

# Without A Trace

**Thousands of adults vanish each year. Kristen Modafferi was one of them. | BY MATT BIRKBECK**

ROBERT MODAFFERI picked up the phone in his Charlotte, N.C., office that late June morning and heard the news every parent dreads. “I don’t know how to tell you this,” said a flustered voice. “Your daughter’s missing.”

The caller was Griffin Cherry, a 24-year-old website designer. For the previous three weeks, he had shared a house in Oakland, Calif., with Modafferi’s 18-year-old daughter, Kristen, and three other men. Cherry, stammering, said that none of them had seen Kristen for three days—not since she left first thing in the morning for her job at Spinelli’s, a downtown coffee shop.

He hadn’t called earlier, Cherry explained, because he figured Kristen had just met up with friends. But when the second night went by, still with no word, he’d notified police and then placed the call to Modafferi.

Robert, a 48-year-old electrical engineer, took a deep breath. How would he tell his wife, Deborah? What should they do? It was too soon for him to realize that their life, as they knew it, was over.

ON JUNE 23, 1997, Kristen Modafferi, a tall, vivacious brunette, ended her workday and vanished into thin air.

PHOTO: COURTESY MODAFFERI FAMILY

An investigation into her disappearance has yet to produce a trace.

For now, Kristen has become a statistic. Each year, there are as many as 200,000 adults who are listed as missing in the United States. The majority turn up quickly—some having disappeared by choice, some found dead, by accident or foul play. Yet others—roughly 11,000 last year alone—remain missing, 3,400 of them deemed by law enforcement to be endangered or abducted against their will. In many of these cases, investigators have little more to go on than the strong belief that the victims were not the kind of people who would have walked away from their lives. Police say Kristen, now gone for more than six years, falls into that category.

**S**HE WAS JUST A KID, yet in some ways she was mature beyond her years. She had skipped a grade and had traveled as far as Russia to sing with the high school chorus. She was smart. She scored 1570 on her SATs and won a full four-year academic scholarship at North Carolina State University—tuition, room and board included. Kristen was extremely curious, open to new experience. A student of industrial design, she was a photography buff, read Ayn Rand and sang in a cappella group. The world, as they say, was her oyster.

Initially, Deborah Modafferi didn't want to let her second oldest daughter move to San Francisco, the city

Kristen chose to live and work in the summer between her freshman and sophomore years as part of her scholarship program. But Robert thought it was a good idea, and Kristen twisted her mother's arm. "She was so excited about the whole thing, we couldn't say no," Deborah says. "She was really ready to grow up."

So on June 1, her 18th birthday, Kristen spread her wings. She arrived in the Bay Area, enrolled in a photography class at the University of California at Berkeley, and rented a \$500-a-month room in an Oakland house occupied by four young male professionals. Robert would have preferred she stay in the dorms—but agreed, for this summer, to defer to his daughter's stubborn determination.

It was a concession that plagued him now. As he sped from his office to meet Deborah at home, he was tormented by guilt. *Why*, he asked himself, *had he let his little girl go?*

ROBERT AND DEBORAH took the first plane out to San Francisco. They went straight from the airport to police headquarters in Oakland, where the desk officer told them that the investigators assigned to their daughter's case had gone for the weekend. It was Friday afternoon, just after 4 p.m.

Deborah, a part-time teacher, was near panic. "He basically told us that it was no big deal, that Kristen was just one more runaway, and that postponing the search for another few days wouldn't make a difference." Robert said he felt sick to his stomach.

"I just thought, *This can't be happening.*"

Driven by the belief that every minute counted, the Modafferis began the search for their daughter on their own. They went straight from the police station to the two-story stucco house Kristen had rented on Jayne Avenue. A family photograph and a letter from Kristen's younger sister sat undisturbed by her bed. Clothes still hung on the line out back where she'd left them to dry. They talked to her housemates, trying to learn what they could of Kristen's routines in her new city. Their daughter had packed her days with mini-adventures. She'd rise early, throw on high-top sneakers, and head out to work, afterward exploring ethnic neighborhoods, beaches, art galleries. She'd registered for belly-dancing lessons at the local YMCA. "She was looking for something bigger than what she had in Charlotte," says Allison, Kristen's older and closest sister. "She would call and tell us she was learning about life. I was jealous. If I'd had the money, I would have gone with her."

KRISTEN'S PARENTS returned to the police station first thing Monday and spent the morning trying to convince detectives that Kristen wasn't some drug-crazed runaway, but rather a hard-working, determined young



**Kristen rented a room in this house, in part because of its proximity to public transportation.**

woman. Their desperate pleas eventually won over Officer Patrick Mahanay, a bear of a man who was new to the department's missing persons division. "It became clear," says Mahanay, who spoke first with Kristen's parents, and later to her sisters by phone, "that she had no reason to disappear on her own. She wouldn't have put her family through that."

By the end of the day, Mahanay had made a number of calls on the case. He interviewed Kristen's housemates. "They were forthright, helpful and all told consistent stories," says Mahanay. The investigator visited Spinelli's,

where Kristen, clad in a black T-shirt and khakis, had worked an eight-hour shift, picked up her green Jansport backpack, and walked through the restaurant's doors into the crowded adjacent Crocker Galleria Mall.

