

# KLAAS ACTION

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# REVIEW

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE KLAASKIDS FOUNDATION

A mile a minute....  
that is how fast your child can disappear



## A MESSAGE FROM MARC

America's Amber Alert system is broken. It takes too long to activate. The criteria required for activation are too strict and inflexible. While geographic considerations are a necessary component of a viable plan, the wrong ones have been applied. The technologies selected for primary distribution are either antiquated or non-sensical. It does not help the kidnapped children who need it the most.

Ernie Allen, President of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), has repeatedly said that "time is of the essence" when children are kidnapped. His contention is supported by statistics. Only 42.9% of missing children are reported to law enforcement within the first two hours. In 56% of cases, two hours lapsed before reports were made. An Amber Alert cannot be issued until a police report is filed, yet 76.2% of children murdered as a result of abduction are dead within three hours. Why then, did Mr. Allen and his colleagues design a National Amber Alert program

that routinely requires 3-5 hours to activate once the criteria has been met and the report has been filed?

My Polly was kidnapped from her bedroom by a bearded, knife-wielding madman in front of two witnesses who were unable to provide descriptive or license plate information on the getaway car. Therefore, Polly's case would not have merited an Amber Alert. Within an hour of Polly being kidnapped, two Sheriff's deputies had the kidnapper within their grasp. Unaware that a crime had occurred, they questioned him and then helped to pull his car out of a ditch and sent him on his way. If they had known that a bearded, disheveled kidnapper was on the loose, they would have treated the incident differently. Of course Polly was

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# THE AMBER ALERT IS A BROKEN PROGRAM

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kidnapped before the Amber Alert existed, but on May 3, 2009, three-year-old Briant Rodriguez was kidnapped from his home in San Bernardino, CA, by two armed men who tied up his mother and then told her that they were going to kill her toddler. No vehicle description; no Amber Alert.

The original Amber Alert, developed in response to the 1996 kidnapping of nine-year-old Amber Hagerman, was brilliant in its simplicity. When the predatory kidnapping of a young child is witnessed and the child's life is endangered, local law enforcement notifies local radio stations who then alert the public. This strategic alliance between law enforcement, the media, and citizens effectively addresses the primary obstacle to a successful recovery: time. A kidnapper can safely disappear with a victim at the rate of a mile a minute, exponentially increasing his own safety zone with the passage of time. Therefore, every minute that reduces the time gap between the kidnapping and public notification raises the probability of a safe recovery. The Dallas plan issued Amber Alerts via radio based on the theory that kidnappers would escape in cars and most people driving in cars were listening to their radios. Early successes supported this theory.

The federal Amber Alert that debuted in 2003 bore little resemblance to its namesake. In order to protect against "cry wolf" scenarios by local law enforcement, the states were instructed to designate state coordinators as the authorizing entity. The new policy dictated that local authorities report their findings to the state coordinator who would then determine whether or not an Amber Alert was warranted. This process often fails based on

any number of factors ranging from human error to computer error. At the very least it wastes valuable time.

At the first National Amber Alert Conference (12/9/02), OJJDP Administrator Robert Flores asked how a kidnapper might use the Amber Alert to his or her own advantage. The obvious answer is that a clever abductor can avoid an Amber Alert by simply driving away from the coverage area and maintaining posted speed limits. This scenario was enabled when each state was designated as a separate Amber Alert zone. State borders dictated which communities would receive Amber Alerts, regardless of their proximity to the crime. In order to activate an Amber Alert in an adjoining state, the issuing state's coordinator must first notify the neighboring state's coordinator, who then begins the verification process all over again.

