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AMBER ADVOCATE 59



The AMBER Advocate, 2024 Issue 3

Families Reunited

Parents & Siblings of Missing Children @ National Missing Children's Day 2024

PLUS:

- Hawaii's three recent successful child recoveries underscore need for training
- AMBER Alert-related news from around the United States & Indian Country

[Photos]

A collage of photos showing people attending the National Missing Children's Day commemoration, and related events, on May 22, 2024, plus a photo of the poster that won a contest held as part of National Missing Children's Day.

COVER STORY: MAIN FEATURE

Family Togetherness in D.C.

Parents and siblings of missing children reunite—and renew their commitment to advocacy—at this year’s National Missing Children’s Day.

By Denise Gee Peacock

National Missing Children’s Day has long been a lodestar for families of missing children—a safe harbor for gathering with child protection professionals who on that day are recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) for being at the top of their game.

This year that star shone brighter than ever, largely fueled by the unwavering advocacy work of nearly a dozen surviving family members—including parents and siblings—who have endured the nightmare of a missing child, brother, or sister. Their presence at the May 22 commemoration, and related events, was deeply moving—despite the fact that “all of us belong to a club that no one ever wants to belong to,” says parent survivor Ahmad Rivazfar.

That club’s members include parents and siblings desperate to find their missing loved ones, whose whereabouts remain unknown. They are also families who will forever grieve a child who was abducted, sexually assaulted, and murdered; families of children illegally taken out of the country by an estranged parent; families who have fortunately been reunited with their once-missing child, but now work to become whole again.

These family survivors’ stories were invaluable to discussions during the 2024 National Missing Children’s Day events. The AMBER Alert Training & Technical Assistance Program (AATTAP) and National Criminal Justice Training Center (NCJTC) hosted the family members at the events, with support from the DOJ’s Office of Justice Programs (OJP) and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP).

The AATTAP-NCJTC team and surviving family members were unified in promoting their work on two updated DOJ resources for parents and families of missing children: *When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide* (released last year) and the forthcoming sibling-focused survival guide, *What About Me? Finding Your Path When Your Brother or Sister Is Missing*.

Collaboration for a clearer path forward

The day before the National Missing Children’s Day commemoration, surviving family members paid a visit to the Alexandria, Virginia, headquarters of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC). Afterward they attended a private AATTAP reception recognizing their contributions to ensuring family members across the nation have access to the latest information and resources.

They also previewed video segments from a filming project completed earlier this year, one in which contributors to the forthcoming *What About Me?* sibling survival guide shared their insights and advice to illuminate its content for readers. The videos will be offered alongside the sibling guide (after its release later this year) on the [Family Survival Guide](#) website.

During the National Missing Children’s Day ceremony, the group received thanks for their efforts from U.S. Assistant Attorney General Amy L. Solomon, OJJDP Administrator Liz Ryan, and NCMEC President and CEO Michelle DeLaune—as well as attendee applause—when they were asked to stand for recognition.

They also heard from nationally revered parent-advocate and retired AATTAP-NCJTC Associate Patty Wetterling, who was a featured speaker at the event. Wetterling is the mother of Jacob Wetterling, who was abducted and murdered in 1989. (Read more about her search for him, and her new book, *Dear Jacob*, [here](#).) Wetterling also helped update the new edition of the *Family Survival Guide*, released in 2023.

During the session, the family members discussed their experiences with being a part of these survival guide projects, along with their ongoing needs and goals as surviving family members who have experienced a missing child or sibling.

They also offered OJJDP and AATTAP leaders recommendations on ways to best support families and more broadly promote awareness and distribution of critically important resources for families, law enforcement, and child advocates.

Following through on a commitment made by OJJDP Administrator Ryan last year during her impactful meeting with the *Family Survival Guide* contributors at the conclusion of the Missing Children’s Day ceremony, this year’s event included an inaugural, private Family Roundtable discussion with sibling guide family contributors.

Commemoration highlights

Each year, the DOJ honors agencies, organizations, law enforcement officials, and others whose exemplary and heroic efforts have helped recover missing children and prosecute those who harm them.

“Our commemoration is taking a new format this year,” Ryan explained. “OJJDP decided not only to highlight the tremendous work of those who protect children, but also address the challenges in this work—to learn more about issues involving missing kids, and hold in-depth conversations with youth and families of missing and murdered children and other experts on these topics.”

After the commemoration, a cadre of experts, including a youth advocate with lived experience in the foster care system, joined a panel discussion on why so many children and young adults go missing from care. “They will suggest ways to improve collaboration and ensure the well-being of these children,” Ryan said. She next recognized members of the Family Roundtable—parents, siblings and others with a loved one who has gone missing. “Each of them has contributed to two very important [survival] documents.”

