

THE PAIN OF NOT KNOWING - ██████████ DAUGHTER, 17, MISSING 10 MONTHS

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A car stops at a traffic light. A teenage girl jumps out. She sticks out her thumb. Another car stops. She's gone.

Campbell County Commissioner Dave ██████ plays and replays the scene in his head like a clip from a personal horror film.

The girl is Dave ██████ only child, Nichole.

She has been missing for almost 10 months.

He pictures her dead by some roadway. He pictures her huddled in a doorway. He pictures her hurt and afraid. He tries to picture her healthy and happy and safe.

Nichole ██████ 17, 5-foot 3-inches tall and weighing 150 pounds, is listed as a runaway with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and with the Kentucky Missing Child Information Center.

█████ fears that what started as running away may have turned into something far beyond his daughter's control.

"I hope she's gone because she wants to work things out on her own. I hope she's alive and well and happy."

He stops. Takes a quiet, deep breath. And speaks his fears haltingly.

"You hear about mass murderers picking people up and killing them, and you don't find their bodies. A month ago, for about two weeks, I just felt she wasn't alive. I hope that's not the case. I pray."

Dave ██████ is a violin string stretched to its limit. He doesn't know how many more sad notes can be played before he breaks.

He and his wife, Gail, divorced last year after 19 years of marriage. ██████ father died of a heart attack last fall.

"I wish I could just wipe 1990 off the books," ██████ says. "In one year almost my entire family was wiped out. They say God doesn't send you anything you can't handle. But this is stretching."

Nichole, who was living with her father, disappeared about 7:30 a.m. on June 6 at Knowlton's Corner in Cincinnati. She was wearing blue jeans and a white short-sleeved top. She was on her way to school with several friends when she had an argument with another girl and got out of the car, ██████ says.

They were all members of the drug rehabilitation program Kids Helping Kids. Nichole had been in the highly structured program for about 10 months and had been progressing well.

"She was going into a phase where she would have a lot more freedom," ██████ says. "She and I were planning to take a trip to Jamaica. She was doing so well. I think she would have been out in another two months."

█████ sits amid the polished wood and brass of his executive office at ██████████ in Dayton and fumbles with a picture of his daughter.

"This doesn't feel like reality," ██████ says.

"You hear about this, but you always think it will happen to someone else."

Dave ██████ is a man who appears to have everything. He is an internationally recognized businessman who hobnobs with music superstars as the developer of high-tech stage passes for concert tours.

He is a two-term Campbell County Commissioner with a resume packed with awards listing him as "Outstanding Young Man in the State of Kentucky" and "Northern Kentucky Outstanding Elected Official."

He has been an advocate of children's issues, working with programs dealing with child abuse and drug abuse.

"Eight to 10 years ago I worked on the National Missing Children's Institute," he says. "I got involved with the Jaycees state project -

raising money to start a foundation (for missing children) in Kentucky."

"I thought I knew about the problem. But you don't comprehend until it happens to you. There are over 750,000 missing children in this country today. Where are they? You don't know."

Nichole's picture has been circulated in 10 states. ■■■ drives to Louisville and Dayton on weekends, searching the streets for Nichole.

"Last summer a 16-year-old girl's body was found in Cincinnati. I thought possibly that could be Nikki. They found an ID and it wasn't hers," ■■■ says.

"I see a girl in the mall with hair like Nikki's and my heart starts pounding. I run up and she turns around and it isn't her."

■■■ throat tightens every time he plays back his home answering machine - hoping there will be a message from Nikki. He stands in his daughter's bedroom and looks out the window.

"I envision her walking up the driveway," he says. "It just hasn't happened."

Wherever he goes, he looks for Nichole.

"One day in February it was cold and dreary and raining. I was over by Music Hall and I saw this girl huddled up between some buildings. It wasn't Nikki, but it was a girl about her age. I thought, is she out there somewhere, cold? Starving?"

■■■ says Nichole started changing in the summer of 1989. "Her friends started changing. My wife had found some cigarette papers in her room. We suspected she had started smoking marijuana. As a parent, that's one of your biggest fears."

That's when they enrolled her in the Kids Helping Kids program. The program includes intense parental involvement.

"We were communicating so well. We were talking about the future, how she was going to go to college.

His voice cracks as she speaks. He tries to hide a tear by looking away. But everywhere he looks is a reminder. Photos of Nichole as a toddler and Nichole with her prom date are under the glass top of his desk. A pre-teen Nichole smiles in a school photo framed on a shelf. Above it is a small wooden sign that reads "I Love You Dad."

"There's not a second that goes by that I'm not thinking about her," he says.

"You wonder if you put too many pressures on kids. I'm sure, with me and my situation, she felt she was the daughter of a politician and a business person - that she had to be a certain type of person."

■■■ has spent 10 months trying to figure out what he could have done differently. He's not sure if he has any answers. But he's hoping his story might somehow turn up a clue to Nichole's whereabouts, and maybe help some other parents and children avoid the same pain.

"If one person remembers seeing Nikki. If we get one clue. Even if some other parent hears about the Kids Helping Kids program and gets help. Or if somebody else's child calls home - maybe this will have some meaning."

Persons with information about the whereabouts of Nichole ■■■ should call Campbell County Police 635-3122. Families who need help regarding missing children should call Homeward Bound in Northern Kentucky, 581-1111, or the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1-800-843-5678.

- Caption: PHOTOCampbell County Commissioner Dave ■■■, reflected in the lamp base, waits for the phone to ring with word of his daughter, Nichole, shown in photographs at age 16. She has been missing for almost a year. Joe Munson, The Kentucky Post

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