The Emergency Alert System (EAS) was selected as the universal delivery system for Amber Alerts. Over-involved in multiple levels of governmental codes and regulations, the EAS is a deeply flawed, expensive system that requires expensive encoding and decoding equipment and weekly FCC testing. When the Internet was recommended as a more stable and efficient communications platform for the primary Amber Alert dissemination that could seamlessly compliment radio, Assistant U.S. Attorney General and National Amber Alert Coordinator Deborah Daniels rejected the idea upon the recommendation of the architects of the plan. Instead, television was selected as another primary communications platform for the Amber Alert, despite the fact that there is very little that a couch potato can do to recover

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# THE AMBER ALERT IS A BROKEN PROGRAM

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a kidnapped child. Each step in this increasingly complex process aids the kidnapper, as precious time is lost forever.

In some jurisdictions, expectations for Amber Alerts are so diminished that the recovery of remains qualifies as success. In March 2005, ten-year-old Jetseta Gage was kidnapped in front of a witness, yet it took authorities more than four and a half hours to issue an Amber Alert. Her remains were recovered the next morning using information provided by an Amber Alert tip, which qualified the Amber Alert as a success.

I believe that the Amber Alert program can once again fulfill its original intent if certain steps are taken. Eliminate state borders as geographic barriers when issuing Amber Alerts and instead place the point of abduction in the center of any activation. Allow the activation criteria to be guidelines and not impediments.

Streamline the process by eliminating the state coordinator and returning activation authority to local law enforcement. Each case should be judged on its own merits and the best authority to do that is the authority with boots on the ground, at the victim's home, not a bureaucrat in a remote location. We trust the police to wear guns, so why don't we trust them to issue Amber Alerts?

Adam Walsh, Polly Klaas, Megan Kanka, Elizabeth Smart, Jessica Lunsford, Danielle Van Dam, and more recently Sandra Cantu and Briant Rodriguez, did not fit the criteria for Amber Alerts. Yet these are the cases that stole our hearts and in some cases profoundly changed the way that we administer criminal justice in the United States. An emergency alert program that does not include these children is a program that is shortsighted in its goals and falls short of public expectation. ■

## MEGAN IS MISSING AT MEGANISMISSING.COM

The Internet has changed the rules. Back in the day, children had to beware predators lurking in alleys, dark stairwells, in and around parks and schoolyards. Those concerns still exist, but the Internet has emboldened a new generation of cyber-perverts who rely upon anonymity and subterfuge to engage their evil intentions. Many child safety advocates promote placing the family computer in the living room as a way to monitor their children's online activity. That is a 20<sup>th</sup> century answer to a 21<sup>st</sup> century problem.

The movie "Megan is Missing" demonstrates the varied and creative ways that children use communication technology, and

how they make themselves vulnerable to victimization by doing so. That they are able to access the Internet, chat rooms and social networking sites while walking down the street or sitting in a classroom should serve as a wake-up call for parents everywhere. ■



# SOLVING CRIMES WITH SECRET WITNESS

Lisa Bonham was only six years old in 1977 when she ran to Reno's Idlewild Park in Nevada, to join her brother for a day of September sunshine and innocent fun. But a dangerous pedophile was hunting that day and Lisa fell right into his crosshairs.

A year later, Lisa's skeletal remains were found. Community apprehension transitioned into community anger and then into community action. In sacrificing her life, Lisa inspired a community. That inspiration was the foundation and framework for Secret Witness. Founded by local visionary Don Richter, Secret Witness is a non-profit organization dedicated to solving crimes and improving public safety by providing rewards for information, not otherwise available, that aids law enforcement in arresting and prosecuting crimes. Secret Witness recently celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

In its 30 years, Secret Witness has grown from taking five or six calls a month to more than 200. Tips have helped solve more than 1,000 crimes, including 30 murders. The organization often pays more than \$15,000 a year in reward money. Secret Witness has paid over \$250,000 to date, and has received over 57,000 anonymous tips.

One crime resolution aided by Secret Witness that has poignant significance for the KlaasKids Foundation is that of the 2008 kidnap and murder of Brianna Denison. On January 20, 2008, 19-year-old Brianna was kidnapped from a friend's home in Reno. KlaasKids responded to a request from Brianna's mother to establish and train a volunteer search. Search Director Brad Dennis traveled

to Reno and organized more than 1,700 volunteer searchers in an effort that covered a 100-square-mile area. On February 15, Brianna's remains were discovered, partially covered in a snowy field. The FBI quickly determined that DNA found at the scene linked Brianna's disappearance to a serial rapist who had been terrorizing the community for the past several months.