Mahanay, assisted by Sgt. John Bradley, a veteran investigator in the division, ran background checks on Kristen's co-workers, who offered as many ideas about where she might have gone that day as Kristen had places to go. One said the bubbly student was headed to the beach at Land's End. Another said she planned to go straight home to Oakland. And a third said he thought he'd seen her outside

the area. But they turned up nothing.

"You keep hoping," says Mahanay, "that she's off somewhere trying to find herself. But the circumstances described a girl who had not disappeared willingly." She'd even left behind a \$400 paycheck at Spinelli's. "The indication was that there was foul play."

Mahanay and Bradley faced two major obstacles in building a case. They lacked a crime scene; there was no evidence of a struggle, no clothes or clues left behind to work with. And in part because Kristen had been in the Bay Area such a short time, they had few additional leads to pursue.

Through further interviews with

## 'You hope she's off somewhere trying to find herself. But the circumstances indicate foul play.'

the restaurant, standing on the second floor of the mall, chatting with a blond woman.

Mahanay brought in a bloodhound, which picked up Kristen's scent at Spinelli's and six miles away at Sutro Baths, a picturesque inlet near Land's End filled with rock formations and caves. Based on the bloodhound's clues, Mahanay followed a trail that placed Kristen at the beach and gave less credence to the possibility that she'd returned home. The only problem was that the beach trail ended on a rocky promenade overlooking the Pacific. Mahanay called in U.S. Parks police and the Coast Guard to scour

Kristen's roommates, Bradley learned one telling thing. Kristen, who had never had a steady boyfriend, had a very trusting nature—perhaps too trusting. She apparently took "casual carpool" rides with strangers over the Bay Bridge. Once, after missing the last train to Oakland following a concert she'd attended, she considered spending the night on a train station bench. When a young man she'd met at the concert told her that was dangerous, she accepted his invitation to sleep on the sofa at his brother's house. Bradley and Mahanay eliminated the man as a suspect, but wondered how many others like him Kristen had

run into—and if one of them had turned out to be lethal.

**I**T CAME AS NO SURPRISE to the Modafferis that their daughter gave people the benefit of the doubt, perhaps naively so. In many ways, she'd lived a protected, idyllic life before heading to California.

Robert and Deborah were high school sweethearts from New Jersey who had married 30 years earlier and moved to Charlotte in 1988 for Robert's job. They settled into a five-bedroom colonial-style house on a street lined with crape myrtles and dogwoods, in a neighborhood full of families. Robert coached softball, and Deborah shuttled the kids from soccer to piano. All four girls were as beautiful as they were smart—Allison, now 26, then Kristen, Lauren, now 21, and the mid-life surprise, Meghan, now 13. Their lives revolved around one another.

THE MODAFFERIS STAYED in the Bay Area an exhausting 14 days. They were grateful for the increased diligence of the detectives, but couldn't understand why Kristen's disappearance was not attracting more attention. They thought about the milk cartons with missing children on them, the billboards, the television announcements. If their daughter's name and photo were widely broadcast, surely someone would come forward who knew something. Had other area law enforcement agencies been alerted? What if Kristen had been abducted

and taken across state lines? Would anyone be watching for her?

They contacted the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the one agency they'd heard could help. But because Kristen had celebrated her 18th birthday three weeks before her disappearance, they were turned away; the NCMEC's charter limits services to victims under the legal age. Kristen's legal emancipation meant the investigation into her disappearance was ineligible for a variety of resources available for solving missing children's cases in the United States.

When a child turns up missing, for instance, police are required to immediately register all information about the case, including details about possible suspects, with the National Crime Information Center, a sophisticated database managed by the FBI. The NCIC can be quickly accessed by law enforcement agencies across the country. It's this kind of coordination that set the stage for Amber Alert.

In the United States, at least 600,000 children under the age of 18 are reported missing each year. (As many as one-quarter of these cases are classified as family abductions.) Thanks in part to the NCIC database and coordinated recovery efforts, 94 percent of those cases are resolved quickly, the majority with the children found and returned safely home. Missing adults are not as fortunate.

DEBORAH AND ROBERT decided it was up to them to let the public know about their daughter's case. They

bought billboard advertising and pasted Kristen's picture on signs throughout the Bay Area. They notified local television stations and stood on San Francisco street corners passing out fliers, printed for free by a local Kinko's. "This responsible and family-oriented girl," the fliers read, "is considered at risk by her family and law enforcement."

Their efforts began to pay off.

Bay Area TV news stations broadcast details about the case. The publicity did produce leads—many of them, unfortunately, dead ends. An anonymous caller told police that Kristen was going to show up at a local diner at a specified time, and the cops staked out the place for six excruciating hours before concluding the call was a prank.

"Psychics started calling," says Mahanay. "We got a tip that she might be on her way to Oregon. Later, someone was certain he'd seen her in Nicaragua."

Finally, the Modafferis decided it was time to head home. They were paralyzed by the prospect of explaining to their girls how Kristen could have simply vanished.

