

Maura is Missing | Whitman-Hanson Express

Written by Maribeth Conway and edited by Josh Cutler.



Part I: The Departure

In the winter of 2004, 21-year-old Maura Murray of Hanson, a talented athlete and nursing student at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, got into her car, drove to the woods of northern New Hampshire and disappeared. Not a trace of her has been found since despite an intensive search and investigation. What happened to Maura Murray? How, after her car skidded into a snow bank on a mild winter night, could she simply disappear? In a

multipart report, the Express examined the circumstances surrounding Maura's disappearance and traces her steps from Amherst, Mass., to Woodsville, N.H. The story begins in a UMass dormitory...

Thursday, Feb. 5, 2004 -- It was an overcast night at the University of Massachusetts Amherst campus. Maura Murray, a junior nursing major and dean's list student, was working the campus security desk at the Melville dormitory. Her job was to check identification as students entered the dorm

Maura's shoulder-length brown hair was likely pulled back tightly in a bun as it nearly always was. Friends knew Maura as a highly-motivated achiever who could be shy at times but was also a free-spirit. She ran on the college track team and was an excellent athlete who broke her high school record in the two-mile run.

During a slow point in her shift, around 10:20 p.m., Maura chatted on the phone with her older sister, Kathleen. The two were discussing men troubles, specifically Kathleen's tiff with her then fiancé, now husband, Tim Carpenter. The two sisters talked nearly every day and this conversation was not unlike any other, Kathleen would later say. Maura was especially close to Kathleen and her other older sister, Julie. She also had two brothers, Freddy and Kurt.

Maura did not burst into tears right after hanging up the phone, contrary to some published reports. But she did start crying about three hours later for reasons that remain unclear. Maura was comforted by her work supervisor, Karen Mayotte, who walked her back to her single room in the Kennedy dormitory around 1:20 a.m. Maura never told Mayotte why she was upset. Supervisors are on a 30-minute rotation so Mayotte would not have been present for Maura's entire shift.

Whatever was bothering Maura, she did not share it with her friends or father who visited her at UMass on Saturday, Feb. 7, less than 48 hours later.

Growing up, Maura had lived with her mother in Hanson, but she retained an especially close relationship with her father, Fred Murray.

When Fred wasn't coaching her in youth sports or attending one of her track meets, he and Maura would go camping or hiking, usually in the mountains of New Hampshire.

Fred came to UMass that weekend to help Maura go car shopping. Maura's black 1996 Saturn sedan was in rough shape, running on just three cylinders. Maura drove the Saturn as little as possible. The father and daughter were looking at a three-year-old Geo Prizm. "She would have had a new car by next week," Fred said later.

After a day of car shopping on Saturday, the two had dinner at the Amherst Brewing Company on North Pleasant Street in downtown Amherst. Each time Fred visited Maura their routine included trying another of the many local brew pubs in the area.

Maura's friend Kate Markopoulos joined them at the restaurant later that night. After dinner and drinks, Maura's father was ready to head back to the Quality Inn, a motel on Russell St. in neighboring Hadley. Fred offered Maura his new Toyota Corolla to drive for the evening. Maura dropped her father off at the motel and returned with her friend to UMass.

Back on campus, Maura attended a small party in the dorm with Kate and their friends. The girls were chatting and drinking Skyy Blue malt mixed with wine, friend Sara Alfieri later said in an interview with Seventeen magazine. At some point Maura mentioned that she wanted to return the car to her father that night, which didn't make sense to Kate since it was so late, Maura had been drinking and her father wasn't expecting the car until the next day, the magazine reported.

Around 2:30 a.m. Maura told friends she was heading home to her dorm room. Instead she got into her father's car and drove toward his motel. While driving along Route 9 in Hadley, Maura slammed into a guardrail causing about \$8,000 worth of damage to the Toyota. Local police responded to the scene of the accident but no charges were filed.

Maura got a ride back to her father's motel. When Fred Murray learned of the accident, Maura was shaken up and extremely apologetic. "She was upset, but it was okay," Fred recalled. "If this is the only trouble a kid ever causes, then you're pretty lucky as a parent."

At 4:49 on Sunday morning a little while after the accident Maura called her boyfriend, Billy Rausch, on her father's cell phone. Billy consoled her over the phone, though he would later say he thought there was more than just the accident on Maura's mind.

