

# Mother of murdered child campaigns against the death penalty

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get the marshal and brought in the FBI and deputy sheriff.

The FBI set up a trailer as headquarters. Sheriff's deputies conducted a house-to-house search of every house within a 50-mile radius. Boy Scouts came in with machetes to comb through the thick underbrush. Search and rescue squads came in. People who had planes volunteered. Farmers and ranchers went out to check the back reaches of their property. Military personnel came out with tracking dogs. Businessmen released their employees for days to join in the search.

Yet, there was no sign of Susie. A week later, a sheriff's deputy who was manning the FBI trailer for the night, told us he had received a call from his wife. She had received a call from a man who said he had Susie and wanted to exchange her for a ransom. The man identified her by her "humpy" fingernails.

Susie was born with a deformity — just on her index finger. It could have been described as humpy fingernails. We had given a complete description of Susie to the FBI. . . but we had forgotten her fingernails. This man must have seen her.

A week later, we appealed through the media and asked the kidnapper to call us again. But we received no calls.

Finally, a day came that was extremely difficult for me. Every time I turned around, I saw one of my children crying, needing to give vent to the terrible feelings and tears mounting within them. It tore me apart to see my kids suffering. I couldn't bear to look at the anguish in my husband's eyes.

That night, I was weeping, filled with hatred and a desire for revenge. I said to my husband, "even if he were to bring her back alive and well this moment, I could kill him for what he has done to my family." I no sooner said those words than I heard very clearly within me "that's not the way I want you to feel."

I knew God was calling me to surrender my feelings and be willing to take on His feelings of forgiveness and love. But I wasn't willing to give up control of the situation. Finally, by the grace that God always stands ready to give, I said, "I'm willing to forgive him and

act accordingly." I felt peaceful and had the first good night's sleep since Susie was kidnapped.

SHORTLY afterwards, we went back to Michigan. We bought a tape recorder with a phone attachment to record every conversation. Three months later, he called and spoke to my oldest son. He identified Susie by her humpy fingernails again. He said he wanted to exchange her for a \$50,000 ransom, but he hadn't figured out the perfect way to accomplish this without getting caught.

The FBI traced the call to a small town in Wyoming. But by the time they got to the place of origin, the caller had departed.

After Christmas, my kids went back to school and my husband returned to work. I realized I had to deal with something that threatened to tear me apart.

I had always been taught that God was a loving father. What kind of a God is this? I questioned. The more I pondered it, the more I realized the only conclusion that would make sense to my rational mind was that there must not be a God. Maybe God's just a psychological crutch that some wise person dreamed up a long time ago to keep the human race in line.

Yet the more I thought about it, the more I realized I didn't want to believe that answer. I needed the hope that God gives for the world, for my life, for my little girl. Finally, I said, "OK, I surrender again."

It had been a year since Susie's disappearance. So the people of Montana sent an Associated Press reporter. After the interview, the reporter said "I don't understand your faith. If that had happened to my daughter, neither I nor any of my family would ever set foot in a church again."

I expressed my wish that I could someday speak to the kidnapper in person. The article was printed the day before the anniversary of Susie's abduction.

One night before the anniversary of

the kidnapping, I had a dream. It was more like a horror movie than it was captive at. I saw a hand reach into the tent and strangle Susie to the point of unconsciousness. I saw her body being pulled out and her arms fall limply to her sides. I saw her being carried away and placed on the seat of a vehicle. I saw her become conscious again and frightened. I saw her being taken into a building and disrobed. I saw everything that happened to her, but I never saw the man's face. I saw her become hysterical, screaming and crying for me. In an effort to control her, the man strangled her again — this time to death. I saw my little girl's beautiful face become ugly and contorted as her life was taken from her. Then, I saw her body be destroyed. She was decapitated and dismembered. Then the dream was over.

(When the kidnapper later made his confession, I discovered that was exactly what had happened to my little girl. I understand now that it was not a dream, but a vision God gave to me so I would know what happened to Susie.)

The next night — exactly one minute to the year of her disappearance — the kidnapper called my home. He attacked me from a sound sleep, but I had the presence of mind to turn on the tape recorder before answering the phone. Again, he identified her by her humpy fingernails and said he still wanted to exchange her for a ransom. But he hadn't figured out a way to do it. Mostly, he was very smug and taunting.