When Your Child Is Missing: A Family Survival Guide was [announced](#) at the 2023 Missing Children’s Day event. The new fifth edition provides a wider range of missing child situations; gives families instant access to information online; and allows them to hear advice and encouragement from the parents themselves, who speak in powerful videos.

As was the case with the *Family Survival Guide* project, the *What About Me?* project was developed by AATTAP's publications team with guidance and oversight from the OJJDP. Both projects were stewarded by Helen Connelly, retired FVTC-NCJTC Program Administrator who continues to share her expertise as an Associate employee.

Looking back—and ahead

"As you know thousands of children go missing in the U.S. every year," Ryan said. "While most are safely recovered, others are found deceased and never identified. Currently there are more than 1,000 children whose remains have been found, but have not been identified. We want to help name them, and return them to their families, communities, and loved ones."

The OJJDP and NCMEC, with support from the DOJ—and training and technical assistance from the AATTAP and NCJTC—will work with state and local law enforcement agencies to identify these children, Ryan explained, adding, "they deserve no less."

The forthcoming sibling survival guide, *What About Me?*, will help a missing child's siblings understand the emotional turmoil surrounding the crisis as well as the search process. It will offer trusted advice and firsthand insight into what to expect; tips for managing self-care and family dynamics; and guidance on how to deal with law enforcement, the courts, and the media.

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“Surviving family members know firsthand the torment, confusion, and emotional exhaustion of losing a child. They lived it, and have channeled that sorrow into resources to help others.”

Liz Ryan

OJJDP Administrator

[Display text]

“Speaking with OJJDP about crucial topics, working with dedicated AATTAP and NCJTC leaders, and collaborating with parents who radiate light and strength, was insightful and inspiring. It contributes to my healing—and motivates me to keep climbing.”

Kimber Biggs

AATTAP-NCJTC Associate and sibling survivor-contributor to *What About Me? Finding Your Path When Your Brother or Sister Is Missing*

[Display text]

See participating states’ winning posters for the 2024 National Missing Children’s Day contest at bit.ly/NMCD2024posters.

[Photos/captions]

1—Photo of a group of people standing in front of flags. Caption for photo: AATTAP-NCJTC-OJJDP staff and family advisors who attended the 2024 Missing Children’s Day commemoration and OJJDP roundtable discussion were (from left): parent survivor Ahmad Rivazfar; therapist Lillian Ankrah; parent survivor Yvonne Ambrose; AATTAP Program Coordinator Yesenia “Jesi” Leon-Baron; parent survivor Pamela Foster, and husband, Troy Olsen; OJJDP Grant Manager Lou Ann Holland; parent survivor Patty Wetterling; AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen; OJJDP Administrator Liz Ryan; sibling survivor Rysa Lee; AATTAP Associate Helen Connelly; Rysa’s mother/parent survivor Dr. Noelle Hunter; OJJDP Associate Administrator Jim Antal; sibling survivor Heather Bisch; parent survivor Jeffery Morehouse; sibling survivor Kimber Biggs; AATTAP Deputy Administrator Jenniffer Price-Lehmann; and OJJDP Grant Manager Alex Sarrano.

2—Photo collage of scenes from the National Missing Children’s Day commemoration and related events.

3—Photo of three people talking. Caption for photo: Family survivor Ahmad Rivazfar converses with AATTAP Project Coordinator Yesenia “Jesi” Leon-Baron and sibling survivor Heather at the AATTAP-hosted reception held the day before National Missing Children’s Day commemoration.

4—Photo of speaker addressing people sitting at tables. Caption for photo: AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen welcomes surviving family members to the reception.

5—Photo of people in a boardroom setting. Caption for photo: OJJDP Administrator Liz Ryan talks with surviving family members during a roundtable meeting. “The emotional toll of a missing child reverberates throughout our communities, impacting parents, caregivers, and families—truly, all of us,” Ryan said.

6—Head shot photo of OJJDP Administrator Liz Ryan

7—Photo of three women. Caption for photo: Family survivors Kimber Biggs (right) and Pamela Foster (left) with AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen

8—Photo of a girl holding plaque, surrounded by her mother and two AMBER Alert authorities. Caption for photo: AATTAP Administrator Janell Rasmussen (left) congratulates Hanna L. of South Carolina, winner of the 2024 National Missing Children’s Day Poster Contest. They are shown with Hanna’s mother (back) and South Carolina AMBER Alert Coordinator Alex Schelble.

SUB-SIDEBAR

Parent-advocate Patty Wetterling to DOJ and NCMEC: 'You save lives. You saved mine.'

NCMEC President and CEO Michelle DeLaune welcomed parent-advocate Patti Wetterling to speak, recognizing her as “a longtime friend and a personal source of inspiration.”

“Her son, Jacob, who went missing when he was 11 years old, was abducted near their home in Minnesota,” DeLaune said. “Patty has given her life to advocating for her son. She’s raised a beautiful family. And she’s a fierce mother, one who changes this world with every person she speaks to.”