Billy was an army lieutenant who was stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Just a few weeks earlier Maura had arranged for a summer job at a hospital in Oklahoma to be closer to Billy. "They would have ended up married," said Fred. Later, Billy would tell a local newspaper that he and Maura were "engaged to be engaged."

The couple met while studying at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and began dating in the fall of 2001. After three semesters, Maura transferred to UMass to continue her studies. "Military just wasn't for her," said Andrea Connolly, a high school friend who ran on the track team with Maura. continue her studies.

Billy and Maura remained close after her transfer, traveling between their schools to spend time together.

After a few calls Sunday morning, Feb. 8, it appeared Fred's insurance would cover the accident and it was time to "move on." Fred had a work obligation in Bridgeport, Connecticut so he rented a car and dropped Maura off at her UMass dorm. That evening at 11:30 p.m. Fred talked to Maura on the phone and reminded her to pick up accident forms from the Registry of Motor Vehicles. Maura agreed to call her dad on the phone the next night (Monday) at 8 to go over the forms and fill out the insurance information.

The next day, Monday, Feb. 9, Maura made a number of phone calls.

Just before 1 p.m. she called Dominic and Linda Salamone, a couple who own a rental condominium at the Seasons at Attitash Resort in Bartlett, New Hampshire. Maura's family, which frequented the Bartlett area, had stayed at the Seasons, though never at this condominium.

The Salamones don't remember the conversation with Maura but they are certain she did not book their condominium. To do so on such short notice would have been impossible, explained Linda Salamone. "We don't operate like a hotel." Rentals must be booked far in advance in order for the Salamones to drop a key in the mail.

The call to the Salamones lasted about three minutes, records show. Linda Salamone speculates she might have offered Maura recommendations on other places to stay, though her memory was foggy by the time police finally interviewed her - nearly a year after Maura went missing.

Maura called a fellow nursing student at 1:13 p.m., though the purpose for her call is not clear. According to John Healey, a New Hampshire private investigator who is familiar with the case, Maura may have arranged to give her scrubs to a fellow nursing student. Family member Helena Murray maintains that Maura, always conscientious, was merely returning scrubs she borrowed from another student.

At 2:05 p.m. Maura made a five-minute call to 1-800-GOSTOWE, where hotel bookings can be made. The "Go Stowe" system was actually out of order at this time so Maura could not have made a reservation and could only listen to voice recordings.

Also on Monday, Maura sent an email to her boyfriend, Billy Rausch. Maura's email to Billy that day read: "I love you more stud I got your messages, but honestly, i didn't feel like talking to much of anyone, i promise to call today though" The message was signed "love you, maura."

At 2:18 p.m. Maura called Billy on his cell phone and left a brief voicemail message. She said something along the lines of "I love you, I miss you, I want to talk," according to Billy's mother, Sharon Rausch. The cell phone Maura used was a gift from Billy, but Sharon's name was on the account.

Billy would later be shipped out to Iraq.

A police investigation later revealed that Maura also emailed teachers at the UMass Nursing School and her boss at a local art gallery to let them know she would be out of town for several days due to a death in the family. There was no death according to Maura's family.

Maura's friends don't know why she made up the death-in-the-family story. "There was something she wanted to get away and think about," said long-time friend Liz Drewniak. "Maybe she just wanted to get away. She was probably under a lot of pressure."

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There is further evidence suggesting that Maura had intended to leave campus for at least a few days. Maura had "fastidiously packed all her belongings into boxes before she left school, even removing the art from her dorm room walls," the Boston Globe reported, citing UMass Police Lieutenant Robert Thrasher.

"It looked like she was planning to leave school," said Lieutenant John Scarinza of the New Hampshire State Police.

Although police and some friends suggest from her packing that Maura may have been intending to leave school permanently, there is reason to doubt such a conclusion.

Maura met her boyfriend, Billy Rausch, in the fall of 2001 while attending West Point. Maura was following in her sister Julie's footsteps, but later decided military life wasn't for her and transferred to UMass. Despite the distance Maura and Billy remained close.

Maura had recently returned from winter break. The University of Massachusetts has an unusually long break running from before Christmas into late January. Maura returned home to Hanson during her break and logically would have packed her belongings for such an extended time away. The UMass calendar refers to a "Welcome Back Week," occurring over the last week of January and into the first week in February. It is therefore plausible that Maura had been back on campus less than 10 days.

