

# 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

**S**o far it's been a hot and cold summer here in Northern California. The weather was as hot as the agenda when I recently attended the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Melanie Rieger Conference Against Violence in New Britain, Connecticut. As you will see on page 9 of this issue, the Fireball Run is heating up very nicely. General Motors has become a major sponsor of this event and is supplying Team Polly with a 2011 Chevrolet Cruze LTZ to drive during the eight-day, 3,500-mile Race to Recover America's Missing Children.

Unfortunately, the "hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil" California legislature ran as cold as a snow cone as it ignored potential online child safety dangers by effectively killing four bills that addressed social networking threats. Our Spring 2010 issue featured an analysis on these pieces of legislation, which addressed threats to children who frequent social networking sites. Like ducks in a County Fair shooting gallery, they went down one after another. There are currently no laws against the use

of social networking sites by registered sex offenders in California.

These bills were common sense legislation that would have protected children when they go online. Social networking sites have become places for people to escape from their daily routines or take a break from work, and usage is dramatically increasing. The audience for social networks has increased year-over-year for the last three years, reaching an estimated U.S. audience of over 140 million by December 2009. Studies show that on average, teen users may spend more than five and a half hours per day on sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Currently, it is believed that one in five children are solicited sexually while online. One in 33

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## A MESSAGE FROM MARC

experiences an aggressive solicitation where an individual requests a meeting, telephones, or sends mail, money, or gifts. Sex offenders are increasingly using social networking sites to lure children as these sites grow in popularity.

The last bill left standing was SB 1361 (D-Corbett), which would have prohibited social networking sites from displaying the home address or telephone number of a registered user who is under 18 years of age. However, it died in the Assembly Committee on Arts, Entertainment, Sports Tourism, and Internet Media as quickly as a July 4 fireworks finale when only three (Blumenfeld, Calderon, and Monning) out of nine members voted to move the legislation forward.

Opposition to SB 1361 was led by the Internet Alliance (Washington, D.C.), TechAmerica (Arlington, VA), the California Chamber, and Stop Child Predators, a Washington, D.C.-based group that claims they protect America's children from sexual predators.

These groups testified that Facebook and other social networking sites are used as personal, primary address books, and that restricting a child's ability to post their address and phone number on their profile pages would force them to lie. Proponents of SB 1361 believe that it is cynical to presume that America's children are inherent liars who will automatically circumvent tools designed to protect them.

Stacie Rumenap, President of Stop Child Predators, says that, "Unfortunately, the bill fails miserably at reaching its intended goal." She

believes that, "SB 1361 could very well result in unintended consequence, placing teens at greater risk by pushing them away from many of the age-specific protections which currently exist on social networking websites."

I, on the other hand, testified that, "Although social networking sites tend to be the hub of teens' social lives, most teens use social networking sites to interact with friends from their offline world, and to check out possible new friendships. Further, teenagers maintain their primary contact information, not on social networking sites, but in their cell phones, and the main means of online communication is texting."

At KlaasKids, we like to think that the vast majority of teenagers and parents appreciate efforts to protect them from the unintended consequences of reckless behavior. KlaasKids will continue to stand with Supporters of SB 1361 including the California Sheriffs' Association, Parents Teachers Association, and Teachers Association, as well as Crime Victims United, the Junior League of California, the Peace Officer Research Association of California, and the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse. We will continue to fight against out-of-state entities, industry spokespersons, and those who are willing to voice their bogus arguments.

As Senator Corbett said to me on the way out of the committee room following the vote in late June, "This was not the Legislature's finest day." I couldn't agree more. Unfortunately, for the California Legislature, it was a typical day. ■

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## ATTENDING THE MELANIE RIEGER CONFERENCE AGAINST VIOLENCE

Since 1997, I have made an annual trip to Central Connecticut to participate in the Melanie Ilene Rieger Conference Against Violence. It began as a speaking engagement, but has evolved into a unique experience that provides me with the opportunity to reunite with friends and colleagues who, like me, have extricated themselves from the quagmire of tragedy. This year, the conference was held on June 7, 8 & 9th. For three days, Dr. Sam Rieger, the king of cranky, and his long-suffering wife, Wanda, oversee our fraternity of survivors. We visit, laugh, cry, eat, drink, and reminisce without judgment or apology.

