

WANNISHED

In life's terrible lotteries, the chance that a child will vanish has some of the longest odds. But like a rare cancer, it can happen. And once a search has ended without answers, how does a parent carry on?

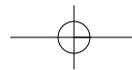
This is the story of three mothers who have survived the unimaginable. Each believes in sharing her experience so that she can further a cause that has become part of celebrating her missing child and overcoming the evil that has invaded her family's ordinary life.

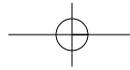
Dr. Robert Maunder, a psychiatrist at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital who helps people cope with extraordinary stress, says it's difficult to find words to describe any good that might come from the suffering of these mothers. "There isn't language that solves that problem," he says. But somehow, despite terrible loss, some people do create good. The research tells us they do it by finding moral purpose. For some, religion helps. For others, an altruistic objective can be the difference between "living a meaningful life and a life without meaning," Maunder says.

For Shirley Brown, Judy Peterson and Wilma Derksen, every parent's worst fear—that her child could vanish—became a reality. What these women have since created as a result of their losses has led to extraordinary lives of meaning—for themselves and many others.

When their children went missing, these mothers somehow learned to live without answers—then carried on to help other families

BY CHRISTINE LANGLOIS





SHIRLEY BROWN

At 72, Shirley Brown has lived for 40 years without knowing what happened to her eldest son, Robbie. He went missing one warm August day in 1968 when he was 12. That afternoon, Brown, Robbie and baby Catharine had spent a lazy time at the beach on Lake Simcoe, near their home in a tiny town just outside Pefferlaw, Ont. Robbie's two younger brothers were at church camp. Around 4 p.m., Robbie went off to do his paper route, planning to be back home for supper. Instead, he disappeared—and no trace of him has ever been found.

For Brown, the agony of those first hours, days and weeks—the creeping realization that her son hadn't just

dawdled on his way home; the endless questioning by police; waking up that September morning when Robbie wasn't there to start Grade 8—turned into eerie emptiness. This was punctuated by overwhelming fear and grief when finally the search ended and the family was left to its own devices. Brown was afraid she would lose her mind. Standing at the kitchen sink, she would be overcome with the violent urge to run into the street screaming Robbie's name.

About two years after Robbie had gone missing, Brown asked a police officer on the case if he thought her son could be alive. He told her gently that he didn't think so; that, at 14, if Robbie had been held somewhere, he

would have found a way to escape. Brown and her husband decided to let hope go and grieve for a dead child. "I just prayed that whatever had happened to him had been quick," she says.

Today, talking on the telephone

from her home in Hamilton, there's a warmth in Brown's voice. She's a cheerful woman who laughs easily. She says the support of her husband, who died in 2001, and her faith have sustained her. "God is my peace," she says.

For many years, she has shared her story of loss and her personal journey to carry on "because I decided to use the experience to help people, rather than wallow in it."

Then, a few years ago, something happened that pushed her to work harder to share her story. Someone found a skull near where Robbie had last been seen. But when Brown and her son Ross checked with the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), Ross says, the OPP could find no record of Robbie's case. Somehow, between municipal amalgamations and the transition to computerized record-keeping, the file had been lost.

This explained why Brown had never heard from anyone: For years, whenever the family moved, she wrote to the OPP detachment that had handled the case in order to update her contact information and to ask that she be notified if ever a body or clues were found. And it drove home how hard it was to live without knowing

the truth. "You never lose the need for answers," Brown says.