Family members also point out that Maura was a "neat-freak" by nature, so it wouldn't be unusual for the former West Point cadet to have her belongings carefully packed and arranged.

Moreover, there is no indication that Maura was doing poorly in school. To the contrary, she had made the dean's list the prior semester and was known as a good student.

Before leaving the UMass campus on Monday, Maura packed some clothing and toiletries, including a toothbrush and floss. Maura was especially conscientious with her dental hygiene, according to her mother Laurie Murray; she would never go long without brushing and flossing. She also brought along her birth control, according to private detective John Smith.

Maura must have packed her college textbooks as well since they were later found in her car. Maura had been getting rides from friends at school due to her car problems, says Sharon Rausch, so it is unlikely the textbooks would have already been in the car.

Maura also packed a cell phone charger and a Samsung travel adapter for her cell phone.

Finally, Maura grabbed her favorite stuffed animal, a monkey her father had given her, and a diamond necklace from Billy.

Sometime around 3:30 p.m. on Monday, Feb. 9, Maura left her dorm and got into her Saturn.

At 3:40 p.m. she withdrew \$280 from a nearby ATM, leaving her account almost empty. Maura was due to be paid soon from her two part-time jobs.

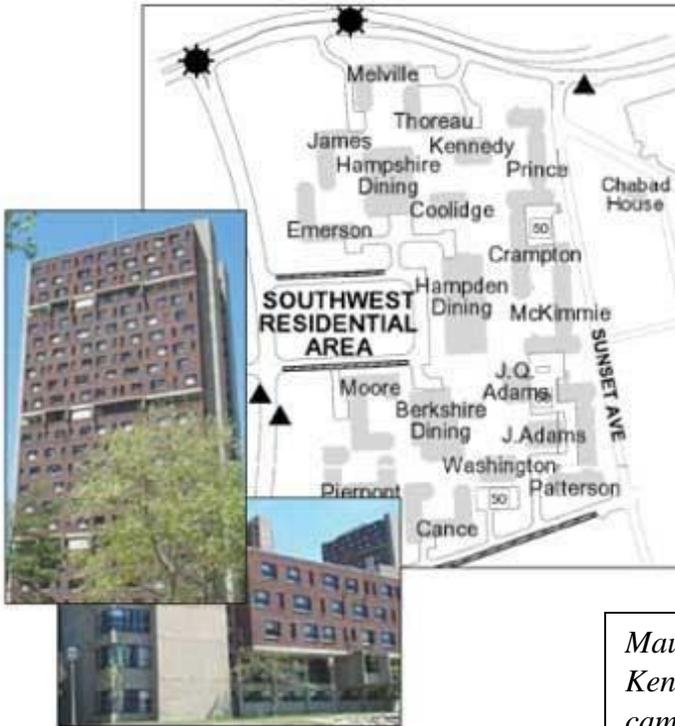
Maura then stopped off at a local liquor store and bought about \$40 worth of alcohol: Bailey's, Kahlua, vodka and a box of wine according to her sister Kathleen. Police later found a liquor store receipt in Maura's car. A police review of surveillance footage showed Maura was alone at both the ATM and the liquor store.

Maura Murray then hit the road, heading north toward the New Hampshire wilderness. She never returned.

At 4:37 p.m. Maura checked her voicemail for messages. This was the last recorded call on her cell phone.

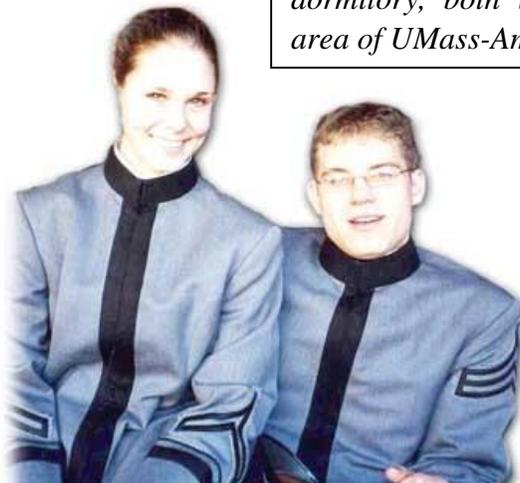
As she promised her father, Maura obtained accident forms before leaving town; the forms were later found in her vehicle. Maura may have stopped at the Registry of Motor Vehicles on Route 9 in neighboring Hadley or she could have downloaded them from the Registry website.

