

## The Missing

Working missing persons is a daunting task. APD's two-man missing persons investigation team works roughly 4,000

COURTESY OF RUDY PALTAUF



cases each year – including runaways (the bulk of the cases), disappearances, and abductions. In the first five months of 2009, the unit already had 1,681 cases in its queue. And working these cases is a distinctly different proposition than working, say, a robbery or homicide. There, says Scott's partner, Detective David Gann, you've got a distinct crime scene, and the question becomes: Where did the perp go from there? In missing persons, the first order of business is to determine whether a crime even happened (see "Missing in Austin," p.25).

In the case of Roxanne Paltauf, there wasn't necessarily anything at first to suggest she'd done anything else than just walk off. "The case came [to us] as, they got into an argument, and she walked off – with just that information," Gann says. "Well, you can imagine, working missing cases in a city with a population the size we have, that's a pretty common occurrence. Boyfriends and girlfriends get into arguments, and one of them walks off. They don't come home that night, [and the] very next morning their significant other reports them missing." Often the question of how to proceed in such cases turns on a consistency of behavior – for example, has the person walked off before? According to Walls, Roxanne had done just that.

At first, police had no reason to suspect that Walls – the one who initially reported the disappearance – wasn't being honest. "It's really hard in this profession to pick and choose which cases have nuances that make you say, 'There's something to this; we need to immediately grasp what happened,'" says Scott. "And in that sense, I guess everything that could go wrong [with Roxanne's case] did go wrong." Not that police didn't, as Scott puts it, "use due diligence." Roxanne's name was immediately put into a be-on-the-lookout alert for all patrol officers, and vital information was fed into the state and national crime computers. But it wasn't until later that police had enough information to suggest that there might be far more involved in Roxanne's disappearance than just an unremarkable lovers' spat.

For example, there was the purse: Roxanne's pink purse that she supposedly left, with her cell phone, her wallet, and her jewelry, inside the hotel room. Roxanne never went anywhere without her purse. Never. On that point friends and family completely agree. Ellis says she would actually get into arguments with Roxanne about her always needing to carry her purse everywhere they went. Gonzales agrees: "Anywhere she goes, she's got that purse on her shoulder." When Harris told Gonzales it had been left behind, "I knew immediately that something was wrong." The fact that her

jewelry was also left behind, inside her wallet, let Ellis know something was not right.

Roxanne never went without her rings: "No. ... Even when we went swimming, that girl wore accessories." If Roxanne was going to storm out of the room – even to cool off – she would have taken her purse and certainly would have taken her cell phone. Harris is adamant about that – and she would have called home, say those who knew Roxanne well. "That made me very nervous, the fact that her mother never heard from her," says Comer, Roxanne's teacher. "I couldn't see her being strung out, or whatever, so bad that she wasn't going to call her mother."

Everyone insists that Roxanne talked to her mother two, three times, or more, each day. On the evening of July 7, 2006, those calls ceased. "The one thing that struck me, the day she disappeared, the calls stopped," said private investigator Tim Young. To him, that clearly means that whatever happened, Roxanne did not simply disappear of her own volition. "At that point in the investigation, it seemed clear that she was not with us anymore. There was absolutely no trace of Roxanne."

There was, however, one additional clue that appeared just six days after she went missing. A security guard named Bryan Parker noticed Roxanne's Texas identification card tucked into the wallet of another man who was accused of assaulting a woman at the Motel 6 just up the street from the Budget Inn. According to the police report of that July 13, 2006, incident, a man named Geoffrey Moore, now 33, picked up a Perfect 10 Men's Club dancer and her husband, outside the Chevron station at Rundberg and I-35. Moore asked, "How much for her?" She replied that she was not a prostitute but would do a private dance for him at the motel. The three went to the motel, and Moore and the woman entered the room. He locked the door, however, before the husband could get inside.

The woman alleged that Moore attacked her and tried to rape her. The husband heard his girlfriend shouting, got Parker and a passkey, and the two men tried to get into the room. When they finally got the door open, the husband attacked Moore, who fled, leaving behind his wallet and his hearing aid. When Parker picked up the wallet, he found Roxanne's ID. Moore later came back to the scene, to retrieve his things, and was arrested by police. He was never charged – in part, it seems, because the chain of events that led to his alleged attack of the woman aren't entirely clear. Moore, for example, told police that he tried to get intimate with the woman but she refused. He then went into the bathroom and came back out to find her rifling through his pockets, trying to steal from him. Could it have been that the woman and man lured Moore and then tried to roll him? Or was it an unprovoked sexual assault? Ultimately, the Travis Co. District Attorney's Office declined

to pursue sexual assault charges against Moore, and the case was closed. (Moore could not be reached for comment.)

But the incident did provide Harris and police with yet another lead. How had Moore gotten Roxanne's license? To date, that is not entirely clear – even though detectives have spoken with Moore about Roxanne's disappearance. But police say they're certain that neither Walls nor Moore have told everything they know about Roxanne. Walls' attitude is especially frustrating. "People don't realize that although I feel that he could be more forthcoming," says Scott, "I don't have any legal rights to force him to do anything. And until I get the kind of forensic evidence that would allow me to go to a grand jury, to force him to answer questions, I can't. I mean, it's not like in the movies, where you can just go to somebody and say, 'Well, we're taking you downtown.' Because if they don't want to ... all we can say is, 'Well, that's a real bummer.' We can't just throw you in a car."

More importantly, says Scott, Walls "just doesn't care that he's a suspect. [H]e's no stranger to bad-acting, so it's not a huge burden for him."

Ultimately, though, Scott says he will find the truth, from Moore or Walls (or whoever else), to solve the mystery of Roxanne's disappearance. "Basically, I've got two violent offenders. Both of them are lying to me," says Scott. "[T]hey're both hiding criminal activity. But I think one of them is hiding a murder."

## Waiting for Answers

The questions continue to haunt Harris. Where is Roxanne? What happened to her? As the years have passed, the questions have become more detailed and more disturbing: Did Walls try to roll Moore? Could he have used Roxanne as bait to do just that? Did Moore, who had been popped before for carrying a butcher knife in his car while trolling for hookers along Middle Lane, happen upon Roxanne and try to solicit her? Or maybe, did he recognize her as Walls' girlfriend, from a previous encounter?

The questions, the possibilities, feel endless. Harris and Doyle have staked out motels near Rundberg, they've walked the streets handing out fliers asking people to "Please Help" Harris find her daughter, they've posted alerts and questions on the Web, gotten Roxanne's story featured on *America's Most Wanted*, and in turn they've been approached by psychics. So far they've made little progress. Harris still holds great hope that the right person, with the right tip, will finally have the courage to tell the truth. "My biggest thing is, is Roxanne out there? Is she alone? Is she scared? Is she crying out for help and I just can't hear my daughter?" she asks. "I need my closure. I need to find my daughter one way or another." ■

Anyone with information about the disappearance of Roxanne Paltauf can call an anonymous tip line at 800/670-6760 or APD's missing persons unit at 974-5250.

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