After ten months of dead ends, futile surveillances, and serious man-hours, the authorities were no closer to solving this case. It is fair to say that spirits were waning. "Everybody poured their hearts into this case," said Detective Adam Wagnanski.

However, on Halloween night 2008, a tip turned over to the Reno Police Department by Secret Witness volunteers proved to be the break everyone was waiting for. "I was working a double homicide and just decided to take a break and go through my basket of tips, like I do a couple of times a day," said Wagnanski. "When I came across this one, it just stuck out."

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© 2009 by the KlaasKids Foundation. The *Klaas Action Review* is published quarterly for Foundation members. Dedicated to the memory of Polly Klaas, the Foundation's purpose is to inform parents, children and communities about how to prevent crimes against children through personal action and support of legislation. Design Concept: Blackburn Design, Petaluma, CA. Printing: MSI Litho, San Rafael, CA.

## STAYING OUT OF TROUBLE IN THE CITY

**M**any years back, probably about 1973 or 1974, two girlfriends and I ended up in Georgetown, DC, late on a Saturday night. We were locals, but I had a lot more city experience than the other two girls.

We'd all been to Georgetown many times and we were at home there. We were only a half-block away from Wisconsin Avenue & M Street, NW (if you're familiar with DC). At the time, there was an estate jewelry store with interesting window displays behind its burglar bars. We were having fun and were completely relaxed, picking our jewelry as girls of all ages did then and do now.

Even though we were all 21 or 22, we probably looked like we were 14. (I was

routinely carded until I was 40.) We'd each picked out a number of pieces of jewelry that we'd have like to have had we been wealthy, and were laughing and just about ready to move on to the next window full of dreams. From behind us, we heard a man's voice say "Would you ladies like some watches, some rings?" We turned around to see a pimp (no one else would dress like that) and behind him, two big guys in full-length leather coats — and the coats weren't needed for the weather that evening.

Two of us did our best not to laugh in the guy's face, and the third girl, who we knew was naïve, proved why we tried not to let her out alone. As we quietly said that we weren't

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## SOLVING CRIMES WITH SECRET WITNESS

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The anonymous tip changed everything. It was an immense break in a case that had a city on edge and tested the energies of the entire police department.

On November 26, 2008, James Biela was arrested and booked for the kidnap and murder of Brianna Denison. "This never would've happened if we hadn't gotten that one Secret Witness tip," said Wygnanski, who's had success with Secret Witness tips in the past which have helped resolve cases involving, among other things, drug dealers and sex offenders. Prosecutors intend to seek the death penalty when Biela is tried for Briana's murder.

Secret Witness is a perfect example of how a civilian, community-based organization can

aid law enforcement in keeping the public safe from crime. By providing a safe haven for witnesses to report a crime, Secret Witness enables crimes to be solved, for innocent citizens to avoid victimization, and for justice to be served. Their results are as profound as they are tangible. They have assisted in solving 30 murders in 30 years, avoiding incalculable victimization and creating safer streets. This is a significant legacy that must be encouraged and supported. ■

To learn more about Secret Witness log onto:

[www.secretwitness.com](http://www.secretwitness.com)

See a crime. Call the line.

775.332.4900

One tip can change everything.

## IN REMEMBRANCE OF AMY JONES

Violet and I were looking forward to dinner with our dear friend Amy Jones on the evening of March 24, 2009. She was flying into San Francisco from Dallas, Texas, to fulfill her regular duty as emcee and speaker for Peter Lowe's Get Motivated Business Seminar. Two days prior to the event, I received a phone call from Amy's mother. As a precaution, due to a tragic family history and a minor injury that did not properly heal, Amy had entered the hospital for a biopsy. Amy passed away from kidney cancer on June 19.