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Maura lived in the high-rise Kennedy Dorm (top) and worked campus security in Melville dormitory, both in the southwest area of UMass-Amherst.

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Part II: The Accident

Nestled in the Connecticut River Valley, a stone's throw from the Vermont border, Woodsville is a rural village within the town of Haverhill, New Hampshire. Woodsville has a year-round population of 1,080 and was best known as the home of America's oldest covered bridge -- until the night of Mon. Feb. 9, 2004.

Sometime after 7 that evening, 21-year-old Maura Murray found herself in a snow bank off Wild Ammonoosuc Road in Woodsville. How and why she arrived at that point, and what happened next is the source of great mystery, conjecture and heartache.

Wild Ammonoosuc Road, also known as Route 112, winds along the northern end of Woodsville near the town line with Bath, New Hampshire. The road is named for the nearby Wild Ammonoosuc River, which starts in the White Mountains and snakes west for about 15 miles, eventually flowing into the Connecticut River.

Little is known about Maura's trip north after she left the UMass campus in Amherst, Mass around 4 p.m. Presumably she drove Route 116 out of Amherst, picked up U.S. Route 91 North in South Deerfield, Mass. and headed toward New Hampshire. Considering that Maura landed on Route 112 in Woodsville, she likely took exit 17 off of Route 91 to reach Route 302.

In winter, local travelers know to take Route 302 if headed to Bartlett, N.H. instead of the faster, but snakelike Route 112, which later turns into the Kancamagus Highway. The entire journey from Amherst would have taken Maura 2 1/2 to 3 hours.

There was snow on the ground, but it was a mild February evening in Woodsville.

It had been quite cold earlier in the day, but by 2 p.m. a warming trend drove the temperatures above freezing and they hovered around 33 degrees Fahrenheit for most of the night. (Later reports would erroneously state the high temperature at 12 degrees.)

Shortly after 7 p.m. Faith Westman heard a loud thump outside her white gambrel-style home at 70 Wild Ammonoosuc Road. Her house is located inside a sharp left-hand bend in the road; Westman lives there with her husband, Tim. The couple also owns The Weathered Barn, a well-known local landmark, which is across the street at 69 Wild Ammonoosuc Road. In this barn, Tim Westman, a renowned craftsman, restores antique musical instruments.

Faith Westman peered out her window and saw Maura Murray's black Saturn lodged in a snow bank a short distance from her home. The car was facing west on the eastbound side of the road. From the look of things, it was clear there had been some kind of accident.

At 7:27 p.m. Westman called the Grafton County Sheriff's Department to report the vehicle, which she described as being in a "ditch."

Westman told dispatcher Ronda Marsha she was not sure if there were any injuries. Notably, the log reports that Westman said she could "see a man in the vehicle smoking a cigarette."

Maura never smoked and was vehemently anti-smoking, according to her mother and father.

In a later interview with Maura's father, Fred Murray, the Westmans could not agree on an exact description of the person in the black Saturn. Faith Westman believed she had seen a man with a cigarette, while Tim Westman believed it was a woman at the scene on her cell phone and that the red light from the phone looked like the tip of a cigarette.

An investigator who later interviewed the Westmans confirmed that the couple did not fully agree on a description.

When asked to clarify for this story the Westmans declined comment. "We've been down that path too many times. It's worn thin," Tim Westman said.

Meanwhile, across the street, neighbor Virginia Marrotte was standing in her kitchen with her husband, John, who was peeling an orange.

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John Marrotte told the same story to private investigator John Healy after the incident and added that he believed he saw Maura's car back up parallel to the road, indicated by the car's rear lights.

While the Marrottes were watching from their kitchen window they observed another neighbor arrive on the scene in a school bus.

Arthur "Butch" Atwood is a former Taunton, Mass., resident, who worked as a school bus driver for First Student Inc., the second largest school bus operator in the U.S. according to the company website.

