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MISSING WOMEN

The day began to swirl

■ **Nightmare:** "I didn't want to call 911. I didn't think it was an emergency," says Janis McCall, remembering the empty house.

By Robert Keyes
The News-Leader

It was around 8 a.m. when a groggy, hung-over Janelle Kirby got out of bed. The graduation and birthday parties from the night before had blurred into the early morning of Sunday.

Kirby, then 18, hadn't said goodbye to Stacy or Suzie when they left her Battlefield home around 2:30 a.m. They would meet later in the morning, road-tripping to Branson and a day at White Water.

Kirby was the anchor of the threesome. A good friend with Stacy McCall since they were 4. She and Suzie Streeter had schooled together since the first grade.

If the three were together, Kirby was why. So often in the past year she has thought of that night, of that bond, and has told herself she should have gone with them.

"Maybe I could have made a difference."

Maybe others, too.

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The sun rose at 5:33 a.m. on what would be a warm, hazy Sunday. Forty minutes high, it reflected, as one witness will never forget, in the terrified eyes of a young blonde-haired woman who later would double hauntingly with the face of Suzie's on a missing poster.

The witness heard a man's voice demand: "Turn around and back up, back up. Don't do anything silly or stupid."

The woman did as she was told. It would be, perhaps, the only sighting of a now year-old abduction in progress, and of a moss green van police have never located.

It was a hot lead if you call police right then. The witness — who asks to remain anonymous — was scared. This was not normal, but police were not called.

Instead, "I went in the house and tried to forget about it."

It would be 17 days before investigators were told, another month before they followed up.

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Around 8:30 a.m., Kirby made the first of maybe a dozen calls that day to Sherrill Levitt's home. She left messages reminding of White Water and for Suzie and Stacy — who at the last minute decided to sleep there — to call her.

There was no cause for concern. The three Kickapoo classmates had Celebrated late, having graduated the day before from high school.

There were plenty of explanations. They'd gone out for breakfast, for a walk. Maybe they'd gone to Branson without her.

Stacy was to call her mother that morning before they left. Instead, friends called Janis McCall looking for her daughter.

She told the friends Stacy had spent the night with Janelle. She didn't know of the last-minute change. But Stacy had always been so responsible.

"I wasn't upset," Janis says. "This is the day after graduation. It was a special day."

Around 1 p.m. Janelle called and told Janis that Stacy had slept at Suzie's mother's house. Levitt's number was new and unlisted. Janelle gave it to her. Janis left a message for her daughter. "I just wanted to see if she needed anything. We usually kept in pretty close touch and since she hadn't called me that morning I really just thought she was probably still asleep."

It was early afternoon when Janelle and boyfriend Mike Henson arrived at 1717 E. Delmar St.

Dressed for water, Janelle let Mike knock to avoid stepping barefoot on broken glass that had covered Sherrill's still-glowing front porch light. Janelle saw through open blinds the pulled-back covers of Sherrill's bed. From the carport, Suzie's bedroom blinds stuck in an open-eye position as if someone had looked out.

Maybe Suzie had. Maybe that's when the volume of her bedroom TV — still on — was turned down.

At the time, those thoughts didn't enter. The broken glass, the three purses lined neatly together at the foot of Suzie's bedroom stairs, the three sets of car keys, the three cars outside, the unlocked front door.

"I didn't really think anything of it," Janelle says.

She punched a button and listened as her voice replayed on the morning's phone messages. She called the mother of another friend.

Should she lock the door? No. They'd be back soon. It would be embarrassing to lock Sherrill out of her own house.

They cleaned up the broken glass and left, not realizing Sherrill, if she could have, would have cleaned it up promptly. They drove the neighborhood, asking an elderly couple if there was a swimming pool nearby. Maybe they were there.

There was no pool and the two went to a friend's house for a couple of hours. They called Levitt's one more time, then went back again around 3:30 p.m.

Everything was the same. The phone rang. An obscene caller — always unsettling, but it happens. He quickly called back.

They drove to get some food, and Janelle was crying in the back seat. Mike assured her, nothing was wrong. They went to Hydra-Slide in south Springfield for some fun.

Stacy's mom had called the house a couple more times that day, then "we did our own thing."

