

recalled recently. Walls was perfectly aware of his girlfriend's close relationship to her mother, and it would seem logical, Harris thinks, that he would assume she'd left him and gone home. "To me, he was saying he already knows that something happened to her."

An Insane Situation

Harris' suspicions were not without basis. The two-year relationship between Roxanne and Walls had been volatile. "I never approved of Louis from the beginning," says Rachel Gonzales, who had been friends with Roxanne since the two met as students at Kealing Junior High. The relationship didn't exactly start on a positive note: According to friends and family, Walls lied about his age to Roxanne, telling the 16-year-old that he was just 19, when in truth, in the summer of 2004 when they met, he was already 28. It wasn't until well over a year into their on-again-off-again affair that she finally learned he was actually closer to 30. The deception felt purposeful and manipulative, say Roxanne's friends and family. The relationship was also abusive – starting "at the beginning," says Gonzales. "He would cheat on her every once in a while and push her around." Gonzales said she tried to tell Roxanne that she should end it, but Roxanne defended Walls. "It got to a point that we were being separated, that she was telling me less and less [about] things that were going on."

According to another friend, Elizabeth Ellis, Roxanne was simply too trusting and too generous. Roxanne stayed with Walls in part, she believes, to help take care of his two young children to whom she had grown attached. She would buy them presents at the dollar store – dinosaur toys for his son, for example, and pretty accessories for his daughter's hair. She'd go to the apartment Walls shared with his mother and babysit for the kids by herself when Walls wanted to go out, sometimes overnight. "She had a big heart and was a nurturer," Ellis says. Ellis says that she and Harris tried to convince Roxanne that she was being used. "She really didn't know how to pick 'em," Ellis recalled recently. "Roxanne was always trying to [get Walls to] get himself a job, to be a man. And that's something that her mom and I would always tell her: 'You can't tell a man to be a man; he needs to just be one.'" But Roxanne would always stick up for him – and, perhaps, lie for him.

That's what seems to have happened in 2005, when Harris found Roxanne sitting alone at a bus stop, her face bruised and puffy. Her nose was not just broken but internally detached, requiring serious surgery. Roxanne told Harris that the injury had been an accident: She and Walls had been down on Sixth Street when a group of guys began to catcall her, saying she should leave Walls and go off with them. Before she knew it, Walls was fighting the whole group – Roxanne tried to break up the fight and instead got popped in the face. Walls had gone off to have a doctor at Brackenridge Hospital look at his hand.

That was the story Roxanne initially told Gonzales too, and Gonzales didn't believe a word of it. "She stuck to it, but I knew it wasn't the truth. He was pushing her, slapping her," she says. "I honestly believe he did that to her." Ellis says that Roxanne ultimately admitted to her that Walls was responsible for the damage to her face but shrugged it off. "It was just an insane situation," Ellis says.

Time to Go

In the months leading up to Roxanne's disappearance, it seemed to her friends and family that she was finally pulling away from Walls. Although she'd dropped out of McCallum High School as a junior, she had found her way to the Goodwill job training and GED program and was thriving there, said her case worker, Sandra McDowell, and her teacher Jane Comer. "She wanted to grow, to become more, to get a good education and ... a good job," says McDowell. "She had friends who did not have those credentials and wants in life, [but] that was her ambition." Roxanne was "very artistic," Comer says, and she was excited to land an unpaid mentorship spot with Charlotte's Fiesta Flowers on Lamar Boulevard, near the cluster of hospitals and medical facilities off 38th Street. "Everyone loved working with her," says flower-shop owner Charlotte Wainscott. "She was just such a sweet and nice person." She did so well in her mentorship that after it ended Wainscott hired her on. "She learned and caught on quickly. She was one of those people that really loved flowers." Indeed, says McDowell, Roxanne thought that one day she might be able to have her own flower shop.

Roxanne was also making progress in her school work, says Comer, and by early 2006 had passed all but one of the tests needed to receive her GED – only math was standing in her way. But like many young adults who fail to secure a GED on the first try, Roxanne began to drift from the program; she didn't come around as often and put off further study. But she kept working and eventually took a second job, working for the Census Bureau.