Assistant U.S. Attorney General Amy L. Solomon added, “We’re so honored that you could be with us today, Patty. We’re indebted to you for your years of advocacy on behalf of missing children, and for the work you continue to do to claim a brighter future for our children.”

What follows is an excerpt of Wetterling’s remarks given at this year’s National Missing Children’s Day commemoration.

I want to thank you, Liz Ryan, for meeting with this amazing group. [Wetterling gestures to the family-survivor group attending the ceremony.] I belong over there with you, my heart is with you, and we draw strength from you. I also want to thank everybody at NCMEC and the DOJ. You save lives. You saved mine.

National Missing Children’s Day is a time to shine a light on a dark topic. When my son, Jacob, was kidnapped, I knew nothing about crimes against children. ‘Who would do that?’ I cried, ‘Who would harm a child?’ It is an unimaginable pain.

After a few days, sleep deprived and depressed, I crawled into bed and pulled the covers over my head, deciding I’m never gonna get out of bed again. It’s too hard. It hurts too much. I can’t do it. But with tears streaming down my face, I suddenly saw Jacob curled up in a ball somewhere saying the same thing. ‘I can’t do this anymore. It’s too hard. They’re never going to find me.’

Screaming, I got up and said, ‘Hold on Jacob, we will find you! But you have to stay strong!’ I got out of bed. That decision to get out of bed was the first of many choices that I had to make.

That was in the early days, and in the 34 years that have followed, I decided I couldn’t live in the darkness. I chose to seek light instead. I chose to fight for the world that Jacob knew and loved—a world that was fair, kind, and safe for kids.

When I was given the phone number for the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, I learned so much about the problem—how many children were missing and exploited, and what we all needed to do to bring them home. Most kids come home because somebody is aware of their abduction. They look at the pictures. And if they see something unusual about a child, or a child in a bad situation, they trust their instincts and call the police.

We tried to make sure everybody got Jacob's pictures. We had to mail out pictures back in 1989. We sent them all over. My favorite story was when a couple was traveling from Minnesota to Florida and thought they saw Jacob. They recognized the picture and said, 'He was with a man who's very thin, and he didn't look like he wanted to be with this guy.' But they didn't know who to call. So eventually they called the FBI in Minneapolis. When they described the man that this boy was with, the FBI agent knew who they were talking about...and caught up with him in Flagstaff, Arizona. And clearly [the child they found with him] wasn't Jacob.

But at least one 12-year-old boy got to go home because somebody was aware of the problem. They looked at the pictures and took that extra step of being there for the child. In those 34 years since Jacob was kidnapped, I've learned we are stronger when we collectively pool ideas and resources through [Team HOPE](#) and the family and sibling survival guides, we support each other and offer assistance to other families walking down this difficult path.

We have to keep missing children in our hearts until we can hold them in our arms again.

We are all the hope for all missing children, as well as all children who are home safe today.

We can never give up hope.

And together, we can, and we will, build a safer world for all of our children.

[Photo/caption]

1—Photo of two women. Caption for photo: Patty Wetterling (right) greets NCMEC's Director of Special Projects Sherry Bailey during the family survivors' visit to NCMEC headquarters in Arlington, Virginia.

FRONT LINES

Hawaii Three-O

In the Aloha State, three successful recoveries of missing children are credited to MAILE AMBER Alerts—and underscore the need for education, training, and an engaged public.

By Jody Garlock

When the Honolulu Police Department issued a MAILE AMBER Alert in February 2024 for two brothers whose mother reported them missing and in potential danger, not even HPD officers could have predicted such a swift recovery. Within five minutes of the alert's distinct alarm sounding on cellphones across Oahu Island, the mother's former boyfriend said he would surrender the 10- and 11-year-old boys in a gas station parking lot. The case serves as a testament to the power of AMBER Alerts—or, as it's called in Hawaii, the MAILE AMBER Alert, named in memory of 6-year-old Maile Gilbert (see "Three for three: Lessons learned") who was abducted and murdered in 1985, prior to the alert's existence.

"With alert activations in a state like Hawaii with an isolated population, we find that abductors may feel the pressure to turn themselves in after either seeing the alert or being told there is one," says Amanda Leonard, coordinator of the Missing Child Center Hawaii and statewide MAILE AMBER Alert Coordinator. Additionally, as in this case, local news reports stated that customers at the gas station who received the alert had promptly called in sightings to police.

Soon after police arrived at the scene, the mother and her boys were able to drive away safely in the gray Honda Odyssey. The van belonged to the mother, who had given the former boyfriend permission to use it and take the boys on an errand. When he failed to return the children and stopped answering her calls after an argument, she contacted police. A subsequent report of a family member learning the man had struck one of the boys in the face, and therefore they may be in danger, escalated the case to meet the criteria for a MAILE AMBER Alert. The 54-year-old suspect was not immediately charged.