*After Melanie's death we discovered that none of the support systems available to criminals exist for homicide victims.*

In 1994, Melanie Ilene Rieger was a 19-year-old human services student at Naugatuck Valley College in Waterbury, CT. She wanted to contribute to society by helping the less privileged and hoped to major in social services or psychology. She was

known for bringing home stray animals and friends in need of a hot meal. Her volunteer activities included a homeless outreach program, soup kitchens, and nursing homes.

On May 19, while her parents were away on vacation, Melanie's violent boyfriend came to her home and strangled her to death. Melanie didn't understand the problems in her relationship with the person who was to become inmate #30602 until it was too late.

Melanie's parents, Sam and Wanda, established the conference in her memory with

the hope of preventing future tragedies and to demonstrate the need for social and legislative change. The first conference was held at Naugatuck Valley College in 1996 where Melanie was a student and Sam had taught chemistry for 30 years.



Melanie Rieger

"We've changed locations a couple of times out of necessity," Sam told me. "The conference has grown over the years. We're no longer small and local. Now, hundreds of people attend from all over New England. We keep attendance costs low so that we can reach a large audience of social workers, educators, students, advocates, law enforcement, corrections offices, judicial professionals, and crime victims."

"After Melanie's death we discovered that none of the support systems available to criminals exist for homicide victims. Criminal defendants have 15 rights provided by amendments to the U.S. Constitution, but crime victims have none. Criminals, even violent ones, have government financed support systems, social service agencies, and well-funded advocacy groups tending to their every need, but we stand alone."

Sam says, "Look at me. I look just like you. I didn't think I would become a homicide survivor.

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## ATTENDING THE MELANIE RIEGER CONFERENCE AGAINST VIOLENCE



Sam Rieger, Nancy Grace & Wanda Rieger

People don't understand that it can affect them as well. Violence is prevalent in our society, yet people put their head into the sand and try to ignore it. How can you do that knowing that violence may very well impact you sooner or later?"

"Wanda and I attended our first Survivors of Homicide meeting on the first anniversary of Melanie's murder. We went once a month, told our stories, cried, and went home. Survivors of Homicide provided no advocacy, and didn't offer other types of support. We realized that we had to find a way for victims to lobby for change. We needed to educate policy makers, officers of the court, and the public. We had to change the law so that the voice of crime victims could be heard."

Today, the conference has become Sam and Wanda's primary platform for change because it is such an empowering forum. The attendees appreciate the victim's perspective because victims don't speak out of a textbook, they speak from their hearts. Attendees also have an opportunity to be eyewitnesses to a victim's triumph. "We are unique in the sense that crime



Front Row: Marc Klaas, Vanessa Dorantes, Dana Laudati, Marilyn Gambrell  
Second Row: Joseph DiTunno, Lisa & Chip St. Clair

victims fuel our conference. Nobody else runs such a victim-centered event."

Many of the conference participants have returned time and again. "We have become a close knit group that has to meet at least once a year. It's like a family reunion," Wanda says. "The common bond of surviving tragedy brings us back together year after year. When we get together everybody understands. When we discuss our cases with each other nobody runs for the exit."

Sam and Wanda have made a difference, and yet success for crime victims has been and continues to be fleeting. Sam consistently presents the victim's point of view in the Legislature, in the media, and at his beloved conference, but he is concerned that many of the hard-won gains that he has helped to achieve are being reversed. "You just get the feeling you're banging your head against a brick wall," he says. "Laws that we worked on have been ignored, overturned... it's really pathetic."

