

# Toth: Making a payment on my debt to society

by Heidi Toth  
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I think the hardest thing about being a parent would be if one of my children disappeared. The uncertainty, the difficulty of not knowing where she is, if she's safe, hurt, hungry, cold or scared, would drive me crazy. I wouldn't sleep at night, I couldn't eat, I don't even know if I would be able to focus on the daily grind of living. I'd be too overwhelmed with grief, pain and uncertainty.

The one thing I would do, though, is everything within my power to find her. I'd be driving around town to her favorite hangouts, I'd be calling her friends and her boyfriend, her teachers, coaches, coworkers, acquaintances. I'd be scouring fields, neighborhoods, parks, the Internet, everything. My life would become one endless search for my little girl.

This is why, when I found out the United Response Search and Rescue Team was holding a search on Saturday for missing Lubbock residents Joanna Rogers and Jennifer Wilkerson, I knew I had to go. If I didn't, and then I sometime found myself in this situation, I wouldn't deserve the help of friendly, concerned residents like those who joined me at Cooper High School on Saturday morning.

The search itself was relatively easy. We divided into teams, and my team went to a field north of town. We spread out in a line and started walking very slowly, pushing away waist-high weeds and staring at the ground. It was complicated most by the fact that we weren't entirely sure what we were looking for. Some of it would have been easily noticeable - a body, bones, what could be a grave. But most of it - jewelry, buttons, pieces of clothing - was less clear-cut. There was a lot of guesswork, a lot of uncertainty from a dozen inexperienced searchers.

What made the experience difficult was what I heard, what I saw in the people around me, and what I thought. I knew what I was looking for before I went; I knew anything we found would most likely not lead to a joyful reunion. And I knew that if I found anything unpleasant, I would be screwed up for life. But when URSAR was giving us instructions, vocalizing my fears, I had to fight the urge to turn and run. I listened to what to look for in a grave and to watch out for excessive flies. It hurt to hear the words spoken, and the images in my mind were terrifying.

I saw Joanna's father, broken up by the loss of his daughter but still out there, still searching, still hoping, truly sorry his daughter was no longer the only missing person. I saw Jennifer's mother and sisters wiping tears as they spoke, and one of her relatives who, despite her pain, wanted to be out in the field searching. I saw immense strength in ordinary people who were given an awful set of circumstances and, instead of buckling under the weight, stood taller and stayed strong.

I saw other people, people whose children were safe, people who didn't have to carry this burden, pick up some of the weight from those most affected. A hundred people, people who were a little afraid to be there, who were unsure about the whole thing, who wanted to do what they could but didn't know what to do, so they showed up and fought through nature, looking for something. I saw a community respond to help its own.

I didn't find anything on Saturday, except for an old towel half covered in mud. I don't think any major leads were reported from the search. I don't know if it's better nothing definitive was found; that would provide closure and certainty, but not a happy ending. Not knowing has to hurt, but there's still hope with uncertainty.

All I know is, if there's another search, I'll be there. I owe it to myself, to my future children. It might scare me, it might scar me. But I can't not do it. Because someday, it might be me.

For more information go to website: [ursarteam.org](http://ursarteam.org)