This recent case is the latest in a string of MAILE AMBER Alerts in a state that historically has had none. And for Leonard, it also serves as an example of the importance of public awareness and quick-thinking citizens willing to be an extra set of eyes to help keep children safe. "Part of our culture here is really about family and children," Leonard says. "We pride ourselves in not just looking out for our own children, but other people's children in our community."

Case by case

Hawaii put its MAILE AMBER Alert system in place in 2005, becoming the final state to join the nationwide AMBER Alert program. In a ceremony with Hawaiian officials, Tracy Henke, who at the time was Acting Assistant Attorney General for the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, called the establishment of statewide AMBER Alert plans in all 50 states "a landmark achievement that makes America's children safer."

Just four months later, the state had its first activation. In that case, a 4-month-old baby was safely recovered in Honolulu thanks to an attentive delivery truck driver. The driver had received a message about the missing infant from his dispatcher after an office worker saw the alert. (This was before the text-like wireless emergency alerts, or WEAs, began appearing on phones in

subsequent years.) He spotted the stolen pickup truck, which had been abandoned with the infant safe inside.

Seventeen years then went by without any MAILE AMBER Alerts. Leonard speculates that had more to do with a lack of understanding about the program than about no cases meeting the criteria for issuing an alert. So when she began working at the Missing Child Center in 2018, she made it her mission to build relationships and enhance the education and training—including monthly tests of the system—with the state’s four county police departments. (In January, Hawaii’s statewide police force became operational; it stems from a 2022 bill then-Governor David Ige signed into law in an effort to allow more efficient and effective emergency response.) The MAILE AMBER Alert program will remain under the Hawaii Department of the Attorney General.

“We started to really revamp and aggressively work on improving our program with the help of the National Criminal Justice Training Center [NCJTC],” Leonard says.

Preparedness pays off

In September 2022, authorities faced their most dramatic case—a rare stranger abduction that garnered national attention. This marked the first MAILE AMBER Alert on Hawaii Island, and also was the first time the state used a WEA to alert the public. A 15-year-old girl who was at a beach on the Big Island was forced at knifepoint to tie up her boyfriend and was led through a wooded area and across lava fields to the abductor’s vehicle. The man took her to his home on the opposite side of the island some 70 miles away, where he chained her up in an old school bus on the property.

As a massive air and ground search, which included volunteers from the community who galvanized after receiving the MAILE AMBER Alert, continued the next day, the teen convinced her abductor to take her to a café in the nearby town of Hilo to get something to eat. The café host felt something seemed off when he first spotted the duo, then it clicked: “That’s the AMBER Alert girl!” he yelled as he rushed to grab the girl from the man’s grasp and safely whisk her to a back room in the café.

Another person began taking photos as the abductor fled in his SUV. A few hours later, authorities arrested 52-year-old Duncan Mahi, who witnesses identified in a photo lineup. Mahi remains in custody as he awaits trial for charges that include kidnapping and sexual assault.

“It was really incredible,” Leonard says of the two citizens who were dubbed the “Hilo Heroes.” When Leonard asked them what gave them the courage to intervene knowing the man was armed, they both said they felt compelled by the MAILE AMBER Alert. “The café host said he responded in the way he would want someone else to respond if it had been his little sister or cousin,” she says. “It was definitely a testament to the power of the program and the Big Island community.”

On the heels of that case, about five months later the Maui Police Department issued its first MAILE AMBER Alert. In February 2023, an island-wide alert was disseminated for a 3-month-old boy whose mother had fled with him after the father was granted sole legal and physical custody. Shortly after the alert was issued around 2 a.m., authorities received a tip on the whereabouts of the mother, who was wanted for custodial interference and was in violation of a

temporary restraining order between herself and the child. The baby was safely recovered.

“We have a 100 percent success rate so far—knock on wood,” Leonard says. “When you look at these three consecutive alerts, I think it shows we’re on the right track.”

Partnering for a cause

For Leonard, the fact that Hawaii has had an increased number of alerts—with about 300 recoveries a year when factoring in other types of missing children cases—is a direct correlation to increased education and training. “The criteria for issuing a MAILE AMBER Alert did not change—it was the program development that we’ve worked on since 2018 that changed,” she says.

She considers partnerships with organizations such as the NCJTC a key to success. National and regional NCJTC meetings have provided training by national experts, the ability to meet survivors from across the country, and valuable networking.

“We wouldn’t be able to be successful without those partnerships and being able to meet other folks who have our jobs in other states,” she adds. “It’s been absolutely instrumental.”

Leonard also praises the dedication of law enforcement authorities and those working on behalf of children who consider their work a lifestyle and a calling more than a job.

