

Jacobs Memory and Hope

Patty Wetterling, a Mother's Legacy

By Cordelia Anderson, friend, colleague and admirer



Patty Wetterling, a mother, victim-parent, and tireless victim advocate, has created waves of heart-based social change. Her activism slowly grew out of the tragedy of her son Jacob's abduction on October 22, 1989. The search for Jacob lasted nearly 27 years along with the families, and so many others, firm hope that Jacob was alive. That reality shifted when Jacobs remains were identified. On September, 6, 2016, Danny Heinrich plead guilty to a child pornography charge while also admitting, with horrifying detail, how he had kidnapped, sexually assaulted and murdered Jacob. He buried Jacob's body in Paynesville, MN which is near the same small town where he had kidnapped and sexually assaulted another boy, Jared Scheierl. While not admitting to more crimes, there were other boys about the same age, about the same time, approached and assaulted in a similar way.

How many of us in Patty Wetterling's place could have emerged from such agony to becoming a beacon of hope for so many families, the media, law enforcement, victim advocates and sex offender therapists and researchers?

When I first met Patty, we were on a Governor's Task Force. I figured Patty, understandably would be focused on one thing only; and that would be finding Jacob. Further, given his case was rare among rare – an abduction at gunpoint by a stranger wearing a mask – that she would be focused on such cases. Instead, she quickly realized that as gut wrenching as child abductions are, they are blessedly relatively rare compared to children who are sexually abused by someone they know and trust. She went from this reality to passionately speaking to not only finding Jacob and other missing children, but also fighting to end the sexual abuse of all children.

One key piece of Patty's legacy includes the bridges she builds between those who worked with victims and their families, those worked with sex offenders, those in media, those who investigate and prosecute and those dedicated to prevention. Patty had a message for all of us that quietly insists that we understand:

- the impact of sexual abuse on the victims and their families,
- what's known about the children, youth and the adults who perpetrate all types of sexual harm,
- how key the media is to such families and how important it is for media to be sensitive to their needs,
- what's needed to more effectively investigate, prosecute and manage those known to have caused the harm, and
- the need for a deep investment from ALL of us to prevent such harm and trauma.

How has Patty begun to address such a painful and complex problem? Patty and her husband Jerry Wetterling co-founded the Jacob Wetterling Resource Center to help find missing children, support families and advance education and prevention. JWRC is now led by Alison Feigh, a dedicated victim advocate and prevention activist who was a classmate of Jacob's. Patty often consulted with OJJDP and Fox Valley Technical College to use her story, and the story of what happened to Jacob, to train professionals to more effectively respond in a victim/family sensitive way. Patty's victim-impact statement was a powerful inspiration for attendees at a wide range of national conferences. Out of her

desire to support others faced with this numbing trauma, she co-founded Team H.O.P.E. which is a national support for families of missing children and was a founding member and past president of the Board of Directors of the Association of Missing & Exploited Children's Organizations (AMECO). Patty co-authored "When Your Child is Missing: A Family Survival Guide" and co-edited a 2015 "Perspectives on Missing Persons Cases." Patty was instrumental in advancement of Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children Sex Offender Registration Act in Minnesota which also informed the 1994 Federal Crime Bill and later was a spark for the AMBER Plan in Minnesota.

Patty is a long-term member of the board of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) where she went from being a passionate member as a victim parent to the Chair of the board and now immediate past Chair. She also served as the Director of the MN Department of Health's Sexual Violence Prevention Program where she spoke to the need to respond to sexual violence as a public health concern. Patty has won several prestigious awards from NCMEC including the Rainbow and Vision Awards. She was named one of the 100 Most Influential Minnesotans of the Century by the Star Tribune, received a Governor's Leadership Award for "Unique Acts of Kindness" and "Eleven Who Care," from KARE 11-TV.

Along with making keynote speeches at a wide range of conferences and national events, Patty and the entire Wetterling family have kept hope alive and demonstrated the power of love and resiliency. They continue to live their lives in demonstration of never letting the person who took Jacob take anything else from the family. Patty has made it clear that the foundation for her work and her life lies within the pillars of strength from her husband, her children and later grandchildren, and the ever growing legions of people who care deeply for them. For 27 years, Patty has continued to speak to the importance of fighting for the rights of children to grow up safe and to be able to follow their dreams.

Patty's legacy is direct talk, grounded in love and possibilities -not fear. Her legacy is the firm belief in holding those who did harm accountable, but in ways that assured public safety and were generated out of evidence rather than fear. Patty often experiences well-meaning people seeing her and other family members, and responding with sighs of sadness. Yet Patty's legacy is the power of spreading joy, paying more attention to the good of most people rather than the bad in a few. Patty's legacy is never giving up hope - hope that those harmed can heal and thrive, hope that more everyone can learn to speak up when they see questionable or concerning sexual behaviors and hold those doing harmful acts accountable, hope that our criminal justice system can work as effectively as possible and ultimately hope that we work collectively to end perpetration, and we invest in comprehensive prevention, so that no other children are harmed.



Patty Wetterling serving school lunch to Jacob at Jacob's school (photo from JWRC)

Friends say no legacy of Patty Wetterling is complete without acknowledging she is a champion chocolate chip cookie maker. Perhaps the summary of Patty's legacy is in the simplicity of her recommendations posted on the JWRC, and other suggestions she's had about what all of us can do even in the most painful of times:

- Be fair, be kind, be understanding
- Be honest, be thankful
- Be a good sport, be a good friend
- Be generous, be gentle with each other
- Be positive
- Giggle
- Light a candle
- Play with your children.
- Create joy
- Eat ice cream

After doing this work for forty years, it is easy to get stuck in the complexity of what is needed to ultimately end child sexual abuse. However, knowing Patty, and experiencing her strength against the odds, changes the odds. Knowing Patty fuels my passion a speaking one's truth to create a culture of compassion and recognizing the power of kindness.

Those wishing to send the Wetterling Family words of support can do so through:

[Jacob Wetterling Resource Center](#), a Program of Gundersen Health, 2021 East Hennepin Ave, Suite, 360, Minneapolis, MN 55413. Join them in the movement wearing #11 for Jacobs Hope.

[National Center for Missing & Exploited Children](#), 699 Prince Street, Alexandria, VA, 22314

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