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It was the summer of '73. Richard M. Nixon's presidency was slowly crumbling before the eyes of a nation mesmerized by the Watergate hearings.

The Arab oil embargo forced mile-long gas lines, puncturing the American myth of the free and open road.

"The Poseidon Adventure" was the summer blockbuster, foreshadowing the titanic box office appeal of movies about sinking ships.

And at a wooded summer camp in Narrowsburg, N.Y., Brooklyn teenagers Bonita "Bonnie" **Bickwit** and Mitchel Weiser were making plans to head for the music event of the year -- a three-day outdoor rock festival called Summer Jam in upstate Watkins Glen.

Billed as a successor to Woodstock, it featured the wildly popular counterculture rock groups the Grateful Dead, the Allman Brothers and The Band.

Bonnie, a brown-haired, freckle-faced 15-year-old from Borough Park, and her boyfriend Mitchel, a sweet-faced photography buff from Flatbush, were schoolmates at John Dewey High, the new "experimental" school for high achievers. They had been dating for more than a year.

Mitchel, working that summer at a Brooklyn photography shop, hitchhiked to Camp Wel-Met, a popular summer spot for middle-class Jewish kids 90 miles from the city. Sponsored by the UJA-Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, it

served as a kind of Fresh Air Fund for thousands. Among its alumni is the radio superstar Howard Stern.

Bonnie, a longtime Wel-Met camper, was working there as a mother's helper.

On the morning of July 27, 1973, Bonnie and Mitchel left the campgrounds for Watkins Glen, a rustic village in Central New York famous for its Grand Prix race track.

They were never seen again.

Police in Sullivan County and New York City ignored the incident as a case of runaway hippies. The FBI didn't touch it; there was no proof state lines were crossed. The press quickly dropped the story.

The grief-stricken families distributed thousands of fliers, hired a private detective. They consulted psychics. All proved to no avail, as they tried to understand law enforcement's snub.

"I went to the Town of Monticello. Their attitude was, 'they are away for the summer and they will come back,'" recalls Bonnie's mother, Raye, now 75. "They dismissed it."

It was 1973, a time before a nation recognized the plague of missing children, years before their sorrowful pictures adorned the sides of milk cartons. It would be 13 years before a national computerized network for missing children would be established.

But now, on the 25th anniversary of Bonnie and Mitchel's disappearance, officials are making a last-ditch effort to solve the mystery of what experts consider the oldest missing teens case in the nation.

Just last month, and for the first time, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, a quasi-federal agency, unveiled an age-enhanced photo of Mitchel to show what he would look like today, at 41. It, along with a 1994 age-enhanced photo of Bonnie, who would be 40, is now posted on the Internet (www.missingkids.com) and carried on local TV and radio nationwide. Trucks traveling across the country and stores show the photos.

Perhaps even more important, missing persons experts are hoping that two major events in the next few weeks will shake the memories of some who may have seen the teens hitchhiking --or know who picked them up.

First is next week's 25th anniversary of the Watkins Glen concert. Considered the largest outdoor rock concert ever, it attracted as many as 800,000 music fans. "Watkins Glen was the biggest concert in history," Robbie Robertson, former leader of The Band, said in 1994.

Although there is no anniversary concert planned, tens of thousands of baby boomers recalling a seminal event in their lives are expected to chat about it on the Internet.

And next month there will be a three-day rock festival in Woodstock to commemorate the 29th anniversary of the mythical event that defined a generation.

"At this point we want to make somebody try to remember," says Ron Jones, a caseworker at the national missing children's center in Arlington, Va. "The way they disappeared is doggone strange. Just to stir the memories of all those people who went to the Watkins Glen concert who might have forgotten about it. Somebody to say, 'Hey, I saw them after this concert.'"

But experts are also not shying away from the painful probability that the teens are dead, and most likely have been for nearly 25 years. They also want anyone with any information about what happened to them to come forward, to provide some measure of closure for the suffering families.

"Maybe somebody in jail, or somebody who heard something in jail, could tell us something about it," says Jones, a former Washington cop who says he has 1,200 cases under his belt.

"I think the only thing to bring closure is if they are found, one way or the other. The only thing to do is to keep the story out -- and especially the pictures."

