# A Son Lost -- He Disappeared While Hiking In The Woods 3 Months Ago; Now His Family Struggles To Cope With The Void

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Ferdinand M. De Leon

Perhaps sometime soon, when the snow starts to melt on Church Mountain and the warm weather begins to draw hikers celebrating the coming of summer, Bill McKinnon will be found.

It is likely his frozen body lies in a ravine impossible to reach when the search for him was under way nearly three months ago.

Or maybe he is curled up beneath the boughs of a fir where he'd sought shelter from the freezing February nights before drifting into deadly, hypothermic sleep. Or, as his father fears, his body may be near the switchbacks where the elder McKinnon thought he heard a faint voice call "Dad . . ." on the fourth desperate day of searching.

Or the worst possibility of all, the one feared most by those McKinnons left behind when Bill disappeared during an impulsive winter hike with friends: that he will never be found, that they will never lay him to rest.

A DAY THAT BEGAN BRIGHT

It was on a beautiful Valentine's Day afternoon that Bill McKinnon, a student at Western Washington University in Bellingham, disappeared.

When he had come home from work the night before, Bill asked his roommate, Eric Hals, to wake him if weather permitted the hike they had planned with friends.

Late that Sunday morning, Eric roused Bill from sleep. They had their wish: a sunny day, with temperatures in the 50s. After tossing on some light clothing - blue jeans, a sweater, a green jacket and tennis shoes - Bill and the others were on their way to Church Mountain near Mount Baker. It was a trek they had made in other seasons, usually hiking to an alpine meadow with breathtaking vistas.

Although his hiking experience was limited, Bill made up for it in enthusiasm. He found in the mountains a spiritual transcendence that eluded him in everyday life.

The group began its hike at the trailhead near the 2,000-foot level, on its way to 4,200 feet. After an hour or so, they encountered snow. That's where Bill stopped. He said he wasn't dressed properly.

The others kept going. When they returned, they saw no sign of Bill where they'd left him. They assumed they'd find him at the parking lot, but he wasn't there. They thought Bill might have hitchhiked home, so they headed back to Bellingham, arriving around 6:30 p.m. Still no Bill. After a frantic round of phone calls to others who might have seen him, Eric contacted the authorities.

What followed over the next five days was a search that would, in time, include search-and-rescue teams from as far as Canada, a specially equipped Army helicopter from Portland and even the guidance of two psychics.

For his family, it was the point after which nothing would be the same; a moment that cast a pall over everything else. Where Bill once filled their lives, there is an all-consuming void.

Now there are only questions: Do you continue to hope? Do you accept the possibility of death? How do you continue living when someone vanishes without a trace?

For Bill's parents, Wilbert McKinnon, a retired IBM administrator, and Sandra McKinnon, a manager at Microsoft, and for his sister, Valina, a high-school senior, the answers have been slow and painful in coming.

THE BAD NEWS

The phone rang at Sandra McKinnon's house in Kirkland late Monday night.

Until then Bill's family was oblivious to the unfolding tragedy. Valina had tried to reach him all Sunday to pass on a phone message. They've always been close, despite their age gap - she is 17, he was 11 years older - and they talked often about life, movies, their parents. But she never reached him; even the answering machine failed to go on.

Sandra answered the ringing phone. It was Eric. Quickly, nervously, he told her what had happened. He explained he hadn't called sooner because they had hoped to find him OK, and the family would not have been bothered. They never would have needed to know.

By the time Sandra learned what happened, a whole day had passed. From dawn to dusk, nearly 20 searchers and several bloodhounds had combed the trails. When it became too dark to look any further and Bill had still not been found, the Sheriff's Department, which had organized the search, insisted the family be notified. Eric agreed to call.

Sensing something was wrong, Valina asked her mother what was happening. She knew it was bad news. She thought the worst: that her father was dead. When she learned it was her brother, and that he had been lost during a hike, she started screaming hysterically, uncontrollably. Then she cried.

Sandra, too, was adrift in a sea of emotions. It was only when she talked to Bill's best friend, Mike, that she regained her footing. He told her she had to have a plan. By 2 a.m. she and Mike were on their way to Bellingham, car loaded with everything they thought they'd need for their search, including a flashlight, binoculars and compass. They also brought a blanket; they planned to wrap Bill in it when they found him.

