

THE OFFICIAL COLD-CASE PUBLICATION OF THE CITIZEN DETECTIVE

# UNSOLVED

BECOME PART OF THE INVESTIGATION... AND THE SOLUTION

MAGAZINE

Summer 2019

## CrimeCon 2019: A Look Back, And A Look Forward

A Discussion With Founder Kevin Balfe

The Cold Case vs. the Unsolved Case

POMC-Parents of Murdered Children, Inc.

JODI HUISENTRUIT: CASE UPDATE



Premiere Issue – CRIMECON 2019 Convention Edition



Miata, with a bent key nearby. A pair of red high heel shoes, earrings and a blow dryer were on the ground. Drag marks on the surface of the parking lot indicated there had been a struggle, and a partial palm print was recovered from her car. Neighbors recalled a scream between 4 and 5 a.m., and someone reported seeing a white van in the parking lot.

**UM: Who was the last person to see Jodi before her abduction?**

**CL:** John Vansice, a friend of Jodi's, said he was. Vansice, a Mason City resident at the time, showed up at the parking lot that morning while police officers were on the scene. He told them Jodi stopped by his home the night before to watch a video of a surprise birthday party he had hosted on Jodi's 27th birthday, a few weeks earlier. Vansice was a seed salesman who was about 20 years older than Jodi. The weekend before Jodi disappeared, he took Jodi waterskiing with friends in Iowa City. He even named his boat after her. As the investigation proceeded, Vansice was interviewed and polygraphed. Most recently, in March 2017, Mason City police put GPS tracking devices on two of his vehicles. The search warrant used to get a judge's approval to follow those vehicles remains sealed, and police have acknowledged the devices did not produce any helpful evidence.

Vansice denied having anything to do with Jodi's abduction and repeatedly has refused media requests for interviews when they've reached out to him at his home in Arizona.

**UM: How much attention was given to Jodi Huisentruit's case?**

**CL:** State and federal investigators quickly joined the search for Jodi. National news crews also flocked to Mason City, a small Iowa town near the Minnesota state line. Hundreds of volunteers searched the area, putting up flyers and wearing ribbons. Her image was emblazoned on billboards.

While the community and law enforcement searched for Jodi, investigators explored

possible scenarios about her disappearance. Had Jodi been abducted by someone she knew, or had she been targeted by a stalker who'd seen her on television? Or could it have been an impulsive attack by someone who just happened to see a young woman alone in the dark parking lot? Those were the questions then, and they linger today.

Almost 24 years later, the mystery of Jodi's abduction continues to generate intense media coverage. In December 2018, CBS Television's "48 Hours" aired an episode called "Find Jodi." The investigative report was prompted by the dedication of three billboards in Mason City by the FindJodi team on June 5, 2018, Jodi's 50th birthday. Inspired by the movie "Three billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri," the signs fea-



tured photos of Jodi and a simple message: "Someone knows something. Is it YOU?"

Since then, other network crime shows have expressed interest in Jodi's case, and a podcast called "Frozen Truth" focused its latest season on the search for Jodi.

**UM: Caroline, how did you get involved with this case?**

**CL:** I got involved in 1997, two years after Jodi was abducted. Back then, I was a reporter covering the crime and investigative beats for WCCO-TV, the CBS-owned station in Minneapolis. I have always had an interest in missing persons and unsolved cases. In

this case, not only was Jodi a fellow TV journalist, but she was working just two hours south of Minneapolis, and her hometown of Long Prairie, Minnesota, was two hours northwest of us. Jodi had studied journalism at nearby St. Cloud State University. After a couple of years in Mason City, Jodi applied for positions at Minneapolis-St. Paul TV stations, hoping to advance to a major market. Sadly, instead of helping her secure a new job, clips from her audition tape were used in TV coverage of her disappearance.

**UM: Describe what you and WCCO-TV did to cover this story.**

**CL:** Although Mason City was not in our viewing area, WCCO and other Twin Cities stations devoted a lot of time and resources to Jodi's

case. Part of it was her Minnesota roots, but it was also because many of us could relate to her dream of working in the Twin Cities market. We covered countless police news conferences, chased "promising" leads, interviewed Jodi's family, many friends, and coworkers at KIMT-TV. We also collected photos, sifted through police reports, did milestone update stories and stayed in touch with authorities.