Meanwhile in Sullivan County, where Narrowsburg is located, Det. Lt. Anthony Suarez says he plans to distribute fliers at the Woodstock festival.

"It's a shot," says the Brooklyn native, who was handed the stagnating file by his superiors in 1994 after inquiries from the families and a newspaper reporter.

But these efforts don't dismiss the failure of law enforcement to pursue the case when the teens were first reported missing, say bitter relatives who believe police ignored their pleas for help in 1973.

"There was never really an investigation," says Bonnie's older sister, Sheryl Kagen, whose husband, Edward, is a director of the JCC Association, the umbrella organization to JCCs and Y's in North America.

Without police help, she said, "I never really understood what we were supposed to do."

"It's a scandal," admits New York City Police Lt. Philip Mahoney, recently appointed commanding officer of the Missing Persons Squad. Mahoney, who attended the Watkins Glen concert as a teenager 25 years ago, says that unit was mismanaged for years. He said files on the **Bickwit** and Weiser cases cannot even be found today, even though it should be an active

case. "It's an embarrassment for us." He said he is trying to locate the microfilm from the original reports.

Sullivan County police were the lead investigators, but the NYPD were supposed to offer assistance because the teens were city residents. Family members say it was clear that the two departments did not work together and failed individually.

Suarez, in Monticello, admits that Sullivan County's original case file from July 27, 1973 is missing. He can't even say who filed the original missing person's report.

"I couldn't find the original case; I had to reopen a new one," he said.

The blundering is crucial: The files may have contained copies of Bonnie and Mitchel's dental records -- one of the only ways to identify their bodies after all these years. Both their dentists are dead, and original dental records long destroyed, the families say.

New York State's senior sheriff, Michael Maloney of Schuyler County, where the Watkins Glen concert took place, says police investigators at the time obviously fell down on the job, including failing to enter the teens' names in the FBI's national data bank.

"When a juvenile is missing, you put it into your computer no matter what, said Maloney, whose first job as deputy sheriff was trying to manage 750,000 teens at Watkins Glen.

Maloney had no jurisdiction in the investigation --it is not known if Mitchel and Bonnie ever made it to Watkins Glen. But Maloney still recalls the fliers sent to him by Mitchel's father, Sidney Weiser, 25 years ago.

"I feel kind of bad things weren't followed up on," he said. As a result of The **Jewish Week** probe, Maloney insisted he would pursue an investigation and work with Suarez to track down overlooked leads.

Law enforcement's dismissive response doesn't surprise television child crusader John Walsh, the host of "America's Most Wanted" and father of Adam Walsh, the 6-year-old who was abducted and murdered in 1981. Since then, Walsh has been one of the nation's leading advocates for missing children. "The sad thing is, I will tell you right now, nobody looked for those kids," Walsh told The **Jewish Week** in a recent telephone interview.

But he said such police response "is absolutely typical. We find police departments to be totally disorganized. Local cops don't know what they're doing. Who's gonna update the files? Nobody has the time to do it."

Walsh said he personally encountered the problem when his own son vanished 17 years ago. "Can you imagine 25 years ago? There was no awareness."

Even today, with a national center and the FBI playing an active role thanks to his work, Walsh says he gets thousands of letters from parents of missing children who complain that local police dismiss their concern.

"There are 17,000 police agencies -- they don't have the resources," says Walsh.

A computer-assisted national search by The **Jewish Week** found no records for the names of these teens anywhere in the U.S. "This one's a stumper," said Alan M. Schlein, a Washington-based computer reporting expert.

"The real problem is that they disappeared as kids and therefore don't have much of a paper trail to follow, like credit cards or home mortgages. At 15, there's not much paper, except things like library cards, which are not on-line."

No Closure

For nearly a quarter of a century, Sheryl Kagen has privately struggled to contain her unending grief over the disappearance of Bonnie, 11 years her junior. Sheryl had never officially acknowledged that her sister might be dead.

But it finally became too much for her.

"I was having a difficult year; it was in my mind all the time," says Kagen, 51, a Manhattan mother of two. She sought out her rabbi, who advised her to have a memorial ceremony on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

For the first time she placed Bonnie's name in the Yizkor, or memorial, bulletin at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue.

"I had never put it in writing. I was in some way trying to put some closure on it," Kagen says. "But it ultimately didn't."