As I was listening to him talk, I was filled with genuine feelings of concern, compassion, understanding and forgiveness. He was taken aback. This wasn't what he expected. He began to drop his guard a little. He talked about things he had done and places he had gone with Susie. He said he loved her as his little girl and she loved him as her

father. Finally, he broke down and wept. He said, "I wish this burden could be lifted from me."

TO MY amazement, I discovered we had been on the phone for more than an hour. The FBI copied the tape and sent it around. When agents in Montana heard it, they felt it pointed to a man named David who had been an original suspect. He was a loner who had committed a couple of acts of violence when he was in high school. He had passed a lie detector test and there was insufficient evidence to hold him.

A few weeks later, I received a call from the Montana telephone company. A woman in their office had received a bill for an hour-long conversation made to me on the anniversary of Susie's kidnapping. I asked the woman to call the FBI.

This woman and her family lived in town, but owned property in the hills. There was a cabin on the property. The FBI went there and found bare, uninsulated telephone wires leading from the cabin. Anyone with a background in communications could put a handset to those wires and make a call.

Directly underneath the wires, there were tire tracks. The agents determined the tracks were made by brand new tires. They went to the closest tire dealer and discovered David had recently purchased this type of tire for his truck. David had been in the Marines and had a background in communications. He would have known how to make this kind of call and he would have the equipment. Also, David had worked as a handyman on this property.

The FBI also discovered that David had been in a little town in Wyoming on the same day my son had received the call. Eight months after Susie's disappearance, an 18-year-old girl disappeared from the town near the campground. Her remains were later found

on an abandoned ranch. David had been a (snubbed) suitor and was a suspect in that case too.

With all of this circumstantial evidence, the FBI went to David and said he was being considered a prime suspect in Susie's disappearance. He insisted he was innocent. And, on the advice of his attorney, he took more lie detector and truth serum tests. He passed them all.

They had only one piece of concrete evidence. The FBI had determined — in its labs — that David's voice print as recorded in a conversation between himself and an FBI agent identically matched the kidnapper's voice print as recorded in his conversation with me. THE FBI asked me if I would go to Montana and speak to David in person. They thought he may admit what happened to Susie. They feared . . . David may attempt suicide.

I felt I had been given this opportunity by God to tell David I forgave him and that God wanted him to acknowledge Susie's death so it would become a gift of life for him, so he could be the man God wanted him to be. But, in the three encounters I had with David, he was very guarded.

David called me again — a week after I returned from Montana. This time, he was calling collect from Salt Lake City, Utah. He tried to convince me that this was the real kidnapper — not David. But I recognized his voice and began to call him David. It confused him and threw him into a panic. Finally, he totally incriminated himself and said, "you'll never see your little girl again." Then, he slammed down the receiver.

Later that afternoon, David showed up in his hometown and was immediately pounced upon by FBI agents. The last call was concrete evidence. They would arrest him first thing in the morning — after preparing a warrant.

The FBI told me that from the time a connection had been made between Susie, the 18-year-old girl and David, they had gone back to the abandoned ranch where the teenage girl's remains were found. They had taken the place apart and sent items to the Smithsonian to be examined by anthropologists and biologists. . . (According to the Smithsonian's experts) part of a backbone of a young female child was contained in the last bundle. It was concrete proof of what I had already come to know in my heart. . . Susie's life had been taken from her several hours after she had been taken from me.

David was arrested, but insisted he was innocent. Agents found irrefutable proof when they searched his home. They told him that if he confessed, they wouldn't give him the death penalty. He would receive life imprisonment with a chance for psychiatric help.

David accepted the offer, confessing to taking the life of Susie, the 18-year-old girl and two young boys. There was ample evidence David had taken lives of many other children, but those deaths occurred in counties where prosecutors were holding out for the death penalty. So, David refused to confess to the other murders.

The death penalty didn't deter David from committing the murders. It only served to prevent the legal resolution of a lot of unsolved crimes. That's why I'm against it. I also see that it conflicts with my Christian principles.

At 8 a.m., David was given his breakfast tray. He was alone his last night in the jail cell.

I had to accept David's death as well as Susie's and trust that God would somehow make sense out of all this horror. God had been faithful to work a miracle of forgiveness in my heart — a heart that was once filled with hatred and a desire for revenge.

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