Next year's agenda has not yet been set, but it will surely be timely, relevant and an opportunity for old friends to strengthen common bonds. That is how Melanie would have wanted it to be. ■

## DEMONSTRATING THE RESILIENCY OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

On June 8-9, 2010, family members and victims of violence gathered in New Britain, CT, for the 14th Melanie Rieger Conference Against Violence. The unique qualities of this amazing gathering have kept me coming back every year since 1999.

The conference was established in memory of Melanie Ilene Rieger, a college student who was murdered by her boyfriend in 1994. It is the only major national conference I know of that is victim-led and victim-run. While other conferences reflect the agendas of service providers and professional victim advocates, the Rieger conference has a more authentic flavor because it reflects a pure agenda as seen through victims' eyes. While many of us come from different backgrounds and with agendas of our own, the conference is a place where we can set aside the issues that divide us and focus instead on the goals we all passionately believe in: the need to reduce violence, and the need to overcome society's indifference to the impact of violence on victims and their families.

At the heart of the Rieger conference are the personal narratives of real people who have overcome horrific events and somehow managed to turn these tragedies into meaningful personal journeys. Whether it is Chip St. Clair (author of *The Butterfly Garden*) describing his harrowing experiences of child abuse, or Marilyn Gambrel doing inspiring work with children of incarcerated parents, or Marc Klaas working tirelessly to protect vulnerable children, I am always left marveling at the strength and resiliency of the human spirit. If these people can transform crushing loss into hope, there is certainly hope for the rest of us as we cope with lesser life challenges.

The Rieger conference is also a laboratory for new ideas and creative approaches in preventing violence. I know that every year I come away

from the conference with at least one new idea or fresh perspective. These never fail to broaden my understanding and deepen my insight about what it



David Kaczynski

means to be human. While the conference reminds us of some of the worst that human beings can do to one another, it is also a powerful incubator of hope as we hear from presenters who have wrestled with those demons and found ways to overcome them, often by discovering deeper, more powerful resources of love in the human heart.

I would be less than honest if I didn't tell you the most important reason I come back to the conference every year. Because of the many deep friendships I have formed there, it is like a family reunion for me. Once at dinner, Marc nudged me and said, "David, look around the room: so many stories of suffering and unbelievable loss, yet here we are enjoying food and friendship together. When you think about it, it's just amazing!"

Well, it is amazing. It represents living proof that we can be restored to happiness through a community of shared values based of empathy, understanding, and our collective will to make the world a better place. ■

*David Kaczynski is the Executive Director of the non-profit New Yorkers For Alternatives to the Death Penalty.*

## MAGGIE'S MISSION: TEACHING CHILDREN TO DEFEND THEMSELVES

**M**y name is Maggie, and I am the founder of Maggie's Mission. I am 12 years old and will be entering seventh grade in the fall. I live in Connecticut with my mom, dad, and dog. I love to play soccer and play for my town travel team and in a premier league called CFC. I also love musical theatre and basketball. I am currently Junior Miss Naugatuck Valley and I am involved in the Miss America Organization. One of my biggest accomplishments is achieving black belt in the art of Tang Soo Do. In my spare time, I love to read.

On March 7, 2006, a tragedy struck my family. My aunt, Kathy Hardy, was murdered when her Brandford, CT, home was set on fire. After this devastation, my mother got involved in Survivors of Homicide and other victims' rights groups. She then brought me to be fingerprinted and photographed by the Molly Bish Life "Guard" Team.

On my way home from the event, I was reading a pamphlet given to me at the session. It had safety tips, statistics, and other things. However, what caught my eye was the list of organizations on the back. The list consisted of the KlaasKids Foundation, the Melanie Ilene Rieger Conference Against Violence, Joyful Child, and other groups. All of these organizations were started by family members of children and young adults who

have been abducted and murdered. That is when I came up with "Maggie's Mission: Don't Be Too Late." For the first couple of months, I just had the website, but then I had the opportunity to go teach a self-defense seminar and get my organization out in the community.