“There’s no better feeling than getting a call that a child has been safely located alive,” Leonard says. “It makes me feel like we have one of the most important jobs in our state.”

[Photos/captions]

1—Photo of beach with yellow police tape. Caption for photo: A Hawaii Island beach was the scene of a teen’s abduction that resulted in her safe recovery after a citizen recognized her from the MAILE AMBER Alert.

2—Photo of Amanda Leonard, Hawaii’s MAILE AMBER Alert Coordinator

3—Three photos representing successful recovery of children who were subjects of a MAILE AMBER Alert, plus photo of searchers walking on a beach. Caption for photo: Hawaii County Mayor Mitch Roth’s social media post showed his gratitude for the safe recovery of a 15-year-old who was abducted from a beach (where searchers are seen). A news report and an alert poster spread the good news—located, canceled—on two other MAILE AMBER Alert cases.

4—Photo of two women standing in front of MAILE AMBER Alert signage. Caption for photo: “My joy is really for a family, knowing that they’re going to get the news that their child has been recovered alive,” says Amanda Leonard (right) coordinator of the Missing Child Center Hawaii and statewide MAILE AMBER Alert Coordinator. “That makes all the really tough stuff we do on a daily basis worth it.” She’s shown with program assistant Leina Diamond in front of their MAILE AMBER Alert signage.

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“I don’t believe that there’s any room for mistakes when it comes to missing children. We’re not perfect, but we should always be striving for excellence.”

Amanda Leonard

Hawaii’s MAILE AMBER Alert Coordinator

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The “MAILE” acronym in Hawaii’s AMBER Alert program is in memory of 6-year-old Maile Gilbert who was abducted by a family acquaintance from her Kailua home and murdered in August 1985. MAILE stands for “Minor Abducted in Life-threatening Emergency.” Hawaii opted to add a local connection to the national AMBER Alert program—created as a legacy to 9-year-old Amber Hagerman. Amber’s 1996 abduction and murder in Arlington, Texas, sparked nationwide efforts to prevent future incidents.

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“The best thing we can do is be prepared. And we can only be prepared by training, testing, and having solid procedures and policies in place.”

Amanda Leonard

SUB-SIDEBAR

Three for three: Lessons learned

Hawaii's Amanda Leonard suggests ways her fellow AMBER Alert Coordinators can apply lessons she's learned in strengthening Hawaii's program.

Don't let the past dictate the present. In 2018, Hawaii issued a missile alert in error, causing public confusion and panic. That incident may have had the unintended consequence of causing some law enforcement officials to be timid about issuing emergency alerts, including MAILE AMBER Alerts. Leonard makes sure to point out in her training that any comparisons with the false missile alert are "apples and oranges." "There's always going to be concern about making mistakes," she says. "But with missing children, I think the public would want us to always err on the side of caution. AMBER Alerts are lifesaving alerts."

Be an engaged communicator. Leonard continually works on public awareness and talks to the media to make sure they and the public understand that a MAILE AMBER Alert "is a call to action." She takes every opportunity to explain the criteria, including why cases of lost or runaway children don't qualify for an AMBER Alert. "We owe our community that explanation."

Tap into training. Networking, such as through NCJTC, is invaluable. "We wouldn't be able to be successful without that," she says. She also focuses on building relationships with law enforcement leaders, which can take extra effort due to turnover.

FACES

Beacon of Strength

Investigating crimes against children also requires focusing on self-care, which is too often overlooked, says Michael Nixon of Texas.

By Denise Gee Peacock

Michael Jude Nixon's middle name is his mother's homage to Saint Jude, "the patron saint of hope and hopeless causes," Nixon says. "She had a rough time during her pregnancy with me, and found comfort in prayer," he says. "Thankfully everything turned out OK."

And thankfully for those in his hometown of Beaumont, Texas, Nixon has devoted his life to serving people in need of hope—people facing hopeless causes.

"My family taught me to recognize a higher purpose in life," says Nixon, who retired five years ago as a detective with the Beaumont Police Department, where he worked for almost 16 years and was the department's AMBER Alert Coordinator.

Nixon now serves in two broader-ranging law enforcement capacities. Since 2020 he has held the role of Region 12 Missing Person Alert Coordinator for the Texas Department of Public Safety. (Region 12, comprising six counties in the Beaumont area, is home to about 500,000 people in southeastern Texas near southern Louisiana.)

Since 2020, Nixon has worked as Assistant Director and Training Coordinator for the Lamar Institute of Technology (LIT) Regional Police Academy in Beaumont. And on the national front, he recently joined [Team Adam](#), a seasoned group of law enforcement professionals tapped for rapid deployment by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children to investigate missing child cases.

Nixon's path into law enforcement followed a decade of doing manual labor for the City of Beaumont.

