

SNEDDON

Continued from A1

the Yunnan Province.

Missing

But when he missed a flight to Seoul for an important business meeting and then missed his flight back to the United States, his family knew something was wrong.

Two weeks later, David's father, Roy, and David's older brothers, Michael and James, were in China retracing David's steps and talking with local police.

"We think he was picked up," Roy Sneddon said. "I don't think there's a question about that."

After several visits over as many years, the family has tracked David's steps through Tiger Leaping Gorge, then on to Shangri-La, where he was last seen around noon on Aug. 14, 2004.

"It's literally like he vanished," James Sneddon says. "There have been no sightings of him. ... No money has been taken from his bank account. His passport hasn't crossed the border of China since he first went in five years ago. He's gone. A grown man disappeared."

Theories

"If something physical happened to him, an accident, he would have been found," James says. "We believe he's still alive, and I know there's a large number of people who think that's laughable. Whatever. That's their prerogative. If I hadn't experienced the things we experienced, I would have significant doubt, too."

The Sneddon men hiked along the "High Trail" through Tiger Leaping Gorge, where they ruled out the possibility that David fell off the trail into the river or even into a deep thicket where he couldn't be found.

The trail is too populated, and the river is too far away.

Besides, David was an Eagle Scout and an experienced hiker. He had been on more dangerous terrain in Wyoming.

Both on the gorge trail and then along the road to Shangri-La, and in Shangri-La, formerly called Zhongdian, the Sneddons met guides and shop owners who recognized David's picture on the placards the Sneddons wore around their necks.

From Shangri-La, David should have boarded a bus to go back to a youth hostel at the beginning of the gorge trail to get his backpack. He never did.

The Sneddons now have that backpack, which held David's set of LDS scriptures, as well as his airline tickets, but there's still no sign of the smaller fanny pack David wore while hiking or of his passport or clothes.

"Not to be gruesome, (but) there's no body, no reason to think that he's died or been killed," Kathleen says.

There's also no reason to think David ran off with a Chinese woman or went "underground," his family says. That just wasn't David's style as a devout member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and a student with extensive plans.

Kathleen, who has also been to China to look for her son,

wonders if someone believed David was part of the underground railroad, an escape route for North Koreans through China. The Yunnan province is a prime escape area, because it borders Laos, Vietnam and Burma, and it's the area where David was last seen.

That theory makes a lot of sense, Michael Sneddon says.

David had served as an LDS missionary in South Korea and then worked in South Korea for his brother Michael's language translation company, MultiLing.

While in Beijing that fateful summer, David taught Korean to the children of a Chinese couple.

Then, David's former mission companion, who had been studying displaced North Koreans in China, requested a visa to go visit North Korea.

After his request was denied, he was told to leave China. He stayed with David for five days before he could get a flight back home to the United States, Michael says.

Then there's the Korean café where David spoke to the owner in Korean — the last place he visited before he was supposed to leave Shangri-La.

"David fits the profile of the South Korean Christians who help defecting North Koreans travel through China via the underground railroad," Michael says.

Besides, it would have been almost impossible for David's presence not to have raised questions.

He's a Westerner, traveling on his own, speaking fluent Mandarin Chinese and Korean. That's the stuff spies are made of.

"It's very plausible that some internal security group grabbed him because they were worried about or suspected something," James says. "We think they probably decided at some point that there was nothing there, but then how do you divulge that? Do you release him and say, 'Oops, we made a mistake,' a year later, six months later? It's probably better just to not say anything at all."

Emotions

"There's times I reflect," Kathleen says, "that it would almost be better if he were dead rather than in prison or hurt and starving."

She's even worried about his teeth.

David had braces on when he left, and Kathleen's nephew, a dentist, told her that unless he found a way to get them off, his teeth will be rotted.

A deeply religious family, the Sneddons find strength through prayer.

"I can tell you 25 children under the age of 10 who have never even known David — cousins, nieces and nephews

— (and) they tell me, 'Every night I remember David in my prayers,'" Kathleen says, her voice breaking.

Michael said his 7-year-old son, Joshua, recently offered an explanation as to why their prayers hadn't brought David back.

"Maybe God wants him to preach the gospel in China, so that is why he's not home," Michael recounted.

"Part of our test here in this mortal sphere is to accept the will of the Lord," Michael continued. "Learning to accept his will in all things is something I strive earnestly to do better."

Even complete strangers haven't forgotten the family's struggle.

"I'm amazed at how many people I hardly know hear my name and say, 'Yes, I remember you. You lost a son in China. Are you still looking for him?'" Kathleen says.

The answer is always yes.

The Sneddon men are confident they will see David again, but that doesn't stop James from worrying about his mom.

"It's just too hard for a mother to wonder where a child is," he says. "If they're dead, well, they're dead. You know that. And depending on what your beliefs are regarding death and the afterlife, you can use that. But when you don't have any idea ... the wonderment is sometimes what kills you the most."

Keeping up hope

Although it's hard to find someone who can relate with their situation, Kathleen says the Smarts are her role models.

Elizabeth Smart, then 14, was abducted from her Salt Lake City home in 2002 and held captive for nine months before she was found.

"It was the Smarts' persistence. ... They're the ones who kept working, got the information out that finally helped their daughter come home," Kathleen says. "The difference is ... they did it here in America. And we can't do that in China."

Kathleen also followed the case of missing BYU sophomore Brooke Wilberger, who was kidnapped in Oregon in 2004. Her captor, Joel Courtney, recently confessed to her murder and led police to her body.

"I'm so happy for the Wilbergers to have a resolution," she says. "I'm genuinely happy for the Smarts. But it is still difficult for me to deal with it."

That's just her personality, Kathleen explains. She needs resolution, closure.

But not Roy.

"I don't have that need," he says simply.

It's hard to convey the spiritual impressions that tells him his son is OK, even if they haven't heard from him in five years and don't know where he is.

Although the Sneddons think of David daily, his disappearance seems to be of little interest in China anymore.

The family says the embassy has closed David's case, although a search on the Chengdu-China Web site of the Consulate General of the United States still reveals David's missing person report.

An e-mail to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing merited this response:

"Thank you for your recent inquiry," wrote deputy press spokesman Richard Buanagan. "Unfortunately, the U.S. Embassy cannot comment on cases of private American citizens without specific authorization from the individual. I regret that I cannot be more helpful."

A call to the U.S. Department of State was not immediately returned.

Michael — who after their 2004 trip created a detailed, 74-page report for the governments of China and the U.S., which outlines why they believe David is still alive — said he has been read internal documents that indicate the U.S. State Department has internally concluded that David is dead.

But even without a case or

official involvement, Kathleen still researches and follows up on any information, her thoughts frequently drifting to China.

She has loved the country for years, long before it swallowed her son.

She taught English to Chinese students in Nebraska, and she and Roy taught English in China for several semesters through BYU.

When they moved to Providence several years ago, she befriended two Chinese women who wanted to learn English.

On an especially cold day the first fall after David disappeared, one of the women told Kathleen about Chinese winters.

"It's just cold there," she told her. "It's cold all the time. You never get warm."

The protective mother pauses briefly after remembering the words of her friend, then says simply,

"I hope David's warm."

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