Since that first seminar, I have taught many seminars all throughout the state as well as appearing in the news many times. I have been featured in FOX 61 News reports a couple of times. I had the great pleasure of being on *Connecticut Style* and *Better Connecticut*. I have



also had articles in the *New Haven Register* and the *Republican American's Tuesday Women*. I was featured in a web story the *New Haven Register* did on my aunt's case.

This year I was asked to do two breakout sessions at the Melanie Ilene Rieger Conference Against Violence. This was an amazing

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## MAGGIE'S MISSION: TEACHING CHILDREN TO DEFEND THEMSELVES

experience and I hope that I am able to do it again in the future. Not only did I get so many people to know about Maggie's Mission, but I was introduced to some of the most inspirational people I will ever meet. People such as Marc Klaas, Marilyn Gambrell, Chip and Lisa St. Claire, and of course I got to spend time with Sam and Wanda Rieger.

My seminars usually run about an hour. However if I need to, I can make them longer or shorter. My partner Kevin Smith and I do not only teach self-defense, we teach self-awareness as well. The first 20 to 30 minutes of each seminar are spent with me and the kids sitting in a circle on the floor as I teach them about how to prevent a kidnapping. This includes telling them different safety tips like, I will yell "FIRE, HELP ME!" when attacked because the word fire draws more attention. The one thing I

want every kid to take from my seminars is that they ALWAYS fight back, no matter what.

Next, we all get up and start with the self-defense portion. I show them how to get away from wrist grabs, bear hugs, and other ways an attacker will try to grab you. This is what the kids really enjoy, and this is why they remember what I teach, because they have fun. Kevin is our "bad guy" and every workshop he puts on all the pads so the kids can actually practice kicking and punching him.

I am very passionate about my work with Maggie's Mission and I know I will continue to do it for as long as I can.■

*Maggie is the Founder and Executive Director of Maggie's Mission. You can find more information on this unique non-profit at <http://www.maggiesmission.org>.*

## A VOICE IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

*By Judge Susan B. Handy*

**I**n 1999, I had the pleasure of meeting Dr. Sam Rieger when he was the head of Survivors of Homicide. I recall being quite anxious about that meeting. Who were these people whom I sometimes saw in my courtroom? What did they want? I learned that "these people" were true survivors, all having lost members of their respective families. I learned that what they wanted was a voice and a chance to be part of the criminal justice process.

Since 2004, I have had the privilege of being a small part of Sam and Wanda's annual Melanie Rieger Conference. Now I personally know some of the people who sit in the many courtrooms. I

have spoken with them and have had an opportunity to listen to their concerns. We continue to work on understanding each other's roles and responsibilities while appreciating that we may at times be at conflict. I have learned to listen more closely. Quite simply, my annual return to the conference "grounds" me, emphasizing the responsibilities with which I have been entrusted as a judge.■

*Susan B. Handy  
Presiding Judge  
Connecticut Superior Court*

## FINDING THE LOST: THE KLAASKIDS SEARCH CENTER

Calls to the KlaasKids Foundation come in regularly from parents, law enforcement, search and rescue units, and other agencies around the country. Regardless of the source, each call is about a missing child or loved one, and represents the sheer frustration and desperation that is felt following someone's disappearance.

We are frequently asked what type of cases we get involved in. The KlaasKids Foundation will assist with any case that involves a missing child that is registered with their local law enforcement and entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database. Cases vary: Some require case work and referrals to appropriate agencies, while others are better suited for on-site search and rescue assistance.

When the Foundation opened its search center for missing children in 2003, approximately 1,700 children were reported missing every day in the U.S. Today, that number has grown to 2,300. Our cases range from the runaway child to the victim of child abduction. We have responded to children being sold into sex slavery and to cold cases involving children who have been missing for years.