The first half of that chapter was working in water maintenance for five years, and for the next five "dealing with alligators, snakes, you name it" as an animal control officer. The arduous, all-hours work "was difficult, but important," he says. "It just didn't pay enough to help me make ends meet" for his young family, and kept him from home a lot.

Some friends at the Beaumont Police Department encouraged him to join the BPD.

But then came Hurdle One. "Initially, I was provided a job offer, but it was rescinded after they learned I had a GED instead of a high school diploma." (Nixon earned a GED at 18 after enlisting in the U.S. Army Reserve.) Undaunted, he returned to high school at age 32 and received that diploma. That allowed him to train at LIT and join the BPD in 2004.

Next came Hurdle Two: navigating the traumas associated with crimes against children—from

child abuse to sex trafficking cases, which he was responsible for investigating for much of his BPD career.

The way he managed to cope (see “Take 5”) now informs his Regional Police Academy training work at LIT. It also has spurred him to continue expanding his horizons for both personal and professional growth. In December 2023 he earned his Associate of Science degree in criminal justice from LIT, and currently is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in the discipline from Lamar University.

We recently caught up with Nixon so we could learn more about his work experiences—and also glean his advice that others could apply to their work lives.

How did your world change after becoming a police officer?

Working for the water department and as an animal control officer prepared me well. I saw the downside of humanity in those roles, and it was humbling. That makes you a more empathetic person. I was able to carry that over into law enforcement. I realized that everybody I encountered was somebody’s child, somebody’s parent, somebody’s loved one. I credit that to my mom’s influence. She taught me to be nice to people, even if you can’t do anything else to help.

What were some challenges you faced in your law enforcement work?

Earning people’s trust, for one. Also, getting them to talk. Many small-town communities that have been mistreated or ignored by law enforcement have built up a wall, a mentality of ‘us versus them.’ That wall has to be continually torn down by both cops and citizens, Black and White alike. That’s because any national incident of police brutality will overshadow hundreds if not thousands of positive incidents, so it’s an uphill battle that we have to learn from. It doesn’t do us any good to be overzealous or condescending. As my mother always said, ‘You can catch more flies with honey.’ And when someone extends an olive branch, take it. I made an effort to go to park events and parades, to meet people on their level. We may not be welcomed at first—or the second time or third time—but we shouldn’t give up.

How did that affect cases involving missing children?

When a community doesn’t trust law enforcement they’ll think they can solve a problem faster and more effectively on their own—of not getting the police involved. That’s especially true because most AMBER Alerts we handle are family-related and not stranger abductions, so people figure an outsider won’t be much help. I’ve had to work hard to convince them that I’m on their side. One challenge comes when children have been lured into sex trafficking. You have about four seconds to make a positive impression before they close their minds to you. Most have been told not to trust law enforcement; to be afraid that a cop will victimize them.

Do you cross paths with some of the children you helped over the years?

I see a lot of them quite frequently, but very few know who I am. That’s by design; our child advocacy center is their true liaison. But their parents tend to know who I am. Often they’re people I grew up with. And sometimes they’ve come to me for guidance. I feel good when I can help.

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“Working in the realm of child exploitation, abuse, and sex trafficking makes us need to talk to

each other—to trust in each other. We need to lean on one another and find grace from what we’ve experienced.”

Michael Nixon

Texas Region 12 Missing Person Alert Coordinator and Assistant Director/Training Coordinator,
Lamar Institute of Technology Regional Police Academy

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Up to 35% of police officers may have undiagnosed post-traumatic stress injury due to the trauma they witness during their careers. National Library of Medicine

[Display text]

“Most people will experience a traumatic incident maybe five to seven times in their entire life. Meantime, a cop may experience a traumatic incident five to seven times a shift.”

Michael Nixon

[Photos/captions]

1—Head shot of Michael Nixon, Texas Region 12 Missing Person Alert Coordinator and Assistant Director/Training Coordinator, Lamar Institute of Technology Regional Police Academy

2—Photo of two men standing beside one another. Caption for photo: Michael Nixon and fellow Texan John Graham, a law enforcement veteran and Region 2 AMBER Alert Coordinator, share mutual respect. “If my child was abducted, Mike is who I’d want leading the investigation,” Graham says.

SUB-SIDEBAR

Take Five: Ways to keep stress in check

Dealing with the disturbing realities of child protection work is a major stressor for law enforcement. “So many of us compartmentalize all the things we see,” Michael Nixon says. “We tell everybody that we’re fine when we’re not.” Here is some of his hard-won wisdom.

Share your feelings with a trusted friend or professional. “Around the time of my retirement, everything I’d dealt with over the years was causing me to have sleepless nights, to feel anxious. And I’m not ashamed to admit that I decided to talk with a therapist. He helped me see I was finally ‘man enough’ to admit the issues I was having. That’s why I tell our police academy cadets, ‘If you’re not feeling well, talk to someone,’ Nixon says. “It also helps to talk with colleagues who’ve had the same experiences as you.”

