"They are angry too, and

frightened that this kind of thing can happen and people can react so cruelly," Mrs. Gosch said.

When Kristy Gosch was selling candy to help raise money for the detectives, a woman spat on her, saying "Your mother is disgusting and I wouldn't do anything to help her."

Mrs. Gosch told of having people watch her while she shopped for groceries, and say things like, "What's she doing buying avocados when her boy is missing?"

At the end of one of Mrs. Gosch's speeches, a man stood up and said he thought she didn't have a son named Johnny and had made the whole thing up to get attention.

"I told him I hoped the next child taken was his," she said. It was the only time she has lost her composure in public.

But Mrs. Gosch is also quick to note the good things that have come along with the bad.

"We have met some wonderful, kind people that we never would have known without this," she said. "We have made some positive changes to help the missing

children and we're going to push for more."

But the stress takes its toll. The Gosches sometimes "are so tired we feel we can't move another inch," she said. And at times she can't believe her son is gone.

"Sometimes in the middle of the night I'll wake up and think it's all been a nightmare and I'll go down to Johnny's room. Then I open the door and he's not there and I remember."

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Staff Photo By Robert John Mihovil

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Aggie Mom Mayor Jan Coggeshall buys tickets for the Sept. 12 Texas A&M scholarship fund-raising event from Frank Urbanic, program chairman. Head Coach Jack Pardee of the Houston Gamblers football team will be guest speaker at the event 7 p.m. Sept. 12 at the V.F.W. Post 880 Hall, 245h and Ave. K. A shrimp gumbo dinner with free beer will be served and four tickets to Gamblers football will be raffled off. Dinner tickets, \$10 each, will serve as raffle tickets. No tickets will be sold at the door. For tickets, mail check to Galveston County A&M Club, P.O. Box 972, Galveston, 77553. Tickets paid for will be at the door for pick-up.

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