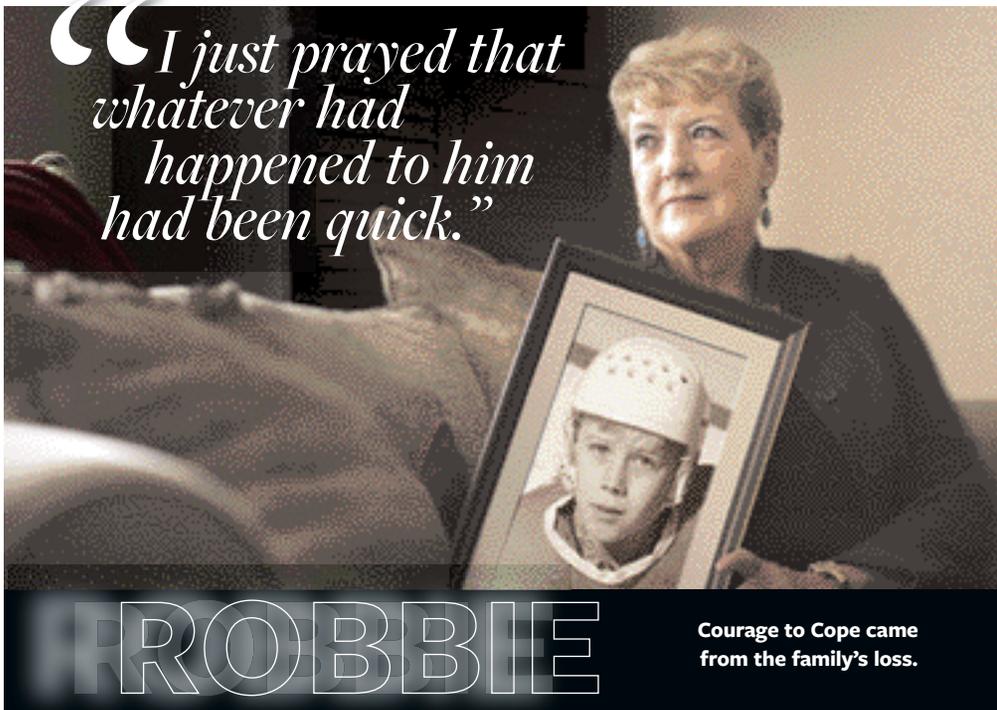
Although the file was eventually found, this was a turning point for the Browns. They felt they needed to do more to help other families in similar circumstances. While Robbie's is a rare case, there are many missing children. And whether runaways or victims of parental abduction, "it feels the same to the parent," Brown says.

So the family launched Courage to Cope, an organization that offers simple one-on-one help, with people who will listen as families talk about the missing children, and express what they are feeling. "We understand the hurt," Brown says.

JUDY PETERSON

Ever since her 14-year-old daughter, Lindsey Nicholls, went missing in 1993, Judy Peterson, 53, has lived with the guilt that she could not keep her eldest daughter safe. "Guilt is part of being a parent," she says. "When a child is missing, guilt comes in huge waves."

Lindsey was a rebellious teenager who, not long before she vanished, had run away from the family's new home in Comox Valley on Vancouver Island to go back to the Vancouver suburb of Delta where the family had lived previously. After three months, she agreed to return to Comox Valley, but she insisted on living in a foster home. She was there three days when she headed off to meet friends—likely by hitchhiking, Peterson says—and simply disappeared.

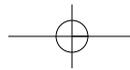


"I just prayed that whatever had happened to him had been quick."

ROBBIE

Courage to Cope came from the family's loss.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY GEOFF GEORGE



It's been 15 years, and Peterson, a business analyst for B.C. Ferries, still has no answers. In those first weeks, she frantically called her daughter's friends and put up posters all over Vancouver, where she thought Lindsey might have gone. She pushed the police to help her search, but initially got little support because Lindsey had run away before. And although the RCMP eventually put significant time and effort into the case, following up on more than 300 tips and doing three major reviews of the file, Peterson believes their "first window of opportunity" was missed.

