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**News**

**Father soldiers on, searching for leads 29 years after Audrey Nerenberg's mysterious disappearance**

By ELISHA PAPPACODA, DAILY SUN

CITRUS SPRINGS — It was mid-afternoon when Audrey Lyn Nerenberg, an 18-year-old freckled brunette, woke to face a lazy summer Friday on July 15, 1977. Dressed for the disco era in a blue tube top, denim shorts and clear platform sandals, the teen left her Brooklyn, N.Y., home to pick up a \$2 pack of smokes.

Her family never saw her again.

Jimmy Carter was president, "Annie Hall" was big on the big screen and "How Deep is Your Love" by the Bee Gees blared across the airwaves. Bread sold for about 34 cents a loaf, and a new car would set you back \$6,000.

New York City was still reeling from a 25-hour blackout. Brooklyn's streets felt like an urban swamp. The masses were hot and angry, and riots broke out in scattered parts of the five boroughs.

The city eventually got back on its feet, but the Nerenbergs' world came to a screeching halt that day.

"Audrey got up and got dressed," said her mother Evelyn, sitting in the family's humble Citrus County home. "She told me she was going to get some cigarettes. She went around the corner and never came back."

"Never came back," Audrey's father Milton echoed forlornly. "I've never seen her again in 29 years. It's not fair. It's not fair."

Images of Audrey's face, often pictured smiling alongside her older sister Brenda and younger brother Steven, are plastered throughout the home. Scattered among old family photos, Audrey is clearly the focal point — a gaping hole in the Nerenberg family tree, an embittered, unanswered question, a decades-old mystery that gets colder with each passing day.

"There (has to be) somebody who knows something but doesn't want to get involved for fear of something," Steven said. "Nobody just becomes invisible."

However, a dozen investigators, from the FBI to the New York City Missing Persons Squad, have taken on the case and come up empty. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children recently mailed 28,000 fliers to the Nerenbergs' former Brooklyn ZIP code. Nerenberg has sold 300 copies of his self-published book about the case, and Audrey's story is repeated on nearly 700 Web sites.

Still ... nothing.

"I never had any leads," Milton said.

He's also never given up.

Audrey's story

More than 10,000 days have passed since Audrey's grieving, yet still hopeful, father has seen his middle child. Today, the slender teenager whose smile revealed a slight gap between her two front teeth would be 47 years old.

At age 73, Milton still recalls with agonizing clarity the events leading to her disappearance.

As a teenager, Audrey was diagnosed with hebephrenic schizophrenia, a psychotic disorder that causes delusions and hallucinations.

"As she was growing up she was very good in school, but the schizophrenia came out at age 15 and a lot of things changed," Milton said.

Audrey sometimes would become disoriented or lost, but always managed to call her dad for help. Audrey's doctor prescribed her the anti-psychotic drug Thorazine, which her father insists she had been taking regularly. While taking the drug, Audrey behaved normally.

"When you're missing and you don't take the medicine, you don't have a head anymore," Milton noted. "She probably doesn't even remember her name at this point."

Though ill, Audrey was in many ways a typical teenager. She often hopped the bus to a local mall and even double-dated alongside her older sister.

"She loved music. She could stand by the phonograph and she wouldn't stop dancing," her father recalls. "She was also very good at making friends."

Her casual amiability, coupled with her compromised mental condition, may have made her an easy target, her parents fear.

Brooklyn was tumultuous during the summer of '77 — "Son of Sam" David Berkowitz was still on the loose, having gunned down two couples between June 26 and July 31. The notorious Gambino crime family, thought to have carried out as many as 200 Mafia hits, was headquartered in the Gemini Lounge just blocks from the Nerenbergs' Flatlands home.

On July 13, the city experienced the start of a blackout that sparked riots and resulted in 4,000 arrests. On July 14, the Nerenberg clan climbed into the family car and drove across the pale blue expanse of the Verrazano Bridge to Staten Island, the only borough with power.

"We went out to see a Jerry Lewis movie," Milton recalls. "We all had a wonderful time at the movies."

The next day, Audrey was gone. Then, the Nerenbergs' phone rang.

"I've got your daughter," said a man's voice. "Get as much money as you can and I'll call you back later."

Milton still recalls his next move with regret. He immediately telephoned the FBI, and a half-dozen conspicuous G-men arrived at his doorstep. He never heard from the caller again.

He keeps his focus tuned to a heavy-set neighborhood boy who had been friends with Steven. In 1982, he was convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to 18 years in jail for stabbing a Manhattan woman 15 times.

Milton also recently persuaded police to search a neighborhood ice cream shop where Audrey claimed to have been sexually assaulted, but a patched-up panel on the floor large enough to entomb a body produced nothing.

The driven father is still pressing police to re-interview both the local ex-con and the "ice cream man."

Yet Milton rarely considers the idea that his beloved daughter may have perished sometime during these past 29 years, her lonely remains undiscovered. Asked what he believes happened to her, Milton pauses.

"That's a good question," he said. "She was adopted and given another name and Social Security number."

He hopes.