Valina stayed behind; someone had to be there in case Bill called. Wilbert McKinnon, who has lived in Lynnwood since he and Sandra divorced three years ago, agreed to meet them at Glacier, seven miles from Church Mountain.

Sheriff's deputies met them there. The search-and-rescue volunteers came again with their dogs.

They found Bill's footsteps near the beginning of the trail. In one snowy area, he had left plenty of tracks, but the footprints were all going up. None headed down.

Months later, Sandra McKinnon vividly remembers that first day of searching. She recalls the clarity and sharpness of her senses, being tuned in to every sound, her vision sharp as she scanned the ground for clues.

"BILLY!!!" they shouted in unison, hoping their combined voices would carry their shouts farther into the mountains. They waited in silence for a few minutes, giving him a chance to call back, straining to hear even the faintest sound. But only the mountain answered, filling the crisp air with ghostly echoes.

"WHERE ARE YOU???" they shouted. The mountain replied with the same mocking query.

Had he fallen somewhere and gotten hurt? Was he reaching for help? Were they missing some clue right before their eyes? Could he have come down from the mountain? The thoughts raced through Sandra's head.

The searchers had divided the territory on maps and fanned out in different directions.

Equipped with radios, they were poised to pounce on whatever trail seemed hot. At a point near one of the switchbacks, the bloodhounds seemed restless.

Rescuers went down the side of the mountain and found groves of trees with trunks large enough to conceal someone who might have slipped and fallen. But nothing else. No Bill. No clues.

No indication he had ever been there.

SEARCH SCALED BACK

On Tuesday, the water bottles the searchers carried froze. The forecast of sub-zero temperatures at night added even more urgency to the search. But when it started to get dark, the searching stopped.

Then there was the bad news.

The Whatcom County Sheriff's Department told Bill's parents the search would have to be scaled back. As they left, one of the police officers told them to be prepared for the worst.

"I really did not get desperate until that evening," Sandra said. "There was no hope. He was going to die tonight."

Recalling those moments still brings back the pain, and tears well in her eyes. If Bill were alive out there in the mountain, she thought, he was probably freezing, thinking nobody was looking for him and everyone had given up.

"As his Dad and I and Mike were leaving we all thought, another night, how is he going to make it through another night?"

Defeated and in despair, they headed back. But as Sandra walked back into her Kirkland home, she was greeted with a report that Bill was still alive.

`A PERFECT MATCH'

Sandra McKinnon is actually Bill McKinnon's second mother. Sandra, who is from Panama, came to New York City in 1964, the year Bill was born in Brooklyn.

They met when he was 4 years old, a skinny boy who seemed scared and lonely. His childhood nickname was Billy, and for the rest of his life he was Billy to her. Sandra was then dating Wilbert, who is also from Panama. His first wife had died from lupus two years earlier when Billy was just 2 1/2 years old. After she died, Billy lived with his aunt and two cousins.

"After Will asked me to marry him and I agreed, I went to meet Billy," Sandra recalled.

"It was like a perfect match. He was immediately comfortable with me and I was comfortable with him. One day he was staying at my house and I remember him coming out of the shower and he said, `Sandra would you be my mom? Just my mom?' because he'd been sharing mothers with the other kids. I realized how much he hungered to have somebody he could call his own," she said.

Eventually, the family moved to the Seattle area when Wilbert was transferred by IBM. It was here that Valina was born.

Bill's teen years were filled with rebellion. When he was 16, he was enrolled in an accelerated program at Seattle Preparatory School that would have enabled him to finish college early. But when the time came for him to enter Seattle University, he told his parents he wasn't ready.

They stressed the importance of a college degree, but the more they pushed, the more Bill resisted. He went, instead, for another year at Edmonds-Woodway High School near his home. His parents thought he would go on to the Seattle University program after that. Instead, he joined the Air Force.

But Bill hated having the Air Force telling him what to do as much as he did his parents. It was a commitment, however, harder to escape. When he got out four years later he came home, unsure what to do next, full of questions.

"He felt he needed more than living, getting married, having kids," said Sandra. "He said, `I want to understand what there is in the human life that brings us to this experience and where does it go.' "

Eventually he enrolled in a Job Corps program for vocational training and was urged by one of his teachers to try college. He enrolled in a community college and eventually transferred to Western Washington.

Ultimately he discovered a love for French and chose it as his major. He talked about becoming a teacher.