About six weeks after Lindsey disappeared, Peterson found out about the Missing Children Society of Canada, an organization that provides investigative support to families like hers. First, workers mailed her a registration form; then, they sent an investigator. "That's when I really got scared, because they were also worried about

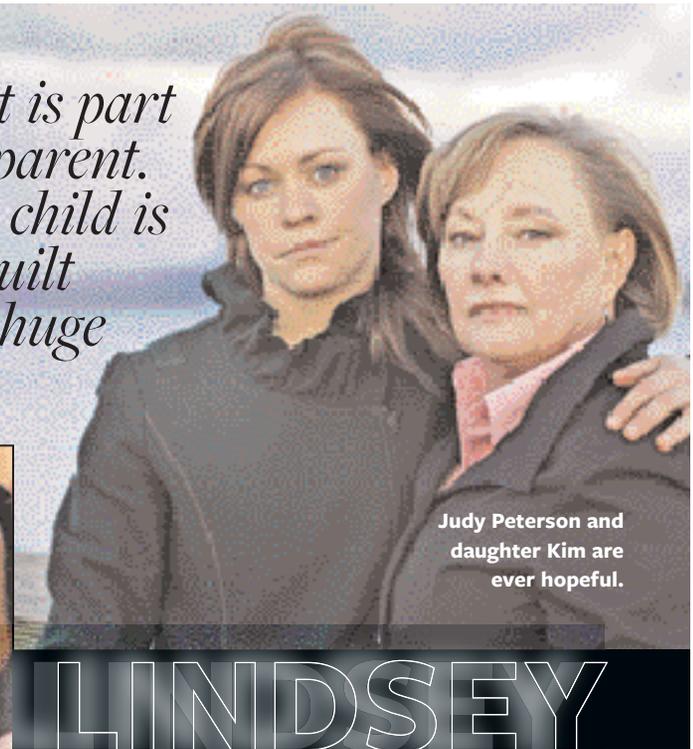
Lindsey," Peterson says. The investigator found nothing.

Eventually, Peterson had to resume her life for the sake of her younger daughter. "Kim was only 11. I struggled to keep things as normal as possible—going to work, soccer practice, taking the dog out." But shortly after Lindsey went missing, Peterson and her husband divorced. (She has since remarried.) Through it all, however, Peterson never gave up searching. Although she held on to a tiny hope that her daughter could be alive, she also began to follow up reports of bodies found, checking on dozens of cases.

In 2000, Peterson wanted to have her DNA checked against that in the newly created National DNA Data Bank in Ottawa, in case the bank contained Lindsey's DNA. But she was shocked to learn this would not be possible. Although the bank currently contains DNA samples from nearly 150,000 convicted offenders and over 43,000 DNA profiles derived from crime-scene evidence, it does not contain DNA from found human remains.

That's when Peterson started fighting for what would come to be known as "Lindsey's Law." "I have a right to know if my daughter is lying in a coroner's office somewhere," she says. She lobbied politicians to amend Canada's DNA Identification Act to include an

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Judy Peterson and daughter Kim are ever hopeful.

LINDSEY

SHANNON MENDES

index of human remains and a Missing Persons index, and to allow for DNA cross-referencing. She's written to every MP, spoken at police conferences and had numerous media interviews. The proposed amendment has received some support, including from the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security in the House of Commons, and from a few MPs—Gary Lunn (Saanich-Gulf Islands, B.C.) and Mike Wallace (Burlington) have introduced private member's bills on the topic. But Lindsey's Law still hasn't made it through Parliament.

Despite this, Peterson will keep fighting—for herself and for the fam-

ilies of the nearly 5,000 missing people in Canada. When her daughter's case went cold, Peterson felt there was nothing left she could be doing. But since getting involved with Lindsey's Law, she says, "I feel I am still doing something to search for her."

WILMA DERKSEN

It's been a tough morning for Wilma Derksen. The Winnipeg woman visited a mother whose son and pregnant daughter-in-law were murdered in an apparent gang slaying. An arrest had been made, and Derksen was there to support the woman through the media onslaught.

