

The unbearable lifetimes of waiting Families of missing children live on faith and hope

By Sharon Cohen

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ST. JOSEPH, Minn. — The fliers with Jacob's smiling face are yellowing, the ribbons bearing his name are tattered, the tips to investigators are dwindling. Time fades almost everything — except hope.

Hope is what guides and drives Patty and Jerry Wetterling, from what they do and say to how they think and pray. For almost four months, they've prayed that their abducted son, Jacob, will return home.

Theirs is a story with a beginning and a middle, but no end.

"Every day, you're suspended," Patty Wetterling says. "There's no meaning to days and nights and weeks. Some people call and say, 'It's been seven weeks, it's been eight weeks.' After five minutes, it was too long. . . . It's painful to me every morning when I wake up and he's not here. It's wrong."

A MASKED GUNMAN grabbed Jacob Wetterling, 11, as he, his brother and a buddy rode back from a convenience store. The abductor ordered the two other boys to run or he'd shoot, then disappeared into the darkness with Jacob — less than a half-mile from the family's home.

No night will ever seem longer, no feeling more helpless. A missing child, a stunned family. Then days of helicopters, dogs and the National Guard scouring the fields. Patty and Jerry were afraid they'd find something, and afraid they'd find nothing.

Fears have since turned to frustration. Jacob's name is no longer a staple of the local news. The family's 24-hour police guard left weeks ago. The 70-member investigative team has shrunk to about a dozen.

Jerry Wetterling, 41, a chiropractor, is back at work. The three children are back in school. But skating, fishing and football outings have been replaced by fund-raisers and efforts to keep the story alive.

"We're not ready to pull together as a family of five and go on," says Patty Wetterling, 40. "That's not right yet for us." She pauses, then adds: "I don't ever want that to happen."

For the Wetterlings, it's not if Jacob will return, but when. Hope is their theme. Tens of thousands of "Jacob's Hope" hats, white ribbons, signs, buttons and T-shirts have been distributed nationwide. The words adorn a candle atop City Hall and a sign in front of the family home in this quiet central Minnesota town of 3,200.

"WE CHOOSE to remain hopeful because we believe we're going to get Jacob back," Patty Wetterling says. "Kids do come home after a very long time."

Of nearly 24,000 missing children reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in a 5½-year period ending in December, abductions by strangers accounted for less than 4 percent. Most other disappearances involved family members or runaways.

Despite the "public sense these cases are doom and gloom," about 60 percent of children in long-term abductions by strangers are found alive, said Ernie Allen, the center's president.

One of the most publicized, Steven Stayner, disappeared in California at age 7 in 1972 and surfaced in 1980 at a police station about 200 miles away, with a 5-year-old boy his abductor had snatched. Stayner was killed in a motorcycle-car accident last year.

But others remain haunting mysteries.

Investigators in the Wetterling case have logged about 20,000 calls, tips and potential suspects since the Oct. 22 abduction. They've released sketches of a 40- to 50-year-old man who last year kidnapped, sexually assaulted, then released a boy 10 miles away, and another of a man with a menacing stare spotted in the store the same day Jacob was there.

Corporations, famous athletes and hundreds of everyday people also have joined the search. A local pharmacist called dozens of folks in different area codes with the Wetterlings' phone number in case Jacob got free and didn't know about long distance or wasn't sure where he was.

A volunteer office, including people who don't even know the family, directs the publicity effort.

Jacob's parents travel the country, making TV and radio appearances, patiently and articulately answering questions, baring their souls to America in hopes of finding their boy.

The Wetterling house is filled with signs of

Jacob, a sixth-grader with a budding interest in the trombone, a passion for sports and, his family says, a keen sense of fairness.

His orange parka hangs in his closet, his hand-drawn picture of a Teen-age Mutant Ninja Turtle and posters of sports heroes line his walls. His dog, named after football player Marcus Allen, pads around waiting for his pal.

As weeks turn to months, the house has been decorated with balloons, inspirational poems, letters and cards from strangers, paper birds from schoolchildren, a hand-scrawled message "We Won't Give Up," and a note from his 8-year-old sister, Carmen: "We are so sorry. . . . Evrybuty cry'd very hard. I love you. . . ."

Trevor, 10, who was with Jacob that night, thinks of his brother, too. When he recently got a baseball player's autograph, he collected an extra one. He often sleeps in his parents' room and didn't want to return to school.

"I SAID there's a law that says kids have to go to school and he said, 'Even when your brother's missing?'" his mother recalls. "I didn't know what to say to that."

The Wetterlings say attending Trevor's hockey games is a sad reminder of Jacob's love of the sport and skill as a goalie.

But some tasks are grimmer. Jerry had to check to see if Jacob was in pornographic pictures police recovered in an impounded car in Minneapolis.

Both Wetterlings are involved in the community: Patty once was PTA president, Jerry led the Chamber of Commerce and a local NAACP chapter. Now, finding Jacob is their work.