Atwood lived with his wife, Barbara, in a log-cabin style home 210 yards east of the Westmans at 4 Wild Ammonoosuc Road. Atwood was on his way home after dropping off students following a ski field trip. His home is on the town line with neighboring Bath.

Atwood stopped by the scene of the accident and saw a young woman alone in the car whom he later identified as Maura Murray. Her dark hair was hanging down, not in its customary bun, though Atwood said he could clearly see her face. She was "shook-up," but not injured, he reported to police.

"I saw no blood...She was cold and she was shivering," Atwood told the Caledonian Record.

Maura struggled to get out of her Saturn because the car door was hitting against a snowbank, Atwood recalled when interviewed for this story from his new home in Florida. There was as much as two and a half feet of snow on the ground in the area.

Atwood stepped out of his bus and asked Maura if she wanted him to call the police. Maura told him not to bother, saying that she had already called AAA, Atwood said.

A N.H. State Police "synopsis" released by Lt. John Scarinza four months later, painted a different view of their encounter: "When the passerby stated that he was going to call local law enforcement to come assist, Maura pleaded with him not to call police."

Atwood said that Maura remained on the driver's side of her car, about 15 to 20 feet away and stayed there during their entire conversation. A heavy-set man about 60 years old, Atwood may have cast an intimidating figure to Maura. "I might be afraid if I saw Butch. He's 350 pounds and has this mustache," Barbara Atwood told the Patriot Ledger two weeks after the accident.

Atwood offered to let Maura wait at his house until help arrived, but Maura wanted to wait with her car. He advised Maura to turn her car's lights on to avoid getting hit by vehicles coming around the bend. Atwood then left the scene and drove the 100 yards to his home.

Atwood doubted that Maura could have reached AAA due to the sparse cell phone coverage in the area. "I knew better," he said later. Family friend Sharon Rausch also confirmed that AAA did not receive a call from Maura that night.

Based on his recollection and the times reported in police dispatch logs, Atwood's conversation with Maura could only have lasted a few minutes.

After Atwood drove away, Faith Westman noticed the Saturn's interior lights switch on and off and witnessed a flurry of activity at the rear of the car, including a person standing at the trunk, according to private investigator John Smith, who spoke with the Westmans after the accident.

Smith is one of several retired police officers who have been working on a volunteer basis with the New Hampshire League of Investigators.

Meanwhile Butch Atwood backed his school bus into his driveway and went inside to call the police. He had difficulty reaching the 911 operator due to busy phone circuits. Atwood eventually got through to the Hanover Regional Dispatch Center, which in turn alerted the Grafton County Sheriff's department at 7:43 p.m., 16 minutes after Faith Westman's original call.

Atwood spoke to the 911 operator from the front porch of his house. He could see the road, but Maura's car was not in his line of sight. As he spoke, a few cars passed by but Atwood was not able to identify any of them.

"I did not hear or see anything strange happen," Atwood said.

Three minutes later, at 7:46 p.m., Haverhill police Sergeant Cecil Smith arrived on the scene. He had been dispatched at 7:29 p.m. following the call from Faith Westman.

Atwood saw that a police vehicle had arrived so he went to his school bus to finish up some paperwork, he said during an interview.

Atwood later estimated that seven to nine minutes had elapsed from the time he left Maura to the arrival of the police cruiser, the Caledonian Record reported.

"Evidence at the scene indicated the vehicle had been eastbound and had gone off the roadway, struck some trees, spun around, and come to rest facing the wrong way in the eastbound lane," according to the accident report filed by Sgt. Smith on February 15, six days after the accident.

Sgt. Smith approached Maura's car and discovered that it was locked. There was no sign of Maura. The driver's side windshield was cracked and both front air bags had been deployed.

In a window of just minutes Maura Murray had vanished.

"Evidence at the scene indicated the vehicle had been eastbound and had gone off the roadway, struck some trees, spun around, and come to rest facing the wrong way in the eastbound lane," according to the accident report filed by Sgt. Smith on February 15, six days after the accident.

Tire impressions were found in the snow, though none were reported on the road.

Sgt. Smith found a box of Franzia wine behind the driver's seat of the vehicle and a red liquid on the driver's side door and ceiling of the car. (Maura's high-school friend Liz Drewniak recalls that Maura was not a heavy drinker, but often liked to buy wine by the box.) The box was damaged, perhaps in the accident, and reddish spots resembling wine were also found on the road, according to investigator John Healy. Sgt. Smith later recovered a coke bottle that contained "a red liquid with a strong alcoholic odor." None of the other bottles of alcohol that Maura had bought in Amherst were found in the car.

