

# Sunday, August 07, 2005

## The Lovely Ladies of Lubbock Part II

He was 100 miles away when it happened. He was 100 miles away from one more opportunity to see that brilliant smile of hers. He may have felt as if he might as well have been a million miles away. She was gone, missing without a trace, and he was devastated.

On July 13, 2004, Jack Wilkerson's then 26 year-old daughter, Jennifer, went home in time to prepare to go to work. She never made it there. Her car, car keys, purse, cell phone, and all other possessions were left behind. Jennifer never picked up her check at work the next day, either. She also had plans to visit her parents that weekend.

Jack called authorities in Lubbock the very next day. He was worried, and his fears were already building like a storm cloud above the Texas plain.

The Lubbock County Sheriff's Office gave Jennifer's case immediate attention. Sgt. Greg Parrott was assigned to the case along with that of Joanna Rogers. "The disappearance of an individual can be a very stressful episode, not only for family members, but by investigating officers alike. The sense of urgency is definitely felt by our agency during these episodes. Each case is often very unique in circumstances. Regardless of investigative techniques or resources utilized, our goal is common: bring the loved one home to the families, and if foul play is feared, seek out those responsible for their disappearance."

Joe Bill Rogers, Joanna's father, was one of the first to reach out to Jack and Vikki Wilkerson, offering support, help, and resources. Joe Bill worked very hard getting posters made up and disseminated and also welcomed them into the Rogers' home to help plan the first search.

Despite the numerous searches and other resources utilized in the search for Jennifer, she was nowhere to be found.

What Jack Wilkerson did find was something he never expected. The tears that came to his eyes seemed like an endless stream representing each and every memory of his daughter.

"I miss the phone calls once or twice a week, hearing the little details of work and school and friends, of new songs or bands, the excitement of a softball games played. I miss the visits, the drives to the country to watch lightning storms and just sit in silence listening to the thunder complementing the beat of her favorite band, Tool. I miss seeing the tiny little thing who thought she could take on anyone and anything in life, and through it all, the pure joy of just being alive and living life to its fullest.

Bringing her possessions home was pretty difficult. When I feed her fish, I wish I had paid more attention during the hours she spent talking about them, but I was more entranced by her excitement over them than what she was talking about. Luckily, she kept every owner's manual on every piece of equipment she ever bought, and has a good library on how to care for them, so when she comes home, they will hopefully still survive."

The fish may survive, but the emotional toll that having a missing loved one takes on a person is tremendous. Jack fought back. He had to, for Jen. It wasn't easy, and it remains a struggle. A year doesn't change that.

"I think my greatest fear is that we may never know what happened, or why. I know that we can't change what happened, and also realize that even if she shows up tomorrow safe and sound, that our lives are changed forever - there is a peace and feeling of security that can never be completely regained.

The emotional rollercoaster has been difficult. One minute we are hopeful and confident, and the next filled with a sense of dread. Every imaginable scenario goes through your mind, and yet none of them really make sense at this point. Every day is different, depending on one's mood. Some days are met with anger, others with tears, some with fear, but mostly with hope."

Sgt. Greg Parrott speaks of the "roller coaster ride", but from a different perspective: "As an investigator, I try not to expose family members to the perpetual roller coaster of information that often pours in. When the information does not pan out, the families are devastated. Some of information, especially that which suggests the missing person may have met with foul play, should be handled delicately- not only for the sake of the family, but to preserve the integrity of the case. We certainly do not want a person responsible for another's disappearance, to skate charges."

The Wilkersons and the Rogers are fortunate to have a good law enforcement team in Lubbock. Many of the families we serve are not so lucky.

"Hearing some of the tips and rumors was extremely difficult, coupled with one's own imagination running rampant." Jack now knows both the emotional and the information roller coaster rides. "One feels guilt for not doing more to find her, helpless not knowing what else to do. I know that we did what we could to provide a good moral background, and that she is a strong, independent, capable person.

If she is alive and gone by her choice, I feel that those qualities will bring her back. If she is alive, and gone not by choice, those qualities will help her survive until she is found or can escape. If she is no longer alive, I know she would be devastated to think that her loss would destroy and dominate our lives, so I try to honor her by accepting that sometimes God gives a short time to complete our mission in life. Sometimes that works.

Jen never waited for life to happen to her – she embraced it, and charged into it with joy, wonder, determination, curiosity, and love. She lived more, and did more, so far in her first 26 years than most do in a lifetime. I admire her for that, and cherish the time we had together. I pray each day that God will grant us more time together. I also pray that someday soon that we will know the truth of what happened, and why. The latter is the peace that eludes us. Life is often beyond our control, but knowledge should not be."

On the day of the one year anniversary of Jennifer's disappearance, Jack and Vikki spent the day going through and organizing their daughter's belongings. They also watched video tapes of her with her nieces and nephews, doing something she loved to do: playing softball. Vikki found a quote Jennifer kept next to her computer that the Wilkersons feel says much about the type of person their daughter is: "Don't cry because it is over, smile because it happened."

Jack and Vikki and I have shared our faith in God and his strong hand guiding us on this rocky path. Vikki sent me one of her favorite stories of faith, written by Max Lucado. It is entitled: "To See the Unseen".

"He gives strength to those who are tired and more power to those who are weak. Isaiah 40:29

An example of faith was found on the wall of a concentration camp. On it a prisoner had carved the words:

I believe in the sun, even though it doesn't shine,  
I believe in love, even when it isn't shown,  
I believe in God, even when he doesn't speak.

I try to imagine the person who etched those words. I try to envision his skeletal hand gripping the broken glass or stone that cut into the wall. I try to imagine his eyes squinting through the darkness as he carved each letter. What hand could have cut such a conviction? What eyes could have seen good in such horror? There is only one answer: Eyes that chose to see the unseen."

To see more information about Jennifer Wilkerson, please visit the family website:

<http://www.findjenniferwilkerson.wagls.com/>

There are also updates on both Joanna Rogers and Jennifer Wilkerson on the Project Jason Forum.

Kathy Rogers said: "Rarely is one girl mentioned without the other, so they both remain in people's thoughts and prayers. My husband has always said if we can find one girl, we can find both. That's our hope."

It's our hope too.