Sheryl's mother, Raye, was against the memorial.

"I was very upset," says Mrs. **Bickwit**, who still lives in the gray-and-white three-family Colonial home in Borough Park where she and her late husband, Theodore, raised Bonnie and Sheryl. "I don't want to accept that she is deceased."

The Weisers also have never said Kaddish, the mourning prayer, for their son, refusing to accept he might be dead.

"No, never," says Sidney Weiser, 71, who with wife Shirley clings to the hope Mitchel will turn up someday.

"Not knowing is horrid," Weiser, a retired prescription lens grinder, said last week. "But if I ever found out he was dead, I think I would just die. I'm just praying to God he is still alive somewhere."

The Weisers moved to Arizona in 1984 for his asthma, but they continue to pay 2.39 every month to New York's telephone company to keep their name and Arizona telephone number in the Brooklyn phone directory -- for when Mitchel returns.

Shirley Weiser said her last contact with her son was on July 27, 1973, when she called him to make sure he arrived safely at Camp Wel-Met. Before he left Brooklyn, she told him she didn't want him to go to the concert, or to hitchhike there.

"I wanted to give him more money so he wouldn't hitchhike. All he had was 25," she said sadly. "But he ran out the door."

Mitchel's only sister, Susan Leibgott, a book dealer in her mid-40s and mother of two, says she continues to live in Brooklyn hoping that her brother will contact her. Whenever she goes on vacation, she looks in the local phone book to see if her brother's name might be there.

In her Ocean Avenue apartment cramped with books and artworks, Leibgott faithfully keeps an old cardboard box containing Mitchel's personal memorabilia. There is his 1969 Mets World Series ticket stubs. Souvenir trading cards from the 1964-65 World's Fair. His old tortoise-shell eyeglasses. His poems. A giant birthday card from the party thrown by friends for his 15th birthday.

Leibgott believes Mitchel was out of sorts when he left for the concert. She thinks he was upset that he might not be able to afford the college of his choice in Rochester. She said he seemed morose before he left to meet Bonnie.

Kagen says her sister appeared troubled the last time she saw her, two weeks before the disappearance. "Her behavior was a little strange. She seemed to have a lot on her mind."

Bonnie apparently slipped out of Wel-Met and returned to Brooklyn one day the week before she vanished. She took 80 she had been saving for a bicycle, Kagen recalls. "She didn't contact me and my parents were away, but other people saw her, and she left the windows open."

Also, Kagen says Bonnie was having trouble with the family she was babysitting for at Wel-Met. Kagen says Bonnie asked for the night off when Mitchel came up but her employers refused. She quit in anger.

Bonnie told her employer, Charles Shayne, she would come back after the concert to pick up her clothes and paycheck, Kagen says. She is bitter that Shayne and the camp allowed an underage employee to leave on her own.

"It's beyond, beyond belief," Kagen says. "They had no business letting her go. They were responsible for a minor."

Shayne, now a director at Kingsbridge Heights Community Center, refused to comment.

But a number of friends contacted by The **Jewish Week** -- who are still haunted by loss of their friends -- dispute implications that Bonnie and Mitchel were having problems beyond normal adolescent concerns. They also universally reject the original suggestion by law enforcement that they were runaways.

"We knew Bonnie and Mitchel did not run away; Bonnie was so close with her parents," said her best friend, Michelle Festa, who was valedictorian at Dewey and is now an attorney with the Board of Education.

Festa says she was in Europe during the summer and exchanged several letters with Bonnie. There was no indication anything was wrong.

Maggy Magliano says she "often wonders what exactly happened to them," adding that "I knew them well enough to state that they definitely didn't just run off. They came to some terrible harm."

"I knew them both, Mitch better than Bonnie," said Denise Karp. "They were both full of plans for the future, and there is no way they were runaways."

Stuart Karten, Mitchel's best friend and a product designer in Los Angeles, told The **Jewish Week** he received a letter from Bonnie dated the day before she disappeared.

It could be the last letter she ever wrote.

She wrote that she was lonely and bored and was considering quitting her job," Karten says.

"P.S., can I get a job at your camp? Ask around," she ended the missive.

But Karten didn't believe it was anything more than "the summer blues. "It was normal stuff," says Karten, who "thinks about Mitchel all the time. They were both really good kids and very responsible."

