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Unending grief

Loved ones of the vanished never know when it's time to stop hoping

Steve Gravelle The Gazette

Iowa City Gazette

The Gazette and KCRG-TV9 are looking into unsolved cases of missing Iowans during February. Watch for Gazette reports on Sundays and KCRG reports on Wednesdays at 6 p.m. Coming this Wednesday: David Scott examines the case of Crystal Arensdorf, of Dubuque.

CEDAR RAPIDS - It was unseasonably warm, a good winter weekend for camping, when Guy Heckle walked into eternity 29 years ago tonight.

To Nancy Heckle, her son is still the dark-haired, bespectacled 11-year-old in the family photo in the living room of the trim northeast Cedar Rapids ranch house where he grew up.

"I remember him the age he was," Heckle said one morning recently. "I think about him every day."

A fifth grader at Eisenhower Elementary School, Guy was "a bright boy," she said. "He was comical" and had "a marvelous sense of humor."

Guy joined Boy Scout Troop 101, which pitched its tents along the Cedar River between Palo and Toddville, near the Duane Arnold Energy Center, the weekend of Feb. 3-4, 1973. He was last seen by his fellow Scouts about 8 p.m. that Saturday.

Troop members searched on their own for about 90 minutes before calling the Sheriff's Department. Regular and reserve deputies, Marion police and Civil Defense volunteers searched the reserve near the Cedar River's backwaters that night.

On Sunday, a searcher found Guy's blue quilted nylon parka, snagged on a log along the river's east bank. Nancy Heckle identified the coat, which remains the only trace of her son ever found.

By that Monday, 250 searchers were at work, including a bloodhound and a special search-and-rescue team from California.

Still nothing. Still.

Investigators found no sign of foul play, and Nancy Heckle, 70, realizes the discovery of Guy's jacket points to the simplest explanation: that he slipped into the icy Cedar River and drowned.

"But we don't have proof, and it's very hard not knowing," she said. "I don't have any hopes that he is alive now, but we would like to know what happened."

And there's still the outside chance.

"If it was foul play, at least one person knows, if they're still alive," she said. "If someone knows, it's not too late to give Guy's family some peace."

Until that happens, Guy's photo remains on the state Department of Public Safety's Missing Persons Clearinghouse Web site (www.state.ia.us/government/dps/dci/mpic/list), accompanied by a note stating the boy would now be 40 years old.

"We keep them on the list," said Wendie Nerem, who supervises the Web site. "They may have been declared dead for insurance purposes, but we keep them on the list until they're located."

Nerem updates the site monthly. There are 361 names, 258 of them juveniles, on this month's list.

Runaway youths are by far the most common missing persons.

According to Nerem, 88 percent of Iowa's missing persons in 2000 were juveniles, and 99 percent of missing juveniles are found to have run off on their own.

And they return home soon: In 2000, 75 percent of all cases were solved within a week, 88 percent within 30 days, and 96 percent within a year.

Nancy Heckle doubts running away, the most common explanation for missing-persons cases, applies to her son.

"He didn't have problems at home, so for him to run away, I'm sure that's an impossibility," she said.

The Heckles never had a funeral or memorial service for Guy, his mother said.

"We never did," she said. "When do you say it's OK?"

When Howard Heckle died in January 1998, his obituary noted he was preceded in death by his son. But "I don't think my husband ever did give up hope," Nancy Heckle said. "He wouldn't say if he did."

Guy's disappearance was tough on his family, including two sisters, one year and two years older than he.

"I've heard people say that kids deal with things well, but looking back, I'm not sure," said Nancy Heckle. "It disrupted our lives. It took attention away from the girls because, of course, we were concentrating on the search."

There were false leads, and for two years every February, there was the phone call.

"A young boy's voice saying 'I know where he is,' " Nancy Heckle said. "It more than likely was a crank."

"Our faith in Christ is what got us through," Nancy Heckle said. "I was a Christian before this happened, but his father wasn't. He became one because of this. Sometimes when you're desperate, you call on the Lord."

Nancy Heckle has made her peace the best she can with her son's disappearance.

"I'm sure some of my friends are saying, 'Why put yourself through this?' But it's not like I'll ever forget about it."

Illustration: COLOR PHOTO

PHOTO

Mark Christian

Nancy Heckle of Cedar Rapids sits on a couch in front of photos of her many grandchildren. Heckle's son Guy disappeared in 1973, when he was 11, while on a Boy Scout camping trip.

Guy Heckle

Vanished in 1973

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