While later reports would suggest that a witness observed Maura intoxicated at the time of the accident, the source of that information is unclear. Circumstantial evidence suggests Maura may have been drinking wine prior to the crash, but Butch Atwood confirmed to a reporter for this story that Maura did not appear intoxicated when he spoke with her.

Other items found in Maura's car were a AAA card, insurance forms, gloves, compact discs, makeup, computer generated directions for Burlington and Stowe, Vermont, and a book Maura had been reading by Nicholas Howe, *Not Without Peril*.

Sgt. Smith also found a rag stuffed into the exterior tail pipe of Maura's Saturn. The rag came from the trunk of Maura's car, according to Fred Murray, who said he had stored the rag along with an emergency roadside kit in the Saturn.

Whether Maura stuffed the rag in the tailpipe herself and what her motivation could have been remains unclear.

Stuffing a rag into a tail pipe would stall the vehicle and it would eventually kill the engine, according to Ferry's Automotive in Hanson. Plugging the tailpipe can also be a way to check for leaks in a vehicle's exhaust system. While carbon monoxide poisoning is a common method of attempting suicide, it would normally require a means of feeding the deadly gas back into the vehicle, such as by hose or in a confined space.

When asked if Maura could have put the rag in the tailpipe, her father said it was possible. If smoke was trailing out of the tailpipe, Maura may have wanted to plug the pipe to avoid attracting attention from police.

After checking the area around the Saturn, Sgt. Smith knocked on the Westmans door and asked the couple what they had seen.

Sgt. Smith then drove the 200 yards east to Butch Atwood's home, and found Atwood sitting in his bus. Sgt. Smith knocked on the bus window. "He asked where the girl was," Atwood recalled and told the officer he hadn't seen anyone since leaving Maura's vehicle.

At 7:56 p.m, 10 minutes after Sgt. Smith arrived, EMS arrived on the scene followed by a fire truck one minute later.

New Hampshire State Trooper John Monahan also stopped by the scene of the accident. It is not clear what time he arrived, if he was dispatched to the accident, or if he stopped on his own accord.

Monahan, who is now assigned to the Registry of Motor Vehicles, did not respond to several requests for clarification. Assistant Attorney General Jeff Strelzin, who is now handling documents for the case, said he was not sure he could provide specifics, but would look into the matter. No further information was available at press time.

Sgt. Smith and Atwood both drove the area searching for Maura. Atwood drove in a loop from Mountain Lakes, a nearby recreational and residential area, to the Swiftwater Stage Stop General Store.

"I took a ride around the back roads. I was gone about 15 minutes. Then I took a ride to French Pond," Atwood told the Caledonian Record.

Sgt. Smith was believed to have driven westbound on Route 112, according to Fred Murray, who said that no search was done eastbound on Route 112.

At 8:02 p.m. EMS had cleared the scene and at 8:49 p.m. the fire crew had also left. Maura's car was towed ten miles to Lavoie's Auto Care Center on Route 10 in Haverhill. At 9:27 p.m. Sgt. Smith was dispatched to another call on Lime Kiln Road in North Haverhill -- a suicidal teenager in danger of electrocuting himself.

The night wore on but temperatures did not dip below 25 degrees.

At noon the next day, Tuesday, Feb. 10, police issued a "BOL" (Be on the Lookout) for Maura Murray. She was described as wearing a dark coat, with black hair hanging past her shoulders, standing five feet, three inches tall, and weighing 120 pounds. A subsequent report from Haverhill Police stated that Maura was last seen wearing jeans and corrected her height to be about five feet, seven inches tall, with brown shoulder length hair and blue eyes. Maura's cell phone was also missing from the scene and police reported she left with a black backpack.

At 3:20 p.m. on Tuesday, Fred Murray got a voicemail on his home phone telling him his car had been abandoned in Woodsville, New Hampshire. Fred was at a contract job in another state and did not receive that message until much later. At 5 p.m. Fred received a cell phone call from his daughter Kathleen; Maura's car had been abandoned and she was missing, Kathleen told her father.