Not long after that Walls began to reappear, says Ellis. According to phone records, in the month before Roxanne disappeared, Walls was calling her constantly. Roxanne would tell Walls what neighborhood she was working in that day doing



Louis Walls

Census business, and then "she'd run into him at a park on that side of town," Ellis recalls. "He'd just randomly show up places where she would say she was going to be. He was way weird." Less than two weeks before she disappeared, however, it seemed to Comer that Roxanne had made up her mind: She wanted to get back to school and get on with her life. "I think the job made her think, 'I need to get my GED and do something else,' so that's when she decided ... that 'I'm going to go back and do this.'"

Yet Roxanne had also apparently reconciled with Walls – at least enough to go with him at the end of June to spend a week together, ending up at the Budget Inn just south of Rundberg. Harris, Ellis, and Gonzales now insist they believe Roxanne was truly and finally done with the relationship. Ellis called her the last weekend in June and caught Roxanne crying. Was there trouble with Walls, she asked? "And she was like, 'I can't talk about it now.'" Ellis told Roxanne to get dressed, and she would pick her up; Roxanne agreed.

Ready to go, Ellis called back, but Roxanne never answered. Gonzales says she had a similarly cryptic conversation on July 4, 2006. "She told me that they were arguing," she recalls. "She was trying to leave him alone, but he wasn't letting her. I said, 'Just leave; don't talk to him anymore.' But you can only tell a person so much."

Harris and Patrick Doyle now wonder if Roxanne had decided to break things off with Walls for good – and if, perhaps, that's what kicked off the argument they had on the evening of July 7, 2006. "I think that argument he said they had, I think it finally clicked for her ...," says Harris.

"That it was time to go," finishes Doyle.

"Time to go," agrees Harris. "I've got nothing else to go on."

The Boyfriend

Walls has never wavered from his version of events – that he and Roxanne argued and she walked out, alone, and disappeared completely within 20 minutes. But in the years since, police investigators have developed a more complete picture of Louis Walls, and it's not impressive. "Louis, among his peers, is an idiot," says 15-year APD veteran Detective James Scott, one of two investigators assigned to the department's missing persons detail. "I mean ... you can look at his criminal record and tell he's not the smartest criminal out there." Indeed. In March 2005, for example, he was popped for agreeing to sell three rocks of crack for \$50 to an undercover APD officer. The cop had spotted him walking along Rundberg, and gave him a ride to the Ramada Limited just off the highway. Walls fetched the rocks and was promptly arrested. After testing, it turned out that the crack was fake. (Walls was handed a 120-day jail sentence.)

Walls has also exposed a far darker side, and particularly a history of trouble with young women – trouble that started before he met Roxanne, says Harris, who made contact with an ex-girlfriend Walls called numerous times in the hours after Roxanne disappeared. The girl told Harris that she had taken out a protective order to keep Walls away. More cryptically, Harris says the young woman told her that when Walls called her he told her that he was "in trouble" but did not elaborate. (The ex-girlfriend, who lives out of state, did not return a call from the *Chronicle*.)

Since Roxanne disappeared, Walls has apparently not changed his ways. In March 2008, he was charged with making a terroristic threat against his current girlfriend, Cassandra Tolbert. According to court records, she told police she'd met Walls to make arrangements for him to see the son he'd conceived with her but that he wanted instead to talk about her getting "back with him." When she said no, Tolbert recalled, he whispered in her ear, "I don't want to kill you like I did that girl Roxanne," and, "I really did kill her; I know how to do something with bodies." (He pleaded no contest to the charge, was found guilty, and sentenced to 140 days in jail.)

More disturbing, says Harris, is that Tolbert told her that Walls had tried to pimp her out. Could it be, Harris wonders, that Walls tried the same thing with Roxanne? That is a possibility, says Scott. "I don't think she was straight-out tricking for him," he says, but he could have been trying to groom her for that role. Ultimately, Scott says, he thinks Roxanne did not see the writing on the wall: "She was naive; she was in over her head and didn't know it. Of course, in missing persons there are a lot of young ladies who feel like they're part of the 'in' clique – they're with a gang leader, or whoever, and they don't realize who they're with."

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Roxanne Paltauf was last seen at the Budget Inn near Rundberg Lane.

JANA BIRCHUM