This year has been no different. The KlaasKids Search Center began 2010 at the Super Bowl in Miami. Along with several other agencies, we deployed more than 160 volunteers on the streets in an effort to locate missing and exploited children, and succeeded in rescuing six.

In Pensacola, Florida, our search team kicked off a massive search on a cold case involving an 18-year-old woman. For the past 17 years, Joanna Otto has desperately pleaded for someone's help in locating her daughter. At the request of the Escambia Sheriff's Office, the KlaasKids Search Center mounted an all-out search for Joanna that

included 12 K-9's and numerous search and rescue units. The search yielded critical information that has allowed investigators to re-focus their efforts to locate this lost child.

Also during this time, a child in California was abducted by a serial predator. Little did we know that the case of Chelsea King of Rancho Bernardo, CA, would break another one of our cases wide open. The case of Amber Dubois was about to be solved in chilling and dramatic fashion.

On February 13, 2009, Amber disappeared as she walked to school. The KlaasKids Search Center was contacted by Amber's family and we immediately flew to Escondido, CA, to begin the search. We continued to assist Amber's family with searches throughout the year. However, it was the devastating news of Chelsea King's abduction that finally unraveled the mystery of Amber's disappearance. The released sex offender that abducted and murdered Chelsea told the authorities that he had also abducted Amber. He later led the authorities to her body.

The KlaasKids Search Center has continued to help Amber's family by returning several times to assist with Amber's memorial, the sentencing, and to conduct follow-up training for two new organizations born of Amber's tragedy: More Kids and Team Amber Rescue.

Our search center has also been called in to assist agencies in the search for several children suspected of being exploited by human trafficking rings. These cases ranged from New Jersey to Georgia. Each of these children has been rescued and is currently receiving services to assist in their healing process.

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## FIREBALL RUN CLOSES IN ON THE STARTING LINE

The fifth annual Fireball Run is less than two months away. The event, also known as the Race to Recover America's Missing Children, begins in Henderson, Nevada, on September 23, and concludes in Galeon, Illinois, on October 2.



KlaasKids Foundation President Marc Klaas will bring his message to participants, fans, and the media. Driving a 2011 Chevrolet Cruze LTZ that is being donated by General Motors, Team Polly will lead the pack in each of the event's 18-city tour. "This is a wonderful opportunity to recover missing kids, raise awareness, educate communities, and build relationships," Klaas said.

Each participating team will represent a missing child from their own community. Hasanni Campbell, a five-year-old boy who

disappeared in Piedmont, California on August 9, 2009, and has not been seen since, will be represented by Team Polly. Their mission will be to distribute 1,000 flyers for Hasanni Campbell to everyone they meet throughout the event. Like all of the other teams in the Fireball Run, Team Polly is hoping that publicity generated for Hasanni will assist in his recovery. More than 40 of the 100 children represented during the first two Fireball Runs have since been returned to their families.

Sanctioned by the United States Auto Club (USAC), the Fireball Run has been praised by members of Congress, endorsed by city leaders and law enforcement agencies. ■

## FINDING THE LOST: THE KLAASKIDS SEARCH CENTER

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Recent cases have taken us to Alabama and Mississippi. Chellie Finch, 15, disappeared from Bay Minette, AL, and was recently located in California. Gerry Manley, 24, of Meridian, MS disappeared in February. Despite an exhaustive search in blistering heat, Gerry remains missing, so we continue to assist his family.

A final note: We need your help! While our services are FREE for the requesting family or agency, your donations become our means to assist these families. Please consider making a donation to the KlaasKids Foundation and together, we can stop crimes against children. ■

*Brad Dennis is the director of the KlaasKids Foundation Search Center. Our search center stands ready to assist you. Please call us at (850) 525-4807.*

# WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT - HELP FIGHT CRIME!

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*Thank you in advance for your contribution and support!*



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