Leave work at work. “One of the best decisions I ever made was never talking with my family about any bad things that I had seen during the day. The boogeyman is not welcome at my house.”

Do a wellness check—on yourself. “Everyone—but especially those in law enforcement—should practice self-care,” Nixon says. “Find a way to step back, take a deep breath, and decompress. For instance, in an active shooter situation, we may run on adrenaline until there’s a break in the action. That’s when we’re supposed to check ourselves for wounds we may not be aware of. The same goes for investigating crimes against children. Check yourself every 12 hours to ensure you’re OK.”

Fortify your body and mind. “I found strength, and stress relief, by going to the gym each day, or working on some property I own in the country, clearing trees and that sort of thing. This kind of exercise can make you stronger physically and mentally.”

Don’t be afraid to cry. “Shedding tears is a body’s way of cleansing itself after a traumatic situation,” Nixon says. “Whenever you need some relief, find an empty office, or go sit in your car, and do what you need to do to lift that weight from your shoulders. Doing that will help you move forward.”

SPOTLIGHT

Tokens of Excellence

California Highway Patrol AMBER Alert challenge coins are honoring officers, agencies, and others who go above and beyond in child abduction cases.

By Jody Garlock

Challenge coins—insignia medallions traditionally awarded to law enforcement and the military—have held special meaning to California Highway Patrol (CHP) Assistant Chief Ken Roberts ever since learning about a World War II pilot who used his medallion to prove his identity after being shot down. After Roberts became a section commander with oversight of the state’s AMBER Alert program about four years ago, he introduced challenge coins as a way to honor law enforcement personnel who proved instrumental in helping solve child abduction cases.

Without the necessary funding to facilitate the project—meant to boost morale in the CHP’s Counterterrorism and Threat Awareness ([CTTA](#)) Section in Sacramento—Roberts spent \$1,000 of his own money to create AMBER Alert challenge coins that honor officers and allied partners for going above and beyond in their duties to recover abducted children. Commending the AMBER Alert work from among his section’s varied efforts was easy: “It’s one of the most nationally recognized alerts, and it hits the heartstrings,” Roberts says.

CHP Lieutenant Justin Howlett, who has overseen the program in recent times, says the coins are an exclusive honor, not something casually bestowed or shared. Since the program’s inception, each year only two or three people or agencies have received the “Recognition of Excellence”—typically fewer than half of the cases that required an AMBER Alert activation. “It’s genuine gratitude,” Howlett says of the CHP AMBER Alert program’s highest honor, only bestowed on personnel actively involved in an AMBER Alert case.

In one case that involved a cross-border collaboration, an [Idaho teen](#) believed to be a victim of human trafficking was safely recovered in California after an AMBER Alert was initiated in her home state. CHP personnel who helped recover the girl from an interstate rest stop near Truckee, California, were awarded, as were Idaho State Police AMBER Alert Coordinator/Missing Persons Clearinghouse Manager Tanea Parmenter and Rupert (Idaho) Police Department Detective Sam Kuoha.

The shiny gold coins bearing the AMBER Alert logo aren’t merely tokens for display. They can help provide closure in child abduction cases, which are some of the most difficult in law enforcement. They also are a source of pride that extends beyond the office or patrol vehicle.

Howlett and Roberts recount the story of an officer whose teenage son teared up after seeing his dad’s challenge coin—and realizing his dad helped save children. “The officer said that was the best feeling ever—to have his son say how proud he was of him,” Roberts says.

While some organizations informally share their coins, the CHP is selective to ensure that “when we give them, it means something,” Roberts says. Award presentations are low key to avoid

seeming like it's being done for the publicity. "We keep it very internal so it feels personal," Howlett adds.

Roberts credits his officers' support for creating the challenge coin recognition. One of them even handled the coin's design. "They were the catalyst; I was just the means to make it happen," Roberts says. "It's not a heavy lift to do something like this, as long as you set a few parameters."

For Howlett, the program has proven well worth the administrative time. "It's something that has value to us, and it has value to the people who receive the coins," he says.

[Photos/captions]

1—Photo of two people holding an AMBER Alert challenge coin. Caption for photo: Above: Tanea Parmenter, Idaho's AMBER Alert Coordinator, and Detective Sam Kuoha of the Rupert (Idaho) Police Department show off their California Highway Patrol (CHP) AMBER Alert challenge coins. Parmenter helped Kuoha investigate and activate resources that led California officers to locate a missing girl. It was the Rupert department's first AMBER Alert.

2—Photo of a man standing in front of a collection of challenge coins. Caption for photo: CHP Assistant Chief Ken Roberts, who started the challenge coin program, stands near a collection of coins.

3—Close-up photo of an AMBER Alert challenge coin in its display holder. Caption for photo: A California Highway Patrol AMBER Alert challenge coin. The CHP has activated more than 320 AMBER Alerts since the plan's origins in 2002.