**U: Did you follow up with John Vansice?**

**CL:** I tried to, with no luck. I thought he might be willing to talk with me after I did a series of WCCO I-Team reports on a Twin Cities serial rapist named Tony Jackson, who

lived in Mason City at the time Jodi disappeared. Vansice has moved to Arizona. That's where I tracked him down in 1998 and approached him outside a restaurant near Phoenix, trying to get his side of the story. He refused to talk with me.

John Vansice recently broke his long silence for the first time in almost 24 years. In an April 2019 statement, veteran media consultant Steve Ridge told FindJodi.com that he interviewed Vansice several times in 2019.

Ridge said Vansice "emphatically" and "repeatedly" denied any involvement in Jodi's abduction, saying he had been living in a "suspended hell" since 1995. Ridge also revealed Vansice had been subpoenaed by a federal grand jury in Iowa on March 2, 2017. That's when he was ordered to provide finger and palm prints, along with a DNA swab, although Vansice previously had provided prints to Iowa authorities. The grand jury subpoena was 18 days before Mason City police obtained a search warrant to obtain GPS data from two of Vansice's vehicles. Ridge also revealed Vansice said he voluntarily agreed to undergo hypnosis to help investigators in their search for Jodi.

**UM: How did Tony Jackson become a possible suspect?**

**CL:** About two years after Jodi's abduction, Jackson was in a Twin Cities jail. He'd been arrested and charged with several "stranger rapes" in the area. Minnesota investigators learned he once had lived in Mason City and informed police there about him. Our WCCO investigation found Jackson lived just two blocks from KIMT TV when Jodi vanished. His girlfriend at the time, who looked a lot like Jodi, broke up with Jackson the week before Jodi was abducted.

After our first reports on Jackson, a cellmate claimed Jackson had written a rap rhyme about what happened to Jodi. WCCO even brought in cadaver dogs which, accompanied by law enforcement, searched a rural area in Tiffin, Iowa. The dogs alerted on a couple items that were sent to the Iowa crime lab for tests. The results did not produce any connection to Jodi. I was able to conduct phone interviews with Jackson while he was in jail. He repeatedly denied having anything to do with Jodi's disappearance. He also denied being involved in the Twin Cities rapes despite DNA, fingerprints and other evidence that led to his convictions. After our reporting

on WCCO-TV, police in Mason City further investigated Jackson and eventually ruled him out as a possible suspect in Jodi's case. They haven't explained why.

**UM: How did you create your rapport with law enforcement?**

**CL:** Some of it came from covering the crime beat for so many years. I also went back to college to finish my degree, majoring in law enforcement at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul. Then I earned a

Master's Degree in police leadership from the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul. I took police skills training, passed the MN POST exam to earn my police license and spent eight summers in a temporary assignment as a uniformed officer at the Minnesota State Fair.

**UM: Caroline, as the years went by, how did your TV career change?**

**CL:** I continued to cover crime and investigative beats for WCCO-TV until April 2011. That's when I decided after 34 years at the Minneapolis station to begin a new professional chapter in California, in part to be closer to three of our kids who live there and to escape

Minnesota winters. I joined KSBY-TV, the NBC affiliate in San Luis Obispo, as the manager of its Santa Barbara County newsroom. I loved mentoring a young group of reporters in a small market and also had an opportunity to do occasional investigative reports at KSBY. My first assignment was investigating how missing persons cases were handled by law enforcement agencies on the Central Coast of California.

The week that report aired, the news director at KARE-TV in Minneapolis asked if I could work on a special assignment for her station. A dramatic break finally had developed in the Jacob Wetterling case, which I had covered for more than 20 years. Jacob was an 11-year-old St. Joseph, Minnesota, boy abducted by a masked gunman in October 1989 as he, his brother and best friend were biking home from a nearby convenience store. Coincidentally, Jodi Huisentruit and I had both had done interviews with Jacob's mother, Patty.



I spent the next year and a half covering a 52-year-old man named Danny Heinrich, who had been indicted on federal child porn charges and whom authorities called a person of interest in Jacob's case. As part of a plea deal on the porn charges, Heinrich led investigators to a farm where they found Jacob's remains in late August 2016. I was in the front row in a federal courtroom in Minneapolis a few days later when Heinrich shared the horrific details of the kidnapping and murder of Jacob. It was a hugely emotional experience, especially hearing Heinrich quote Jacob's last words: "What did I do wrong?"

