

Authorities confirm: Jacob found

September 4, 2016

Almost 27 years after the abduction of Jacob Wetterling just outside St. Joseph, a long trail of investigation appears to be near its end.

The Stearns County Sheriff's Office confirmed Saturday evening that Wetterling's remains have been found. The Ramsey County Medical Examiner and a forensic dentist identified Wetterling's remains earlier in the day.

Investigators and prosecutors are "reviewing and evaluating new evidence" in the investigation and more detailed information is expected to be provided early next week, according to the sheriff's office.

Danny Heinrich, a person of interest in the case, cooperated in the investigation, according to reports that first came from KSTP-TV.

Jacob's mother, Patty Wetterling, said Saturday morning that her son's remains have been found. "All I can confirm is that Jacob has been found and our hearts are broken. I am not responding to any media yet as I have no words," she said in a message to KARE-TV.

Authorities recovered unidentified remains this week after Danny Heinrich, who is a person of interest in the disappearance of Jacob Wetterling, agreed to cooperate and provide information, according to authorities.

In a message to the St. Cloud Times, she said "we will have words at some point."

Stearns County Chief Deputy Bruce Bechtold and County Attorney Janelle Kendall declined to comment Saturday. Bechtold is the lead investigator in the Wetterling case. Several messages left for Sheriff John Sanner were not immediately returned.

The FBI is not in the position to confirm any details regarding the matter, said Kyle Loven, chief division counsel at the Minneapolis office. There is no indication when the FBI could comment further.

"This remains an active investigation," he said.

Patty Wetterling told the Times that she and her family "are heartsick" and referred media to a statement posted to the Jacob Wetterling Resource Center website. That statement said in part: "We are in deep grief. We didn't want Jacob's story to end this way. The Wetterlings had a choice to walk into bitterness and anger or to walk into a light of what could be, a light of hope. Their choice changed the world. Our hearts are heavy, but we are being held up by all of the people who have been a part of making Jacob's Hope a light that will never be extinguished. Jacob, you are loved."

Later she sent out a tweet that read: "Our family is drawing strength from all your love & support. We're struggling with words at this time. Thank you for your hope."

Heinrich has been in federal custody since late October, after authorities arrested him on charges of receiving and possessing child pornography.

Former St. Joseph Police Chief Brad Lindgren said the news of remains being found brings a sense of relief.

"I think it's a good thing for everyone involved to get closure," Lindgren said. "You want to hope for the best and prepare for the worst. It's a big, big closure for that case."

He said that, although the kidnapping happened outside the city limits and was always a county-led investigation, the city of St. Joseph always felt Jacob's disappearance was a part of their identity. And although outsiders might have thought the case was cold and might never be solved, that wasn't the mood of the investigators.

"I never felt like it wouldn't be solved," Lindgren said. "Because there's always someone who knows something."

The child pornography case against Heinrich began building last summer, while authorities searched his home looking for evidence in Jacob's abduction and a separate kidnapping and sexual assault involving 12-year-old Jared Scheierl in nearby Cold Spring nine months before Jacob disappeared.

Jacob was 11 when he was kidnapped shortly after 9 p.m. on the night of Oct. 22, 1989, after he and his brother, Trevor, 10, and best friend, Aaron Larson, 11, rode their bikes to a Tom Thumb store not far from the family's rural St. Joseph home to rent a video.

As they headed home, a masked gunman appeared on the remote gravel road leading to the Wetterling house, told the boys to lie face down in a nearby ditch and asked each his age. He then ordered Trevor and Aaron to run to the woods and not look back. When the boys did, Jacob and the masked man were gone.

No one has ever been charged in the case.

Heinrich, who lived in Paynesville, about 30 miles southwest of St. Joseph, at the time of Jacob's abduction, was first questioned by investigators soon after it happened, and several times in 1990. He said he was not involved, authorities have said.

Heinrich re-emerged as a "person of interest" last summer, authorities have said, because of similarities to the January 1989 kidnapping and sexual assault of Scheierl.

In that case, the driver told the boy after releasing him "not to look back or he would be shot," according to court documents.

DNA evidence later found on the sweatshirt worn by Scheierl, now 39, matched Heinrich. Authorities said in October that Heinrich could not be charged in Scheierl's case because the statute of limitations had run out.

On May 11, Scheierl sued Heinrich, claiming he kidnapped and sexually assaulted him nine months before Wetterling was abducted.

Authorities have long cited similarities in the two cases "both in the description of the suspect and how he approached his victims" as reason to believe the same person could be responsible for both.

They also said that when they searched Heinrich's Annandale home last summer, they found nothing to connect Heinrich to Jacob.

They did find 19 three-ring binders containing numerous images of child pornography, authorities said, including some pictures of known child victims. Child pornography also was found on Heinrich's computer hard drive, the authorities said.

Heinrich was arrested Oct. 29, 2015. That was the first time authorities mentioned his name publicly in relation to either the Scheierl or Wetterling cases. At a press conference, they called Heinrich a "person of interest" in the Wetterling abduction.

Heinrich lived in the Paynesville area at the time of the Wetterling abduction and a string of unsolved attacks on children in Paynesville.

Heinrich has been held in Sherburne County Jail without bail while his federal case progresses.

Gov. Mark Dayton issued a statement Saturday evening that said he was offering his love and support "as the Wetterling family finally brings their son home to rest."

U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, who worked with Patty Wetterling on legislation related to missing children, referred to Patty as a friend. "I have seen firsthand her extraordinary advocacy for children and how she has turned her grief into action," Klobuchar said in a statement. "The Wetterling family and all who knew and loved Jacob are in our hearts today.?"

A statement from the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children said thoughts and prayers are with the Wetterling family. "Our hope today is that this new information will bring some answers to a family who has never stopped searching for their son and brother," NCMC President John Clark said in the statement.

Reviving a practice used to remember the search for Jacob, supporters on Saturday used the social media hashtag #lightsonforJacob to promote the idea of leaving lights on to show support.

Full statement from the Jacob Wetterling Resource Center

"We are in deep grief. We didn't want Jacob's story to end this way. In this moment of pain and shock, we go back to the beginning. The Wetterlings had a choice to walk into bitterness and anger or to walk into a light of what could be, a light of hope. Their choice changed the world.

This light has been burning for close to 27 years. The spark began in the moments after the abduction of Jacob Wetterling, when his family decided that light is stronger than darkness. They lit the flame that became Jacob's Hope. All of Central Minnesota flocked to and fanned the flame, hoping for answers. The light spread state-wide, nationally and globally as hearts connected to the 11 year old boy who liked to play goalie for his hockey team, wanted to be a football player, played the trombone, and loved the times he spent with his sisters, brother, and parents.

Today, we gather around the same flame. The flame that has become more than the hope for one as it led the way home for thousands of others. It's the light that illuminates a world that Jacob believed in, where things are fair and just.

Our hearts are heavy, but we are being held up by all of the people who have been a part of making Jacob's Hope a light that will never be extinguished. It shines on in a different way. We are, and we will continue to be, Jacob's Hope.

Jacob, you are loved.

<http://www.sctimes.com/story/news/local/2016/09/03/authorities-unidentified-remains-found/89825840/>