News-Leader file photo

Sherrill Levitt and Suzie Streeter lived at 1717 E. Delmar St., where this photo was taken shortly after they disappeared along with Stacy McCall one year ago.

The McCalls played that afternoon at Lake Springfield, amusing themselves in the hazy, 80-degree afternoon with a remote-controlled airplane, fetching it when needed with a row boat.

It was nice, family time. Janis and Stu, her mother, their daughter, Lisa, her boyfriend, John, and a little boy who idolized John. The youngest McCall, Janis assured herself, was at White Water.

It closed at 6 p.m. and there was parental expectation of a timely return. The post-graduation alibi had expired. As 7 p.m. passed, Janis was concerned. She again called the Levitt home.

At 7:30 concern fell into panic with a phone call from the mother of Kickapoo classmate Adina Ruthrauff: "Did you know that when Janelle went over to Suzie's all the cars were there and all the purses were there?"

Janis had not been told this by Janelle and the others who'd been there that day. "They didn't want me to get upset.

"That's when I started getting really upset." The day began to swirl.

Janis found Janelle and Mike at Hydra-Slide. And 10 people converged on the Levitt home. For the fourth time that day, visitors.

It was getting dark as they arrived. There were no lights on inside.

"We yelled and hollered," says Janis, who entered first.

It felt strange, intrusive, entering someone else's home. But Janis could justify. "Your daughter's car's there and you're wondering what in the heck's going on."

She tried the outside light switch. Nothing. Then stumbled over a table to a lamp, then to the center of the living room. She pulled the ceiling fan light on.

Initial recollections: A VCR and cable box turned on, videotapes arranged neatly on a coffee table. Nothing out of place. A meticulous home.

Cinnamon, Sherrill's little Yorkie terrier, was having fits, Janis recalls, "yipping and running every which way, and just acting strange."

> **"People say 'they have to be dead.' Well they don't have to be dead. ... I can choose life or I can choose death. I have no proof of death, so I choose life. And I know there is a God and he can do miraculous things."**
>
> — Marsha Harper, Sherrill Levitt's co-worker

They had looked and shouted in the back yard and in every room. They'd seen the purses resting at the foot of Suzie's bedroom stairs, her jewelry from the night before in a bathroom tray, the women's cigarettes, Stacy's migraine medication, her flowered shorts, jewelry and new Gucci graduation watch.

"I kind of toyed with the idea," Janis says. "I thought it was silly and stupid for them to have gone off and not left a note and not let anybody know. I was a little bit angry. I thought I'd just take Stacy's purse and keys and everything and we'd just go home and she'd call us and we'd come and get her. I was upset she hadn't called to let us know. That was not like her."

They huddled and talked in small groups inside and outside the house for about an hour. Waiting. Thinking any minute the women would return, and how awkward it would be explaining their presence.

Adina's mother, Darlene Ruthrauff, suggested they brew a pot of coffee. She searched the cupboards. Janis didn't want any coffee. How embarrassing when Sherrill walked in.

Fear was mounting. Janis: "We were beginning to panic." There was no phone book in the house, so they searched Sherrill's address book, calling anyone and everyone they could, including at least one of Sherrill's relatives in Washington state.

By some time after 10 p.m., Janis called Stu. He'd stayed at home for Stacy's phone call. They agreed there was one call left to make.

Janis dialed the information operator to get a non-emergency police number. "I didn't want to call 911. I didn't think it was an emergency."

Officer Rick Bookout arrived quickly, considering. This was one of 375 missing persons reports Springfield police received last year. Usually it's obvious, Bookout says. Usually, they leave on their own for personal reasons. Usually, they're found within 24 hours.

If not, a missing persons report is filed. Then they show up.

Here, maybe 20 hours after they vanished, Bookout didn't feel right about this one.

He and a second officer seemed startled when they'd arrived at 10:48 p.m., Janis recalled. "(They) come into a house with all those people waiting there. There wasn't any screaming and hollering, there's no blood, no disturbance. And I said 'they're just not here.'

"They had to think for a long time before they made a decision just like we did," she says. "Because we thought, surely we're wrong. I mean things like this just don't happen."

The officers listened to the answering machine tape, to recollections of the day. They, of course, asked the only question that made sense of this: "Would they have gone off on their own?" Finally, the two officers went outside and talked privately.