"I couldn't talk to them, I was so emotionally drained," Deborah re-



**Four months before Kristen disappeared, the Modafferis attended a wedding in Florida (left to right, Deborah, Kristen, Lauren, Meghan, Allison and Robert).**

members. "I didn't want to lie, but I didn't want to say, 'We're not getting anywhere.' "

THE MOST TANTALIZING lead came on July 10, two days after the Modafferis' departure. An unidentified male phoned KGO-TV in San Francisco, claiming that Kristen was killed fighting off the advances of two lesbians, her body dumped from a wooden bridge near Point Reyes, just north of San Francisco. Mahanay and Bradley traced the call to Jon Onuma, 38, a short Asian man with waist-length black hair who lived on O'Farrell Street, seven blocks from Spinelli's.

Onuma eventually admitted making the call, but said it was a prank to get even with two of his girlfriend's

COURTESY MODAFFERI FAMILY

former co-workers, who he believed had plotted to have her fired. He claimed never to have met Kristen, but Mahanay and Bradley weren't buying his tale. "He gave us too many details," says Mahanay. "When people do that, we know they're not giving us a tip. They're telling us a story." The investigators did a background check, and eventually interviewed a handful of Bay Area women who had responded to classified ads placed by Onuma. They claimed he had tried to steal money from them or coerce them into sex, but fearful he'd seek revenge, they never pressed charges.

Mahanay and Bradley obtained search warrants and combed Onuma's apartment, where they discovered sizeable traces of blood. Subsequent testing showed that it was animal blood, and police maintain it came from cats belonging to a former girlfriend. Their theory is that Onuma killed the cats following a dispute. Police also focused their attention on another former girlfriend who claimed Onuma had gone into a frenzy during an argument and threatened to kill her, saying, "Now you know what happened to Kristen Modafferi."

To this day, Onuma, who moved back to his native Hawaii in 1999, maintains he had nothing to do with Kristen's disappearance, and, although police have not eliminated him as a suspect, they say there is not enough direct evidence to charge him either.

Months after Onuma came to their attention, Mahanay and Bradley learned about a personal ad that ap-

peared in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* a week before Kristen's disappearance. It read in part, "Female seeking friend(s) to share activities, who enjoy music, photography, working out, walks, coffee or simply the beach, exploring the Bay Area!" They believe that Kristen may have placed the free ad—and gotten a response from someone who lured her into bad circumstances. But by the time Mahanay contacted the newspaper, the computer files showing who had placed the ad had been purged.

**S**INCE JUNE 1997, the Modafferis have visited San Francisco a dozen times. They've fought to keep their daughter's disappearance in the spotlight. They've prodded investigators, hired four private eyes, created a website, manned phones and answered e-mails, hoping to get the tip that will break open the case. Mahanay says he's never seen anything like it. He wishes he could give them the answers every parent deserves. "I lie awake at night," he says. "We want to bring closure to this family. I truly feel this case will be resolved, even if it takes ten years. There are people out there looking over their shoulder, and my word to them is to keep looking."

Deborah says it's the unanswered questions that are the hardest. "It's worse than losing a child in death," she says, "because then you can grieve and go on. We still have the hurt of not knowing." Because she and Robert

believe their daughter's case suffered from such a slow start, they have sought to find a way for missing adult cases to get the same attention as missing children cases do. "Had Kristen disappeared just 23 days before she did, when she was still legally a minor, there's a good chance we could have had early success," says Robert.

"It shouldn't matter how old a person is when they go missing," says Deborah. "No one should be turned away from resources for that reason."

In 1998, the Modafferis convinced Congresswoman Sue Myrick of North Carolina to back national funding for a center like the NCMEC, but for adults. Two years later, a bill passed creating Kristen's Law. It provided \$1.8 million to the Phoenix-based Center for Missing Adults, which, among other things, is putting together a national registry

of missing adults that will serve as a central repository of information accessible to the public, advocacy groups and law enforcement.

"WE'VE ALWAYS MAINTAINED the slimmest hope that our daughter will be found," says Deborah. Kristen's bedroom back home is just as it was when she left; her sisters don't use the two twin beds in her room—not even for sleepovers. And Deborah hangs a stocking for Kristen each Christmas.

It's for the girls that the couple tries to maintain some semblance of a normal family life. "I thank God we have three other children," Robert says. "They keep us busy and give us a sense of purpose as parents, a reason to go on."

"We're doing the best we can," says Deborah. "What else can we do?"



**FICTIONAL CHARACTERS:  
WHERE THE REAL MONEY IS**

You can make a very nice living if you're not real.

Check out the richest fictional characters in the world, as compiled by Forbes.com.

Rank	Name	Net Worth	Source
1.	Santa Claus	Infinite	Toys
2.	Richie Rich	24.7 billion	Inheritance
3.	"Daddy" Warbucks	10 billion	Defense
4.	Scrooge McDuck	8.2 billion	Mining
5.	Willie Wonka	8 billion	Candy
6.	J. R. Ewing	2.8 billion	Oil
7.	Charles Foster Kane	1 billion	Media
8.	Jay Gatsby	600 million	Racketeering