I first met Amy in Arlington, Texas in 1996, in the immediate aftermath of the Amber Hagerman kidnapping. She attended a televised town hall meeting that addressed child safety issues. After the meeting, Amy and another young woman approached and asked me how they could help the KlaasKids Foundation spread child safety throughout the community. I was as taken by her sincerity as I was enchanted by her smile, which was as big and open as Texas. We became fast friends.

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## STAYING OUT OF TROUBLE IN THE CITY

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interested, Ms. Naïve starts to tell the pimp our life stories including where we lived. Each of us grabbed an elbow and firmly got our friend out of there. The term "racial profiling" wasn't in use back then, but she accused us of behavior along those lines. We told her that our reaction had nothing to do with the man's race and everything to do with his clothes and the thugs who followed him in silence, and with his offer of jewelry. Did she think he was going to give expensive jewelry to three girls because he was a nice guy?!

It's very important that young girls—and boys—understand that big cities don't function like small towns where everyone knows everyone and people look out for kids. Teens in DC and other cities are a commodity if they don't know what kind of dangers to expect. Too many young kids run away to the big city believing that they know all the

answers only to find themselves clueless once they arrive. When swagger becomes apprehension, pimps pounce. Children who thought that they could find a better life quickly find themselves in nightmarish scenarios from which there is no return.

I understand that it's hard for parents to think of their little girls as potential prostitutes, but if a visit to a big city is in the future—with parents or with a high-school class (the high-school class trip is probably a lot more dangerous) they need to have life in the big city explained to them in graphic terms. Both the girls and boys need to know that the rules are different in cities.

It is much better to tell your kids what could happen than to have them tell you what happened. The worst situation is to have the Medical Examiner or a police detective tell you what happened to your kid.■

# IN REMEMBRANCE OF AMY JONES

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In Memory of Amy Jones

Amy was fiercely intelligent. She had a quick, conceptual mind that was well-organized and task-oriented. She dedicated time and energy toward a series of events in the Dallas, Ft. Worth, metroplex that raised funds and enabled us to distribute child

safety information. Amy was instrumental in ensuring that the KlaasKids Foundation had influence in Texas.

No task was too small for Amy and no idea too large. She was a beauty queen, a mentor, a teacher, a ventriloquist, an entrepreneur, a marketing expert, an executive director, an author, and above all an inspiration. Whenever I met with Amy, she would have another young lady in tow. She was dedicated to teaching them about citizenship, about volunteerism, about the importance of having faith in your life.

Possibly Amy's most marked characteristic was her unyielding faith in God and the goodness of man. Faith helped her to face life with courage and to demonstrate love through example. Her faith remained constant in the face of extreme adversity. Or, if she had doubt, she faced it down with resolve and determination.

Amy's courage and natural charm were both demonstrated in the ways that she put the needs of others above her own needs.

Once, she was caught in a raging river. In order to avoid catastrophe she climbed onto the roof of her car. When the rescue team arrived, Amy pointed across the channel toward another car containing an elderly woman. She screamed, "Save the old lady! Save the old lady!" The elderly woman in the other car misinterpreted what Amy was saying and pointed back toward her screaming, "She's going to have a baby! She's going to have a baby!" Fortunately, they were both rescued.

Amy's life was one of accelerating accomplishment, both in the number of people that she touched with her spirit and her growing influence in her community. I have no doubt that her greatest achievements were still before her. However, instead of continued achievement we are left with the memory of a sparkling spirit that enhanced the lives of all who were fortunate enough to reflect in her glow.

Amy was my friend and I will miss her terribly. For one with so much promise to be taken so soon is but another reminder of the fragility of life and how important it is to live with dignity and purpose. ■



# WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT - HELP FIGHT CRIME!

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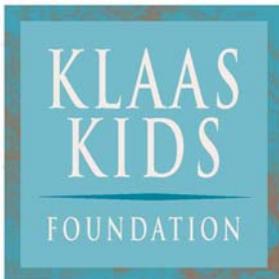
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