"He was finally pulling it together, he was finally getting some direction and knowing where he wanted to go," Sandra said.

Bill's relationship with his parents, which had been strained in the past, had also improved. He shared with them what he planned to do after graduation, which was approaching. He relished the array of possibilities.

A GLIMMER OF HOPE

While Sandra was on Church Mountain, one of her sisters had gone to a psychic, someone she'd heard had found the missing daughter of a friend. After finding out a few basics - Bill's age, his personality, what he looked like - she gave some advice.

Bill was alive but hurt, she claimed, and had to be found quickly. Look in a place you wouldn't otherwise look, she cryptically advised.

It wasn't much information or hope, but after a day that offered little of either, it was enough. Sandra called the Whatcom County Sheriff's Department to get them to continue the search. The sheriff's office, which has used information from psychics in past searches, agreed to do so if the psychic could pinpoint a spot.

It was near midnight and Sandra, tired, decided to get some sleep. She would talk to the psychic in the morning. She was certain she would return to the mountain to reclaim her son.

"I thought that was my miracle and I was convinced this was something God has shown us," she recalled. "That morning when we got up I thought, `We're going to find Billy today."

That sense of confidence in their mission helped to propel them through Wednesday's lengthy list of chores.

Finding a map of Church Mountain, having it enlarged for a better view of the switchbacks, and getting copies of a photo of Bill that the Sheriff's Department requested for a missing-person's poster took up much of their morning.

Then they headed to the psychic's home. Once there, the psychic took their map, closed her eyes and focused.

After seeing Bill's photo, she said she envisioned him crouched with his back to the rocks. She showed them the area on the map where she thought he was and added he was quickly losing life.

Armed with that information, which they faxed to the authorities, they returned to Bellingham.

They arrived in late afternoon. When police saw from the photo that Bill had been in the Air Force, the Sheriff's Department asked the Air Force to send a helicopter to help in the search.

The family headed for the mountain to take advantage of the remaining light.

They climbed higher into the switchbacks than they'd ever done - difficult terrain that had been explored by more experienced searchers the day before. On their way down, Wilbert called to Valina who was ahead of him.

"Did you call me?" he asked.

Valina said no. Wilbert said he had heard someone call "Dad" in a weak voice.

"Are you sure you didn't call me?" he asked again. She said she was sure.

They headed back up again to where Wilbert heard the voice. It was a wooded area, without snow. One of their companions went farther up still, and another went down the side of the mountain. Twilight was dimming. They slowed down, looked more carefully.

"We thought he was here somewhere and we all got very quiet, and we listened and listened and . . ." Sandra's voice trailed off, lost in memory. She added, whispering: "Then nothing."

Looking back, Sandra now believes Wilbert had imagined it all.

"I think at that time we thought maybe we heard him," she said. "When we didn't find him I thought it was our minds playing tricks on us because we wanted to find him so bad. But who knows? Wilbert is convinced that he heard him. He kept saying over and over `If he is found in that spot I won't forgive myself because I heard him calling me.' "

As they were coming down, more search-and-rescue people were heading up, and later the helicopters equipped with night-vision devices scanned the mountainside. They found nothing. At night, the temperatures dropped below zero.

"When it gets dark, it gets pitch dark," Sandra said. "There's no light anywhere, except for the stars, And, of course, it's beautiful. There are stars everywhere."

The search for Bill, already in its third day, continued in earnest for two more days.

That Wednesday night the family stayed at the home of Whatcom County sheriff's Sgt. Ron Peterson, who offered to put them up. It was a show of kindness they had experienced from other strangers who had heard of their plight.

Earlier, a restaurant in Glacier refused to accept their payment for dinner. Later, a hotel gave Wilbert a room and didn't charge him.

Thursday morning, the family stayed close to the mobile communications unit.

New helicopters supplied by the Air Force and equipped with infrared sensors were deployed in the search. But the only thing found was a tarp left abandoned by campers.

By the end of the day, the searchers had covered a 30-square-mile area and searched from the 1,000- to 6,000-foot level.

Later in the day, the family went to Bill's apartment to see if anything was missing. His clothes, his new watch, the check his mother sent him to help cover graduation expenses were all there - no indication he was pulling a disappearing act.

When Sandra's sister arrived and said she had contacted another psychic who suggested another area to explore, the news had less impact.