Their friends are also angry about the lack of police concern. All except one, Festa, were ever interviewed by police.

"No one from the police ever came to ask me any questions, and I don't recall anyone else ever saying that they were questioned either," said high school friend Karin Brooks. "I had a really hard time with all of it. As to the feeling around when we returned to school, I can only speak for myself in saying that the whole thing didn't seem quite real."

"All I can say, I wish you were around when it happened," Karp told The **Jewish Week**.

"Everyone just thought that they decided to do the 'Kerouac thing' that summer traveling the country a la Beat author Jack Kerouac rather than return to camp," said a former Camp Wel-Met director named Marc. "She was my

buddy's

babysitter at camp when they split. Being from the Woodstock contingent, I didn't think twice about it until people started discussing their disappearance."

Ironically, Camp Wel -Met reopened this summer at a new location for the first time in 20 years.

The Disappearance

There is scant information about the last time Bonnie and Mitchel were seen. Mitchel took time off from his job at Chelsea Photographers on Coney Island. In a few weeks he was to take the state driver's license test.

On July 26, he left his parents' two-family home on East 8th Street in Midwood for Camp Wel-Met. The next day, the pair left the campsite.

One story has the young couple hitching a ride into Narrowsburg, about five miles away. A truck driver picked them up at the camp and dropped them off in town, that story goes. They were wearing blue jeans and T-shirts, carrying sleeping bags on their backs and holding a cardboard sign reading "Watkins Glen."

But that's speculation, said Suarez, the Sullivan County detective. He said the only concrete information is that Bonnie got paid and left the camp. On July 30, a Monday, the camp contacted the **Bickwits** saying that she had not returned. Within days, the parents mounted a monthslong campaign that took them to such runaway havens as San Francisco and Oregon.

But they were working-class people with meager means and could afford to do only so much, says Leibgott, Mitchel's sister. They were forced to rely on law enforcement.

Desperate and frustrated by police, Raye **Bickwit** contacted psychics. One told her she "saw" teens lying in a gravel pit." Ads were placed in underground newspapers throughout the country pleading with the children to contact them. Relatives contacted communes and cult groups. But no clues emerged. There were several heartbreaking errors. Once the **Bickwits** received a fund-raising letter from an Indian reservation in South Dakota. The parents thought they might be there. Nine years ago a telephone operator told Sidney Weiser he had a collect call waiting from Bonnie. "I said I would accept, but then the operator told me the other party had disconnected."

And that was it.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children says it has no record of any leads.

"The saddest thing is never to know, never to have any closure," friend Festa says.

But Walsh, whose investigations have helped captured some of America's most notorious criminals and solved decades-old mysteries, declares the police should not give up even now.

"You're talking to the man who doesn't give up," said Walsh, noting that there are a lot more national resources in place today, many through his efforts, than 25 years ago.

Walsh has a series of concrete suggestions for investigators.

"I believe the detective should go now and work with the FBI's child-abduction unit and serial-killer unit in Quantico, Va.," referring to the section made famous in the Academy Award-winning movie "Silence of the Lambs."

"They should look back at unsolved homicides at that time. There may be a guy in jail who knows something. Wouldn't it be wonderful if a memory was jogged?"

New York State felony files should also be checked, Walsh said. He said killers often move to a neighboring county knowing that local police generally don't have the time or initiative to check within a five county radius. "The bad guys know the minute they cross county lines they are safe," he said.

He also said Attorney General Dennis Vacco's office should be brought in to see if there are any unsolved murders in the state's files from that time period or if a murderer was caught using the same method of operation.

It's not a pipe dream, Walsh insists. He cites a case that languished for 22 years before a retired police detective became involved and the story appeared on "America's Most Wanted." That caused members of the public to remember some details and provide new clues that broke the case, and the killer of a child was found.

"Working on this television show reaffirmed my belief in the average citizen," he said. "Can you imagine what it's like to get resolution and justice after all those years," he asked.

Meanwhile, Sheryl Kagen again prepares to list Bonnie's name in her synagogue's Yom Kippur memorial bulletin.

"Some sort of closure is all you could hope for," she says.

And the Wiesers continue to hope Mitchel will find their phone number in the Brooklyn directory.