NEWS BRIEFS: UNITED STATES

Michigan sting operation enlists LPRs to track down and arrest 7 child predators

Working with the Department of Homeland Security, Wayne County, Michigan, law enforcement officers [posed](#) as kids on a website where seven men—including a Wyandotte school teacher—thought they were setting up underage sexual encounters. But as each would-be predator made his way to meet the child, Taylor, Michigan, police used [Flock Safety](#) cameras/license plate readers (LPRs) to track the men and arrest them as they entered the city (five miles southwest of Detroit). Flock Safety traffic cameras log LPR data (including the vehicle's make and model) for 30 days, and the information can be shared with law enforcement across the nation.

Slate of new Wisconsin efforts aims to protect children and women

Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers signed dozens of bills in March that would [invest](#) \$10 million in support of crime and human trafficking victims. A new formal [partnership](#) between Wisconsin Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force (WAHTTF) and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Relatives (MMIWR) addresses the prevalence of human trafficking in Wisconsin's Indigenous communities. In April, Wisconsin signed two new missing person alerts into law, an effort to strengthen the state's existing AMBER Alert system. The [Prince Act](#) expands Wisconsin's missing person alerts for children after the murders of 5-year-old Prince McCree in 2023 and 10-year-old Lily Peters in 2022. In both cases, law enforcement didn't have enough information to satisfy the strict requirements for issuing an AMBER Alert. As part of the Act, a new Purple Alert includes missing children under age 10 and children under the age of 18 incapable of returning home without help due to a disability.

NCMEC's 'No Escape Room' confronts the fear and fraud of sextortion

In 2023, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) CyberTipline received a staggering 36.2 million reports of suspected child sexual exploitation. To counter that, a chilling new interactive video, ["No Escape Room,"](#) uses dozens of real-life tipline scenarios to immerse parents and caregivers into a child's online world, often fraught with peril. Throughout the experience, users are prompted to engage in a conversation with someone they think is another teenager. The friendly, flirtatious chat soon involves requests for nude or sexually explicit photos, eventually trapping the child in a blackmail scenario. The video's immersive viewpoint shows parents firsthand how kids are targeted by predators and struggle to navigate dangerous circumstances. At the end of the experience, users are directed to NCMEC's [resources](#) on sextortion.

NEWS BRIEFS: INDIAN COUNTRY

[Murdered & missing women is a top concern for Native Americans heading into elections](#)
Native American voters could decide major elections in 2024, and [grassroots efforts](#) are underway across swing states to get this important electorate out to vote as Democrats and Republicans vie for power. Key issues for Native Americans, particularly Native American women, include the high rate of missing and murdered Indigenous women, according to a 2023 First Nations Development Institute (FNDI) National [Survey](#) of Native Americans. This demographic is a powerful voting bloc with at least five million voters in the U.S. who identify as Native and Alaska Natives, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates.

[FCC advances new IPAWS alert code for missing and endangered Indigenous people](#)

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has adopted a proposal for an emergency alert that could help save the lives of missing and endangered Indigenous people. The [new alert](#) code would make it easier for public safety officials to use TV, radio, and cell phones to notify the public about missing Native Americans and Alaska Natives. The proposal was led by Native Public Media, a national organization supporting Indigenous radio and television broadcasters. The Indigenous groups comprise a significant portion of the missing and murdered cases in the United States, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In May, the FCC sought [public comment](#) on the proposal, and a final vote to create the new alert code within the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) is pending.

[Indigenous women are becoming advocates and helping address MMIW plight](#)

Is there hope for the hundreds of missing and murdered indigenous women? An [article](#) by Rachel Monroe in The New Yorker begs this question, and the answer may lie in the strength of other Indigenous women. Lela Mailman became an advocate for the voiceless after her 21-year-old daughter, Melanie James, vanished in 2014 in Farmington, New Mexico, a city bordering the Navajo Nation. Local police and media outlets seemed indifferent; Melanie's name was misspelled in reports, and wasn't entered in the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) until three years later. Mailman sought strength in numbers, joining with mothers of other missing children at marches, protests, and prayer gatherings. The #MMIW social media movement traces back to 2012 when Canadian journalist Sheila North, a member of the Cree Nation, began using the hashtag to raise awareness and spark action in Canada and the United States. "North was particularly struck by how many cases went unsolved—evidence, to her, that society regarded Native women as essentially disposable," Monroe notes. Melanie James' case is one of more than 4,000 unsolved cases of missing and murdered American Indian and Alaska Natives, according to The Bureau of Indian Affairs. "Listening to Melanie's family tell their story, I had the uneasy thought that justice in her case might not look like answers, arrests, and convictions but, instead, like subsequent missing persons cases being approached respectfully and rigorously the first time around."