Shortly after talking to Kathleen, Fred Murray called the Haverhill Police and insisted they immediately start searching for his daughter. Police told Fred that New Hampshire Fish and Game Service could start a search Wednesday if Maura was not yet found.

On Tuesday, February 10 at 5:17 p.m. Maura was first referred to as "missing" by the Haverhill Police.

Twelve hours later the formal search for Maura Murray began.

Part III: The Search

The Wells River Motel is a modest, cozy refuge that sits on the Vermont side of the Connecticut River just across from New Hampshire. The motel offers 11 rooms, each with its own theme, including a teddy bear room outfitted with teddy bears on the beds.

As of Wednesday, Feb. 11, 2004, the Wells River Motel became the unofficial headquarters in the search for Maura Murray. Just 36 hours earlier Maura's car had been found abandoned along Route 112, eight miles away in neighboring Woodsville, N.H.

Maura's father, Fred Murray, was the first to arrive. Fred is an intense, energetic man in his 60s with a wiry frame, graying hair and a passion for the outdoors. He knows the White Mountains intimately and often hiked and camped in the area with Maura, the youngest of his three daughters.

Fred had visited Maura the prior weekend at school in Amherst, Mass. Following a two-day visit and some car shopping with Maura, Fred departed on Sunday to Bridgeport, Connecticut for a contract job at a local hospital where he worked as a medical technician. This was the last time Fred ever saw his daughter.

It was around 5 p.m. on Tuesday that Fred first heard of Maura's disappearance. After several frantic phone calls to Haverhill police, he hit the road in the wee hours of Wednesday morning and arrived at the Haverhill, N.H., police station just before dawn.

As police arranged a formal search party, Fred headed to Wild Ammonoosuc Road (Rt. 112), a rural, twisting route that hugs the Wild Ammonoosuc River and later turns into the Kancamagus Highway. Maura's Saturn had been found just past a sharp elbow in a heavily-wooded section of the road.

Fred combed the snow-covered area lining the street; no snow had fallen since Maura disappeared and that made the search for footprints less difficult. Her car had already been towed away but Fred scoured the scene looking for any clues his daughter may have left behind. There was no sign of Maura.

"You find footsteps; you're following them, but you're afraid to look down because it might be your daughter," Fred later recalled.

That same Wednesday morning 1,800 miles away, Maura's boyfriend, Army 2nd Lt. Billy Rausch, headed to the Dallas Fort-Worth Airport to catch a flight north. Once he heard that Maura was missing Billy requested a leave of absence from his unit at Fort Sill in Lawton, Oklahoma, to join the search in New Hampshire.

You find footsteps; you're following them, but you're afraid to look down because it might be your daughter," Fred later recalled.

Before walking through airport security Billy shut off his cell phone. Shortly after, a mysterious call came in that would later be a source of dispute.

Family members began to arrive in Woodsville, including Maura's sister Kathleen and her brothers Freddy and Kurtis. Maura's sister Julie was stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina and flew up a few days later.

The group had few clues to go on. Maura's siblings drove Eastbound on Route 112, to North Woodstock and Lincoln, then across the Kancamagus Highway to Bartlett and Conway -- tourist towns the family knew well from years of summer vacations. They checked motels and asked if anyone had seen Maura; no one had. They handed out flyers and posted them at bus stops, gas stations and police stations.

Meanwhile on Wild Ammonoosuc Road, members of New Hampshire Fish and Game arrived on the scene in a helicopter while Haverhill Police, New Hampshire State Police and a K-9 team gathered on the ground. This was the first time the area had been searched since Monday evening.

A search dog sniffed the area trying to track Maura's scent while a Fish and Game pilot flew just above the treetops, scanning the forest for footprints; snow had accumulated to about two and a half feet in depth by the first week in February. No exact times were reported, though the search must have occurred before the sun set at 5:12 p.m. that day.

Back in Hanson, Mass., at the family's white split-level home, Laurie Murray was living "a mother's worst nightmare." She had first learned of Maura's disappearance Tuesday afternoon when Haverhill, N.H. police called the house looking for the owner of an abandoned Saturn. A fractured ankle kept Laurie from joining her family in New Hampshire. Instead, she remained in the home where she raised Maura and her four siblings, sat by the phone and waited helplessly for any news of her daughter.