The cigarettes convinced them. Sherril, a chain smoker, would never go anywhere without her smokes. A report was filed at 2:30 a.m. June 8, conceivably 24 hours after the women vanished.

That critical time frame, that window of opportunity that police say can spell the outcome of a case, was lost.

Innocently, phone messages were erased, hairs, fibers and prints planted everywhere. Police would later suck it all up. To this day, they do not know what it's worth.

The officers were the last to leave, locking the house. They took the women's car keys and left a note for them to call police when they returned.

"You work a lot of these," Bookout says. "But when I went back to headquarters and was working on the report I kept hoping they were going to call me and tell me to disregard it."

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Janis and Stu left just before the officers, driving in those early morning hours to three Springfield hospital emergency rooms.

They flashed Stacy's picture. No one had seen their smiling-faced daughter. There were no Jane Does. They called radio stations to get the word out. But it was late. News directors were asleep. A few stations said they would try.

Janis recalls someone saying, "I may not be able to put it on the air right now, but I'll start praying right now."

It was close to 3 a.m. when the McCalls got home. Janis got in bed. Stu lay on the living room couch. He wanted to be at the door when Stacy got in.

Neither slept. Their minds raced ... and in the silence, they were engulfed in feelings of loss, grief, of the worst.

"Emotions were flowing," Stu says. "You're wondering so many different things."

With a new day came the media, more police, the beginning of an agonizing mystery that remains unsolved.

They hadn't realized it that Sunday, but by Monday, clearly: "All hell broke loose."

Case chronology

■ **DAY 1:** Sunday, June 7, 1992. Sherrill Levitt, her daughter, Suzie Streeter, and Streeter's classmate Stacy McCall vanish from Levitt's former 1717 E. Delmar St. home the day after the two young women graduated from Kickapoo High School.

■ **DAYS 2-8:** Hundreds of tips pour in from throughout the country. Scores of people are interviewed and re-interviewed. Police will call three to five of them "potential suspects" but hesitate to say a crime has been committed. Searches are conducted throughout the region. The FBI joins the case.

■ **DAYS 9-17:** Police track leads involving transients, cars, vans, prowlers and sightings of the women during the early hours of June 7. Nothing pans out. They begin forwarding information to law enforcement nationwide. An anonymous donor gives $24,000 to the reward fund. One van sighting — now considered crucial — is reported on day 17. It is lost for a month amid other tips.

■ **DAY 30:** Rumors run rampant about Levitt and Streeter in particular. Police announce they will explore Levitt's past in detail and will fly to Seattle, where she once lived. The reward fund has reached $40,000. Psychics from the throughout the country continue to call.

■ **DAY 42:** FBI Special Agent James Wright comes to Springfield, to absorb information and, perhaps, develop a psychological profile of the abductors.

■ **DAY 51:** Police give up 24-hour command post at Levitt's home.

■ **DAY 66:** An old moss-green van is parked outside the police department as the strongest lead yet in the case. It is towed away almost four months later.

■ **DAY 100:** Levitt's son, Bartt Streeter, considered an initial suspect, quits his job and leaves Springfield. He has not returned. Janis McCall: "I'd hate to think of doing this another 100 days."

■ **DAY 114:** Levitt's home goes on sale and is sold five days later.

■ **DAY 122:** Police go back into the neighborhood, knocking door-to-door, double-checking for clues into the disappearances.

■ **DAY 141:** Nearly 200 people rally in a celebration for hope for the missing women at Park Central Square.

■ **DAY 148:** Sherrill Levitt's 48th birthday is quietly marked by friends and family in Seattle.

■ **DAY 183:** A half year and still not even a certain crime scene. "It eats me alive," police detective David Asher says. There are now more than 4,000 case reports from coast to coast. The McCall family plans to wait "just a little longer" to put up their Christmas tree.

■ **DAY 208:** An anonymous New Year's Eve caller to a switchboard operator of America's Most Wanted is cut off when the call-taker tries to link up with Springfield investigators. Police still seek contact with the man, whom they consider to have prime knowledge of the abductions.

■ **DAY 252:** For the first time, police announce they consider the disappearances possibly the work of one or more serial criminals.

■ **DAY 275:** Suzie Streeter would turn 20. Her grandparents offer several hundred dollars in additional reward money in a taped appeal played on local television stations.

■ **DAY 322:** Stacy McCall would turn 19.

