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Private eye found missing N.Y. teen

GABRIEL BAIRD
Plain Dealer Reporter

The case of a missing 16-year-old girl hit private investigator Paul Baeppler in the heart.

The Cleveland-based investigator knew that if his own daughters disappeared, the pain of not knowing their fate would be worse than death.

The woman on the other end of the telephone line said in a thick Polish accent that the missing girl, her niece, left her home on the southern shore of New York's Long Island in September with a man from Ohio whom she met online.

The girl's parents had filed a missing-person report in Suffolk County, N.Y. Detectives exhausted their leads.

Then, a little more than a month ago, the girl called home. She spoke quietly as though afraid someone nearby would hear, then abruptly said she had to go and hung up. Using the phone number from the caller ID, the authorities tried to track the girl but again hit dead ends.

The aunt knew an attorney who knew a second attorney who had referred her to Baeppler. Could he help?

Baeppler quoted the aunt his rates: \$150 an hour for database searching, \$100 an hour plus expenses for field work.

New York teen found near Dayton

She said she would have to check with her niece's parents and call him back.

Baeppler, 40, who's a sergeant with the Cleveland Police Department, comes from a police family. His father, Gregory Michael Baeppler, is a former Cleveland police commander and now the safety director in Parma. The son is a Cleveland police sergeant with 16 years on the job. He moonlights as an investigator for Integrity Investigations, which he founded in 2004.

Most of Baeppler's cases involve finding witnesses for attorneys or proving fraud for insurance companies. He had worked only one previous missing-person case, and that was five years ago.

Baeppler feared the New York girl would suffer long-term harm or that she could have been sold into sexual slavery, as has happened in other cases. And then there was the possibility that she was dead.

When he worked the previous case, his daughters had been too young for him to relate to it. Now

For information

Cleveland police Sgt. Paul Baeppler formed Integrity Investigations in 2004. The company can be reached at 216-221-1000 or online at www.clevelandprivateinvestigator.com.

they were 7 and 9 years old, and he worried, especially about the Internet.

A week passed, then the aunt called back, on Thursday, Dec. 3.

Baeppler was on the case.

The next day, he searched databases using the phone number the girl had called her parents from and the name of the man believed to have taken her, 21-year-old James M. Pulaski of Centerville, Ohio.

Armed with potential addresses and a picture of the girl, Baeppler drove to the Dayton suburb that Saturday morning and staked out the most likely address. Having seen no sign of the 5-foot-5 girl with long, curly brown hair, he drove to a second address and then to a third.

By the time he parked outside the townhouse on Meeting House Road, it was about 8:30 p.m.

Baeppler watched the front, then went around back and peeked over the fence. There, watching TV inside the house, was a girl with long, curly brown hair.

Baeppler called Centerville police. Within minutes, two officers arrived. One watched the back yard, while Baeppler and Officer Tony Beran knocked on the front door, igniting a din from barking dogs.

Pulaski answered but claimed his name was "Randy." Asked if the police could come inside, he closed the door, presumably to put the dogs somewhere else. But as Beran watched through the window in the top of the front door, he saw the curly-haired girl heading for the back patio door followed by Pulaski. Beran radioed the officer behind the house. That officer turned on his flashlight, and the girl and Pulaski scurried upstairs. When Pulaski returned to the door, he claimed he was home alone.

Beran and Baeppler took him to the ground and cuffed him.

Baeppler went upstairs. He looked inside one bedroom, which had an entertainment center, and another. He looked under the mattresses and in the closets. He saw the attic hatch, pulled over a chair, climbed up and shined his light into the darkness.

Nothing.

"I wondered, 'Could she have climbed out a window?'"

Then he checked inside the entertainment center. There, curled up like a contortionist, was the girl.

Baeppler called the girl's aunt and said, "We got her."

The aunt said the family would start the 10-plus-hour drive immediately.

Pulaski was taken to jail and charged with obstructing justice and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. He was arraigned on the charges Thursday in Kettering Municipal Court and posted bond.

The next morning, Sunday, Baeppler met the girl's family and watched as the parents were reunited with their daughter.

"There were no words spoken," Baeppler said. "The father just held her and they just held each other."

Baeppler could not help but put himself in the man's shoes. He said he was so overwhelmed by emotion, he had to walk away.

Soon, he was in his car, driving back to Cleveland, feeling good and looking forward to hugging his own girls.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:
gbaird@plaind.com, 216-999-5833