The Wetterlings say they don't think of the "what ifs."

"I'm not unrealistic, but I can't function if I think about all the bad stuff," Jacob's mother says. "If I get down, lots of times I'll go find a group of kids because kids symbolize hope."

Jerry is an idealist, Patty an optimist. That hasn't changed.

"I have always been the type of person that, if there's a 5 percent chance of doing something, I want to be in that 5 percent," she says. "If there's one chance in a million that Jacob can still come home, I want Jacob to be the one."

They live with a double agony: loss and uncertainty. Parents of abducted children share the painful anxiety that comes with not knowing if or when they'll ever see their sons and daughters again. Here are three families who have endured the worst, but hope for the best:

Ilene Misheloff

Mike and Maddie Misheloff recently marked the saddest milestone of their lives: the first anniversary of their daughter's disappearance.

Ilene Misheloff, 13, vanished in mid-afternoon on Jan. 30, 1989, walking home from school in Dublin, Calif.

"We try to keep on going, keep the publicity going, to not get too up or down about anything," Misheloff said. "We have not given up hope. We refuse to give in to despair."

On the anniversary of Ilene's disappearance, the Misheloffs led more than 500 people in a candle-light vigil, walking along the route their daughter is believed to have taken that day in the community 45 miles southeast of San Francisco.

The Misheloffs and their two sons, one of whom is Ilene's twin, have struggled with a jumble of emotions this past year.

"Frustrated, yes, that we haven't found her," Misheloff said. "Very scared what she has gone through and what she is undergoing. Angry? No. I don't know who to be angry at. I can't get angry at the world. I can't be cynical at the world because of the actions of one crazy person or maybe a few crazy people."

Though the family is "coping as best as possible," Misheloff said Ilene's twin didn't want to celebrate his 14th birthday and he and his wife can't bear to visit the ice rink where their daughter practiced competitive skating.

Misheloff, a microchip engineer, says he has put his career on hold because "Ilene is our No. 1 priority." The couple won't go anywhere they can't be reached by phone or leave town for a vacation.

"I can't conceive of this lasting for another year," he said.

Kevin Collins

David Collins devotes his days to helping parents of missing children. It's a gut-wrenching ordeal he knows about firsthand.

His son, Kevin, disappeared Feb. 10, 1984, in San Francisco. The coach who was supposed to give the 10-year-old a ride home with other children didn't notice he was missing. He was last seen at a bus stop.

His father formed the Kevin Collins Foundation for Missing Children, which has worked with more than 100 families of abducted children. He travels to their homes, helps get fliers distributed and, he said, "I listen a lot."

Collins said he has gone through different stages since 1984.

"The first six months, you're looking at every bus, every car, you're really paranoid about the whole thing," he said. "Your nerves are shot. . . . I was working 16, 17 hours a day (searching)."

"After the second year, things die down, the public becomes a little less interested. . . . the leads stopped coming," he said.

Collins said he no longer thinks of Kevin every day, but vividly remembers his last week at home and how his son, who suffered from dyslexia and was taunted at school, was "just coming into his own."

"He had gotten his first 'A' on a test," Collins recalled. "He came running in, he showed it to me, he gave me a kiss. He'd been through a lot. . . . and he was at his peak."

A picture of Kevin, the sixth youngest of nine Collins siblings, was once on Newsweek's cover for a story on missing children.

The family attends church on Kevin's birthday and, every Christmas, puts his stocking out.

"The ache is always there," Collins said quietly. "It never goes away."

Johnny Gosch

Noreen Gosch last saw her son, Johnny, as a freckle-faced boy of 12 heading off on his paper route. If he's still alive, he's a man.

"I have a real difficult time even comprehending what this boy of 20 might be like," she said. "To me, he's still 12. All those years have been robbed from us. The clock stopped."

Since Johnny disappeared from West Des Moines, Iowa, on Sept. 5, 1982, his family has raised tens of thousands of dollars to hire investigators, made hundreds of speeches and pushed for laws to require immediate police searches when children are reported missing.

They've been victimized, too: One man tried to swindle them, and phone solicitors falsely claimed they were collecting money on Johnny's behalf.

Gosch said it took almost five years before family life got back to normal. Her heart and stomach pains have subsided. But her memories of Johnny haven't dimmed.

"You might hear a song on the radio that might be your child's favorite or pick up something your child gave you or you gave them," she said. "The minute you see it, touch it, feel it or hear it, it just floods back like the child is here."

When she recently posed for a photograph for a story on Johnny, she was asked to hold one of his belongings. "The minute I touched his jacket, I could picture the night we bought it at the store. I could hear him say, 'Oh, Mom, I really love it.' It was like reliving the experience."

The Gosches, who have two other grown children, remain hopeful.

"We know that some day this case is going to be solved," she said. "I want to know if he's alive, of course. If his life has been taken, we can deal with it, but we want to know. . . . I really thought we would have some answer by now."