Support and Advocacy

Courage to Cope offers support and coping skills to families dealing with the ongoing pain of a missing child.
www.couragetocope.org

Lindsey's Law, a proposed amendment to Canada's DNA Identification Act, would allow for the cross-referencing of DNA to help determine whether identified remains might be those of a missing person.

www.lindseyslaw.com

Victims' Voice aims to create understanding of victims of crime; to give emotional support and provide information to victims; and to advocate on their behalf.

www.mcc.org/canada/victimsvoice



“There is a huge stigma around being a crime victim. We had failed.”

Candace's body was found, but the Derksens still seek answers.



CANDACE

Through Victims' Voice, an organization she spearheaded as part of the Mennonite Central Committee, Derksen has made herself available to dozens of crime victims—listening, offering advice, sitting through endless court proceedings, helping to prepare victim impact statements, attending parole hearings. She does it because she has been where these families are—powerless, terrified and guilt-ridden.

On a cold afternoon in November 1984, Derksen's eldest daughter, Candace, 13, went missing on her way home from school. Candace had called from a pay phone to tell her mother that the boy she liked had washed her face in the snow. “She was thrilled,”

Derksen recalls. It was the last conversation they would have.

Candace never arrived home. She was missing for seven weeks, then her body was found—bound, but otherwise unharmed—in an abandoned shed. She had frozen to death the night she had disappeared. What happened to her remained a mystery for 24 years.

Derksen's husband, Cliff, was a Mennonite pastor, and she had just finished journalism school. They were busy parents raising three kids on one small income. Then Candace disappeared, and they were thrust into the media spotlight, pleading on television for her safe return. “It's the ugliest moment in your life. You're completely without pride,” Derksen says.

She felt terrible guilt: Why hadn't she better streetproofed her daughter? Why hadn't she gone to pick her up? And then there is the cloud of suspicion over the family: The first reports were that Candace was a runaway; and Cliff was made to take a polygraph test. “There is a huge stigma around being a crime victim,” she says. “We had failed.”

The day Candace's body was found, the father of a murdered child came to see them. He told them that what had happened to his child had destroyed him: There had been no justice for his family; and he had lost his job and, very nearly, his marriage. He had even lost the memories of his child. “He said, ‘I've come to warn you,’” Derksen remembers.

The Derksens made a conscious decision not to share this man's fate. They started to talk about forgiveness, although, Derksen says, “I'm not sure we knew what it meant.”

They started working at letting go of their hate for whoever had been responsible for their daughter's death and moving on with their lives. “You have to go through the convulsions and pain and move through the hate,” Derksen says. “You scream in the night and cry; then you pull up your socks, with lots of prayer and encouragement from others. You continue to love and try to be positive.”

And over the years, offering support to other crime victims has helped. “It's actually very life-giving to be so needed,” Derksen says.

Now, more than two decades since Candace's disappearance and death, the Derksens may get some answers. In May 2007, police arrested a 43-year-old convicted sex offender, Mark Edward Grant, and charged him with Candace's murder. The preliminary hearing is set for February 2009.

At the press conference held after the arrest, Derksen was asked if she could still forgive, and she replied that she didn't know. Then she went home and crashed. “I hid for a week,” she says.

Finally, she decided to follow a basic tenet of her Christian faith, to love her enemies. “I resolved to pray for this person, then I cried and cried.”

Derksen says that knowing even some of the truth, no matter how terrible, is better than not knowing at all. “I just ache for people who don't have answers,” she says.

In addition, there had always been the suspicion that whatever had happened to Candace was done by a family member or friend. But now that a stranger has been arrested, Derksen says, “my guilt is less.”

As she and her family members prepare themselves for the preliminary hearing and possibly a murder trial, Derksen is very conscious of staying true to the advice she has given to so many other victims touched by crime. “We're not going to allow the criminal justice system to establish the value of Candace. She was so beautiful and she's still so much a part of our family,” Derksen says. “She's my daughter who lives afar.” ■

COURTESY GLADYS TERICHOW