■ **DAY 351:** More than 500 people attend "A Rainbow of Hope," a fund-raising concert featuring Branson entertainers and organized by Kickapoo High School. The concert raises more than $4,000, increasing the reward to nearly $45,000.

■ **DAYS 362-363:** Officers from seven states converge in Springfield to discuss unsolved murders and disappearances in hopes of generating leads and exploring the possibility of one or more serial criminals who may be responsible. The women's case is among those discussed. It spawned the first-ever local conference.

■ **DAY 365:** There are nine thick, bound volumes of reports on the case, and another 10 binders of assorted information. Between 5,000 and 6,000 reports have been generated. Hours worked? Police stopped counting late last year at 20,000.

Missing women hold on to life in hearts of friends, family, city

■ **The house** where the three were abducted has new owners now, but the hope and positive thinking of close ones keeps the issue from fading away.

By Robert Keyes
The News-Leader

Many buried them long ago.

Their friends and family say people do not talk about them as much.

And in the neighborhood where Sherrill Levitt, Suzie Streeter and Stacy McCall vanished a year ago, the fear and curiosity that once dwelled has dwindled.

Cars no longer drive slowly by in legion to look at the house. People sleep with their windows open.

Charlotte Alber last year described the mood as "on edge."

Now her mother's boyfriend seems edgy with an approaching reporter wanting to talk again about a year ago.

A new family lives in Levitt's former 1717 E. Delmar St. home. They will not talk publicly about how it feels to live there.

The home is not the tragedy. But a still missing front door light globe found shattered a year ago remains a chilling reminder of what happened there.

Do we bury them?

Time is no healer for Deb Schwartz. A year brings "a big acceptance of the fact we may never ever know anything."

"We're trying to get through this date," says Levitt's half-sister from Seattle. For six strong months Schwartz believed they would come back alive. "I pray and hope that still, but I don't really believe it."

'What do you do?'

Schwartz considers having some type of memorial for her sister and niece. If not a gravestone, a monument, maybe some red roses.

"Where do you go? I think it's one of the most cruel things someone could do, to take lives like this and watch people — the survivors — dangle on a wire."

Friends have grown closer

There's a consistency among others close to the missing women. Unlike those who talk so surely of their demise, this circle refuses to lose hope.

Janelle Kirby and Mindy Hoelcher often talk about their missing Kickapoo High School classmates, but only in the positive, and only as alive.

They get angry at the rumors and insensitive words they overhear that the women are dead. And they laugh with hopeful, insider knowledge of how their friends' personalities would bring about their release.

Stacy: They'd let her go after tiring of her incessant "I want my mommy."

Suzie: She'd want to fight her captors.

They still dream about the three women. Usually it's good, sometimes bad, always frustrating. Because as in their waking reality, the women are out there alive, they're just never quite returned.

Kirby and Hoelcher laugh, their dreams are so similar. Either Suzie or Stacy has returned, but neither will tell what's happened until the other two missing women arrive.

"You always wake up mad," Hoelcher says. "They don't tell us what happened."

Dead or alive, "why" is all they want to know.

Tears are fewer

But for Marsha Harper, who worked with Levitt as a hair stylist, they still come with remembrance of those first days missing.

"People say 'they have to be dead.' Well they don't *have* to be dead. I have two ways to choose. I can choose life or I can choose death. I have no proof of death, so I choose life. And I know there is a God and he can do miraculous things."

Today, "you get up every morning and you just let the day do what it's going to do. And you believe in miracles.

"Sherrill is not gone," Harper says. "She's been misplaced."

Time stiffens resolve

"The longer we go without any bodies found the stronger I feel they're still alive," Stacy's mother, Janis McCall, says. "Unless (police) can prove beyond any doubt that they're dead, they better keep looking and keep trying."

Inevitably, the investigation may somday slacken, Janis says. "But they're still gonna have me buzzing their beehives everyday. I've been told by officers, don't give up, you keep coming down here on a regular basis, because if you give up, things slide."

A year ago, Janis McCall could not find the police department. She sure didn't know anything about missing persons.

"It has torn apart our lives and our family," she says. "A year ago I wasn't afraid to let my girls go out. I didn't worry about them in the same way I do now because now I know it's a mean, ugly world out there and anything can happen."

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