Exhausted from the search and lack of sleep, Sandra went home, gratefully accepting her sister's offer to continue the search in her stead. Wilbert stayed behind.

Following the second psychic's advice to look in areas with water, the searchers concentrated on an area near the Nooksack River, but again came up empty.

On Saturday, it started to snow on Church Mountain. Snow fell periodically for the next three weeks. The search was scaled back even more.

AWAITING A MIRACLE

It was on Thursday that Sandra started to come to terms with the possibility of her son's death.

"I believe in a God of miracles and I'm not giving up that he couldn't be alive somewhere," Sandra says now. "Valina keeps saying he's not dead. She said maybe he has amnesia and doesn't know what's going on. That he hasn't seen all the stuff in Bellingham on the radio or the TV. I don't know. My logical mind tells me he's dead. But I'm open to a miracle."

The miracle hasn't come.

For a while the family considered the possibilities: Could Bill have hitched a ride? Was he picked up and abducted, a victim of foul play? If he was, his body could be anywhere and he would never be found. Possibly he was hurt and had amnesia. But the desperate questions remained unanswered.

The first week afterward, Sandra wasn't able to talk to anyone or get out of bed. She prepared a written day-by-day account of what happened to Bill so she wouldn't have to answer everyone's questions.

The following weekend, she and her sister and a niece went on a ski trip to Whistler, B.C., a trip they had planned long before Bill's disappearance. They thought the change would do them good.

"It was the wrong thing to do," she said. "It was all snow, it was mountains and trails. I saw Billy everywhere and at that point I really just cried out."

She went home and for the next week plunged into her worst depression.

"I was angry that God would take my son," she said. "We've lived close to God, we've been faithful, why would this happen?"

During that time, she read about hypothermia and the way the body stops functioning when its temperature drops below 95 degrees. She learned this often leads to exhaustion, then sleep, then death.

At the same time, she heard about five cross-country skiers lost in blinding snow in Aspen, Colo. After a four-day search, they were found, alive and safe. In early March, an extensive air-and-ground search led to the rescue of 115 high-school students and others stranded by a blizzard in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina.

"I was happy for them on one level," Sandra said. "But on the other hand I felt why couldn't we find Billy the same way?"

"I thought, `Why should I go on? What's there to live for? I had to bring myself to the point where I had to say to myself `That's crazy! You have a daughter to live for.'

"But this feeling inside hurts so bad. I wanted to just go in a corner and not move."

That was also the week the McKinnons were invited by Western Washington University to their son's winter commencement ceremonies. After a sleepless night, Sandra's anger spilled over and she directed it at Bill's roommate.

"I called Eric one morning and asked `Why did you leave him? If you were his friend then why would you want your friend to go down alone? Why did you let him go down by himself? You knew he wasn't experienced. I want some answers.' "

Eric told her that he was sorry about what happened. But as Sandra's tone became more accusatory, he became more defensive. In the end they reached an understanding. Eric said what happened bothered him too, that he had never thought Bill would get hurt.

FINDING COMFORT

The climb back has been gradual.

Sandra found some comfort in small things. Just weeks before he disappeared, Bill had gone to Amsterdam: an early graduation present. Sandra remembers trying to talk Bill out of it, telling him to wait until he graduated and had more time to spend in Europe. But Bill went, making sure to be back in time for his sister's 17th birthday. Now Sandra is glad he did.

A devout Lutheran, Sandra also found peace in her religion. A song her mother used to sing when Sandra was a child returned to her one day. It was about a woman who lost her baby and asked God why the baby was taken from her. Through a dream, she learns that had the child lived to be a man he would have brought her pain. The song, oddly enough, brought some comfort. Not, Sandra explained, because she believed Bill's destiny was cursed, but that it reinforced her belief in the supremacy of God's wisdom.

The first good day was a Sunday. After coming home from church, she knew she was going to be OK. The following day, March 8, she returned to work. There was never any question whether the McKinnons would go to their son's graduation ceremony.

By the time he vanished, Bill already had racked up enough credits and met all requirements to graduate with a French degree. But he wasn't particularly eager to go through the pomp and circumstance of graduation.

Shortly before he disappeared, Bill told his mother: "I'm doing this for you, because I don't have to put on a monkey suit and get up there and say I did it."