The most recent of nearly a dozen investigators to take the case, Detective Ted Mathison of the New York Police Department's Missing Persons Squad, refused to talk about the case, but said the investigation is ongoing.

Through the years, Milton had dealt with a handful of false leads, including a Texas woman who sent the Nerenbergs a photo of herself clutching a sign that said, "I love you Dad," and signed it "Audrey."

DNA tests proved otherwise.

"When I looked at her picture ... that's not Audrey," Milton said, shaking his head.

The family nobody wants

Although he's more than 1,000 miles away from where he last saw her and has lived in Florida for 21 years, nothing has slowed or stalled Milton's relentless search.

Even while recovering from back surgery, Milton appears sturdy and healthy. He said he needs to remain strong for his family.

On a balmy Wednesday, he lifts his thick glasses to his forehead and glances over a book full of contact information for those who have had some involvement in his three- decades-long endeavor. He remembers them all. He recalls every detail.

Visiting his local library weekly, the former computer programmer thumbs through old magazines and attaches fliers bearing his daughter's image on postage-paid subscription cards. He mails them all over the country, hoping someone, somewhere, knows something.

"He does a lot of typing," said his wife, adding that Milton doesn't work on Audrey's case every day. "He takes a break on Saturday and Sunday."

Milton has spearheaded efforts to get Audrey listed with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children even though she was legally an adult when she went missing, and he was able to get Wal-Mart to post her photo in stores.

In his shirt pocket, he carries small circular pictures of Audrey. He gingerly peels the grainy black and white sticker and plasters it to the wall of a Dunnellon Subway restaurant. He said he performs this ritual everywhere he goes, but when he returns, the stickers are usually gone.

"I need all the help I can get," he said.

And he has found it.

"Unfortunately, we're all part of a family that nobody wants to belong to," said Jim Viola, a New Jersey engineer whose wife, Pat, disappeared Feb. 13, 2001, leaving behind her two young children and a roomful of Valentine's Day gifts.

Through an online network of families of the missing, Milton and Viola have joined forces to help expand awareness of each other's tragic plights.

"He's not a young man anymore and I don't know how he keeps up the energy and the drive and the focus, but I give him a lot of credit for that — for not giving up," said Viola, who has created Web sites, DVDs, posters, and stickers not only for Pat and Audrey, but for dozens of others like them.

Viola admits that thoughts of Pat's whereabouts swirl through his mind almost constantly, and he spends most of his free time working to find her. He attends conferences from upstate New York to North Carolina, talking about his experiences.

"Basically you never stop asking yourself what can you do differently, what can you do next," Viola said. "You keep going over the scenario of that day in your head over and over again. It's just such long a period of time. I know it's nothing compared to Milton, but to me five years is like an eternity."

When an adult

disappears

Audrey and Pat are two of the 23,438 missing adult females in the United States as of June 1, according to FBI National Crime Information Center statistics. Nearly 46 percent of the nation's 110,063 missing people are adults, but their disappearances are often treated differently from those of missing children.

Bruno said unlike in cases of missing children, law enforcement agencies are not mandated to report a missing adult to the NCIC, and local agencies follow varying procedures.

"Some are very proactive while others might not take a report at all," said Erin Bruno, case coordinator for the Phoenix-based National Center for Missing Adults. "That's probably going to be the most difficult things for families out there — the inconsistencies."

About 100 children are kidnapped and murdered each year, and of those who are killed, almost three-quarters are dead within three hours of the abduction, according to a 1997 study by the Washington Attorney General's Office.

"If an adult is known to be kidnapped or taken away forcefully, we're talking about the same time frame for an adult as for a child when it comes to finding them alive and well," Bruno said. "Without evidence (of an abduction), it's hard to say because literally anything is possible. Adults do have the ability to be self-sufficient."

But not Audrey. Her situation hovers in limbo — at 18 she was legally an adult, but had the mentality of a child.

To close this loophole, U.S. Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite, R-Brooksville, last year spearheaded the Audrey Nerenberg Act. The bill, which has since stalled in the House's Committee on Education and the Workforce, seeks to ensure that missing adults certified with a mental capacity of a child under the age of 18 be covered by the Missing Children's Assistance Act. (Former U.S. Rep. Karen Thurman introduced a similar bill, but it died in 2002.)

Brown-Waite said Audrey's act likely would come to the floor for a vote next year.

"We firmly believe that 2007 will be the year that children like Audrey will be protected," Brown-Waite said. "I know that the Nerenbergs have fought long and hard for this. They are such passionate people about this issue. I will be so glad when it finally does become law."

And while the bill may help those who come after Audrey, her parents continue to struggle to find her and bring her back home.

"If we'd see Audrey, we wouldn't even know her after so many years," Evelyn said. "I don't know if I'll ever find her."

To learn more about Audrey, visit <http://www.angelfire.com/ak/403/page10.html>. Milton Nerenberg may be reached at [m\\_nerenberg@yahoo.com](mailto:m_nerenberg@yahoo.com). There is a \$10,000 reward for information leading to Audrey's whereabouts.

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