

# Triggering Memories Of The Missing

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For Rae Bickwit and Sidney and Shirley Weiser, Woodstock symbolizes the greatest tragedy of their lives.

"When I hear about this Woodstock anniversary, I shiver in hate because my children had to be mixed in with that era," Sidney Weiser says.

Rae Bickwit's 15-year-old daughter, Bonnie Bickwit, and the Weisers' only son, Mitchel, 16, vanished while hitchhiking to a rock concert in upstate New York. The concert was not Woodstock but the Watkins Glen Festival, an attempt four years later by music promoters to duplicate the success of the now-historic 1969 event. It is not known if the Brooklyn teenagers, who were dating, ever made it there.

As thousands of people descend on Woodstock '94 this weekend, investigators will make another push to solve a disappearance considered the oldest unsolved children's missing persons case in the nation.

Family members and missing persons experts believe it may be their last best chance to reignite a trail that went cold 21 years ago.

"This has everything to do with Woodstock," says Mitchel's sister, Susan Weiser Leibgott. "Watkins Glen was supposed to be another Woodstock."

"Woodstock may trigger somebody's memory about what happened 20 years ago — it's not that far back," says Bob Bush, a case manager for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Lt. Anthony Suarez, a Brooklyn-born detective with the Sullivan County Sheriff's Department and the primary investigator in the case, will be at Woodstock, questioning concertgoers. He'll be looking in particular for people who may have attended Watkins Glen or who have traveled with the Grateful Dead, who played at the festival.

Suarez admits that no new leads have developed. "I would like to sit down with the families and re-do the case with them," he says, including interviewing friends of the teens. And he believes that new technology and upgraded national computer systems may yield new information.

The center has just created a computer-enhanced photograph, speculating how Bonnie would look today at age 36. It is preparing a similar photo for Mitchel.



Bonnie Bickwit as she looked when she vanished, top, and in image showing possible age progression.

"Of course Woodstock makes one think of them," says Rae Bickwit, now 72. She never moved from the family house in Borough Park, where she raised Bonnie and her older sister, Cheryl. Bickwit's husband, Theodore, died in 1979.

For the Weisers, who spent most of their lives in the Midwood and Madison sections of Brooklyn, the grief has never stopped — but neither has hope. "Lots of people are making the connection between Watkins Glen and Woodstock," says Sidney Weiser, 67. The Weisers, who since have moved to Tucson, keep their names

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Rae Bickwit with a picture of her missing daughter.

and Arizona telephone number in the Brooklyn White Pages telephone directory, at a cost of \$2.25 a month. "It's in case Mitchel wants to get in touch with us," he says. And Mitchel's older sister, Susan Leibgott, has refused to move from her Brooklyn apartment, hoping her brother will contact her.

"I want to see my brother again," says Leibgott, 42. "I want to tell him I love him and that I understand how it was for him."

The story started off simply, almost romantically, with two teenage sweethearts looking forward to spending a summer weekend together. Bonnie, an honor student at John Dewey High School, took a summer job babysitting at upstate Camp Wel-Met. Mitchel, due to begin college in six months, worked as an assistant at Chelsea Photographers in Coney Island and prepared to take his driver's test in August.

On Thursday, July 26, Mitchel left his parents' home and met Bonnie at the camp. She had just quit her babysitting job but said she'd be back for her belongings and paycheck. Mitchel also left behind a paycheck and had a driving lesson scheduled on Monday.

On July 27, the teens hitched a ride into Narrowsburg. The last known person to see them is a truck driver who picked them up at Camp Wel-Met and dropped them off in town. He told police that the two stood on the side of the road holding a cardboard sign

that read "Watkins Glen" — another 75 miles away.

Days later, the parents mounted a months-long campaign that took them to such runaway havens as San Francisco and Oregon. They contacted psychics and placed hundreds of ads in underground newspapers, to no avail.

Leibgott and other family members criticize the investigation for treating the matter simply as a case of runaway teenagers.

"Part of me thinks they could have just run away," Leibgott says. "But why wouldn't they contact us after all these years?"

In the fall of 1973, Rae Bickwit received a letter from an Indian reservation in South Dakota asking for a contribution. Since the teens were interested in Indian affairs, the parents thought they might be there. "After all, how did they get my address?" she says. But nothing ever came of it.

Seven years ago, a long-distance telephone operator notified Sidney Weiser that he had a collect call from Bonnie. "I said I would accept, but then the operator told me that the other party had disconnected," he recalls. If it wasn't Bonnie, Weiser says, "Why would somebody, so many years later, make a crank call?"

Those have been the only leads. Two years ago, during Yom Kippur, Rae Bickwit for the first time allowed herself to say Yizkor, the Jewish prayer for the dead, for Bonnie. "There's been no finality. It's like putting something to rest. If she's gone, God in heaven, under what circumstances?"