"Fine, yeah, you're going to do this for me," Sandra replied.

The graduation ceremony on March 20 was the first time Sandra had gone back to Bellingham since the search.

Before handing out the diplomas, the dean of arts and sciences explained that one student wouldn't be there to receive his. He explained that Bill was lost and presumed dead and that his parents would receive his diploma.

"I really started crying," Sandra recalled later. "I wanted Billy to graduate. He was 28 years old and finally he's done it and he's not there."

There was a reception afterwards for the graduates and their families and the McKinnons were invited, but Sandra couldn't bring herself to go.

"I thought all these people are happy and I'm not happy," she said. "I felt really envious of all those parents that could just smile as they saw their kids go by."

When Bill had returned from Amsterdam, he had been full of plans. He talked of going to Alaska and working on a shrimp boat to make money for graduate school. He said he wanted to enroll in a teaching-assistant program and eventually go back to the Netherlands, perhaps to teach. She thinks now that Bill, a lifelong seeker of answers, would have made a great teacher.

A SHARED LOSS

In the long drive home from graduation, Sandra talked with her former husband. Since their divorce, the McKinnons had shared a tenuous friendship. From the day Wilbert McKinnon thought he'd heard his son on the mountains, he hadn't said much. In the weeks after the search was scaled down, it was he who kept in touch with the sheriff's office, checking for developments at least once a week.

Sandra knew he was suffering, and Bill's loss had brought back the loss of his first wife. He'd said several times that he had no one, that all the people he'd loved had died or gone away. They talked, too, of the son they'd shared, and together they mourned his loss.

These days, Valina talks about her mother holding on more tightly, and Sandra concedes she watches her daughter more and wants to spend more time together. Both say they are closer now than they have ever been.

"I want us to come home and eat together and go to the movies because I'm scared," Sandra said.

"I'm scared that something like this can happen without your planning for it. I'm probably holding on a little tighter than I normally would have; it's because I don't want to lose another child. I don't want her to move away from me," the mother said.

But between Valina and her father, who has spent much of the past few months with relatives in Canada, relations have become strained as her father struggles with Bill's loss.

Valina talks about feeling the heavy burden of expectations and having to compensate for her brother. But, she said, she's also acquired a better sense of her future.

"I need to be my own person," she said. "My brother led a hard life and had a lot of twists and turns in his path, even though in his own way he did lead a good life. I realized that I have to do what's best for me."

`WHERE ARE YOU?'

The news from the mountain has been meager.

When they went to the graduation, the McKinnons stopped to talk to the Whatcom County Sheriff's Department. They were told someone had gone up the preceding weekend with dogs and that in an area where there was a deep gulch the dogs went crazy. But bad weather made a more thorough search impossible.

"Some nights at three o'clock in the morning it's tough," Sandra said. "I see the whole thing with the mountains again and I cry out inside, `Where are you? Let us know where you are.' "

There was a night when she was sitting in her living room and she thought she saw a shadow, and she felt his presence. She wondered whether her son was trying to reach her.

When she wakes up in the morning, he is the first thought that pops into her head. When she goes to bed at night, he is the last. Always, there is the lingering question: Where is he?

"I know that when Billy is found it's going to be very painful," Sandra said. "But at least then I would know where he is."

A TIME FOR CLOSURE

Valina is also ready to have things come to a close. She envisions someday making a pilgrimage to Church Mountain and spreading her brother's ashes, or perhaps going to a cliff in Avignon, France, he once visited and lovingly described for her.

Sandra has sought to say goodbye in other ways. Last Sunday, Sandra returned to Church Mountain for a pilgrimage with her mother, who had come from New York to visit. In the past week, she has sorted through boxes of Bill's old pictures.

"I want to be able to say: `I'm sad because my son has died and we buried him and we know where he's buried. I can go to his cemetery and take flowers to the grave,' " Sandra said. "That's different from saying we never found him."

Yesterday, Sgt. Peterson of the Sheriff's Department coordinated a final search for Bill's body after putting out a call for the most experienced searchers. Shortly before dark, the search was ended. It was the last such effort they will make.

Yesterday too, family and friends gathered in Edmonds at a memorial service to celebrate Bill's life.

"I needed some closure to this," Sandra said last week. "I believe if we leave things open-ended you can never rest. It's a symbol that we accept that he's dead. Then we can grieve and move on."