

Parents describe struggle for police aid after daughter disappears in 2001

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For the family of Erin Pospisil, frustration over the police response to her disappearance has simmered for more than 12 years.

Erin was 15 in June 2001 when she disappeared from a residential street in Cedar Rapids. A kid from the neighborhood had given her a ride to a friend's house, where she planned to spend the evening watching movies.

But her friend wasn't home when she arrived — it was later learned she'd run out to grab snacks.

Instead of returning home, according to the boy who had driven her, Erin hopped into another car, a Chevrolet Cavalier with tinted windows that had driven up from the wrong direction on the one-way street.

She hasn't been seen since.

She disappeared on a Sunday, and her parents reported her missing the following Tuesday, her stepmother, Carolyn Pospisil, said in an interview. From the start, Cedar Rapids police were unhelpful, her stepmother said.

The department categorized Erin as a runaway and committed few resources to finding her, even as her parents contended that her case bore no resemblance to a typical runaway case.

Erin was happy and had big plans for the summer, her stepmother said. She faced none of the family crises that typically compel a teen to run. The police, however, saw what they wanted to see, and seemed to focus much of their investigation on finding facts to back up the conclusion they'd already drawn, Carolyn Pospisil said.

"Honestly, they created crisis," she said. "The police department found things to justify why they termed her as a runaway."

It took 10 days for the family to get a meeting with a detective, she said, and that was only after Carolyn Pospisil sat in the department lobby for six hours, refusing to leave until she spoke to someone.

The family — Erin's father, stepmother and three siblings — led the charge themselves. They plastered Cedar Rapids with fliers, and after about a month linked up with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The organization assigned a case manager and provided resources for getting Erin's face onto billboards and into the mass mailers distributed across the country.

With the national center's help, the family has generated three computerized age-progression photos of Erin over the years.

The Cedar Rapids Police Department views its investigative efforts quite differently, however.

Lt. Craig Furnish, of the department's investigative division, emphasized that the case remains open and is subject to regular reviews.

He said it was "not true" that police concluded Erin was a runaway and gave her case less attention as a result.

"I know it initially came in as a runaway report," he said. "But then as a case evolves and a runaway does not return, then you change your tactics or strategies in investigating, and look at all angles surrounding the disappearance."

Furnish said he could not comment on the current status of the case or the department's operating theories for what happened to Erin, calling such details "protected investigative information."

Carolyn Pospisil said the last time she heard from the department was June 2011, when an investigator sent an email saying he would call her.

He never did. She said the department was in contact with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children about nine months ago, although she's unsure of the substance of that interaction.

Twelve years after the disappearance, Carolyn Pospisil maintains a determined agnosticism about what happened to her stepdaughter. She imagines Erin happily living somewhere with two kids and a dog, even as she acknowledges a more likely scenario involves her being trafficked to Chicago or St. Louis or elsewhere.

As she and her husband pressed law enforcement to act, she said, they were constantly asked what they wanted from the police.

"I just wanted them to do what I thought was their job," she said. "I actually had the (Cedar Rapids) safety commissioner flat-out ask me, 'What do you people expect us to do?' My flat-out answer is, 'I want you to look for my kid.' "