After Jacob's case was finally solved after 27 years, I felt a new sense of hope and resolve to help bring Jodi home. Jodi was declared legally dead in 2001, but her family stayed involved in the investigation. Sadly, her mom died several years ago, still waiting for answers and a chance to say goodbye to her youngest daughter.

Jacob's case also reinforced the importance of keeping an open mind on possible suspects. For many years, police in that case focused on Dan Rassier, a neighbor of the Wetterling family. They even dug up his farm property, looking for Jacob's body. In the end, Rassier turned out to be totally innocent and Jacob's killer was a complete stranger to the boy.

### **UM: Why did you decide to get a private investigator's license?**

**CL:** I decided to apply for a license as a way to get training and tools to help investigate cases like Jodi Huisenruit and Jacob Wetterling. I received my Minnesota license in 2015. My first application for a California license had been denied earlier that year because the state had stopped considering investigative reporting experience as qualifying credentials to be eligible to take the state PI exam. My California mentor, Francie Koehler, led the way to get the law changed. In June 2017, I became the first investigative journalist licensed under Assembly Bill 2632.

### **UM: With the 25th anniversary of Jodi's abduction just a year away, what organized efforts, besides law enforcement's, are still being done to keep Jodi's case active?**

**CL:** FindJodi.com, Inc. is the main effort. FindJodi was created in 2003 by two former Minnesota TV journalists, Josh Benson, now a Tampa News Anchor at WFLA-TV, and Gary Peterson, who was Josh's News Director at KAAL-TV in Austin, Minnesota. They produced a series of award-winning reports called "The Huisenruit File." I joined the FindJodi team after moving to California eight years ago. The other current members of our team are Jay Alberio, a retired police commander from Woodbury, Minnesota, who investigated Tony Jackson's rape cases, and Tara Manis Benson, who was a Florida television news producer in Orlando and Miami, Florida.

### **UM: What is the goal of the FindJodi team?**

**CL:** The main purpose of our team is to keep Jodi's investigation in the spotlight and to serve as a clearinghouse for tips that come our way. That's why we do things like put up the billboards, which we know are an effective way to keep the news media covering Jodi's case. We also want Jodi's family and the community to know, along with the person/persons responsible for abducting Jodi, that we're not giving up.

### **UM: After all your digging, have you reached any conclusions about the strongest possible suspect?**

**CL:** John Vansice and Tony Jackson were the main focus of the "48 Hours" episode and other news reports, and I'm often asked if I think one man or the other abducted Jodi. My answer is always the same: Both men clearly needed to be investigated, but, as we saw in the Wetterling case, someone completely different could emerge as the killer.

Like the Golden State Killer cases in California and the 2018 murder of Mollie Tibbets in Iowa, if someone is eventually

charged in Jodi's abduction, that suspect may be someone who's never been on the police radar.

Clearly, Mason City police continue to focus on John Vansice as a possible suspect. If he were involved, he would have had just a 90-minute window to kidnap Jodi and be back at home by 6 a.m., when a friend named Ladonna Woodford said he answered his landline phone. Woodford said she testified under oath for five hours before a federal grand jury in 1997 that Vansice answered her early morning call to confirm their morning walk. During the walk, Ladonna said Vansice didn't seem anxious, and he told her Jodi had stopped by the evening before to watch the birthday video,

Regarding Tony Jackson, while Mason City police ruled him out as a suspect more than 20 years ago, they have shared very little about how they reached their conclusion. Until we see solid evidence pointing to anyone, I agree with Jodi's sister JoAnn Nathe who said in the "48 Hours" show, "It could be someone you least expect."

### **UM: What's next for the FindJodi team?**

**CL:** We saw the power and scope of the media attention the billboards received last June, and we'll continue to look for more ways to keep Jodi's case in the public eye until Jodi is brought home and someone is brought to justice.

We also invite your readers to join us in our journey. They can follow us at FindJodi.com and on Facebook and Twitter. They also can download a copy of our FindJodi flyer and post it in their own communities and on social media.

If YOU know anything about what happened to Jodi Huisenruit, please come forward. Don't make Jodi's loved ones wait another year for answers.

Mason City Police Department  
Phone: (641) 421-3636  
Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation (DCI)  
Phone: (515) 725-6010  
Email: dciinfo@dps.state.ia.us 