There was little good news to report that day. Fred Murray and the rest of the family came up empty in their search along the Kancamagus Highway. The New Hampshire Fish and Game's helicopter search turned up only deer and moose tracks.

"It's like looking for a needle in a haystack," said Kathleen.

Though it clearly pained him to talk about Maura's disappearance, Fred welcomed the growing media attention the case generated, believing it to be a key in bringing his daughter home. Wednesday's efforts did produce one significant lead. The lone search dog on the scene was given a black leather glove from Maura's car to sniff. Though the dog did not get any hits in the adjacent wooded area or from nearby homes, the dog did track Maura's scent near the intersection of Bradley Hill Road 100 yards eastbound from where her car was found. There are several homes in that area of the road, which is just yards from the Bath town line. On the even side of Wild Ammonoosuc Road is the home of Arthur "Butch" Atwood, the bus driver who said he stopped and offered Maura help that Monday evening. Across the street at 1 Wild Ammonoosuc Road is the home of Rick Forcier, a 45-year-old local contractor, who was living in a trailer on his property while his home was being built. Also within view is the property of Virginia and John Marrotte who live adjacent to Rick Forcier.

The abrupt loss of Maura's scent in the middle of the road prompted officials to speculate that Maura got into a passing vehicle. Whether she did so voluntarily or was forced remains open to question.

As the day's search drew to a close, police spoke with the Murray and Rausch families.

Billy Rausch had arrived in Woodsville earlier Wednesday and met up with his parents, Bill and Sharon, who travelled from their home in Marengo, Ohio.

Around 5 p.m. Wednesday the Rausch family arrived at the Haverhill Police Department, located on Route 10, about nine miles from the scene of Maura's accident. "Billy was extensively interrogated in private, and then Bill and I were questioned in the room with Billy," Sharon Rausch later recounted.

Fred Murray was asked if his daughter had recently experienced any traumatic events. He could only think back to Amherst when Maura banged up his new car. But in Fred's words, "It wasn't a big deal."

At a meeting that night, Haverhill Police speculated that Maura was suicidal or had planned to run away. There was no evidence of foul play or that Maura had wandered into the woods, Haverhill Police Chief Jeff Williams said. He also explained that Maura, at age of 21, was within her legal rights to not want to be found.

Sharon Rausch did not share that opinion. "I cannot believe," she said, "that there would be any problem in her life that would cause her to run away from three close groups of people in her life; her family, Billy and his family and the very close knit group of Hanson high school girl friends."

Exhausted and defeated, the search party returned to the Wells River Motel for the night.

By the next day, Thursday, Feb. 12, police had issued a press release stating Maura may be enroute to the Kancamagus Highway area and was "listed as endangered and possibly suicidal."

The press release also stated that "witnesses at the scene reported seeing a lone female with no apparent injuries who appeared impaired due to alcohol consumption." It still remains unclear who the witnesses were that said Maura appeared to be intoxicated. The release was not dated, but a time stamp shows it was faxed to the Hanson, Mass. police department at 3:05 p.m. Thursday.

On the UMass Amherst campus, another search was underway at Maura's dorm room. Investigators found her belongings packed in boxes and a search of her computer showed she had downloaded directions to Burlington, Vermont.

UMass police and college counselors met later that week with students from Maura's nursing class. The dean of the nursing school, Eileen Breslin, sent out an email to the entire nursing college alerting them of Maura's disappearance. Details about Maura's last few days on campus were starting to emerge, including the fact that Maura had reported a death in the family when there was no death.

It was later reported that Maura's credit cards, ATM card and cell phone had not been used since Monday. The location of Maura's cell phone could not be traced using GPS technology, possibly due to poor cell phone coverage or a dead battery.

In New Hampshire, the search efforts continued on Thursday. Fred and other family members posted flyers and canvassed the area. "We went to every spot we thought she might go to -- hotels and motels -- and put up flyers," Billy Rausch said later.

"Anything that looked suspicious we'd try to check it out," said Kathleen.

The first newspaper report about Maura's disappearance hit the stands that day, a 200-word news brief from the Manchester Union Leader. Maura was described as "possibly suicidal" by Chief Williams. Other news outlets quickly latched onto the story, including New Hampshire and Boston television stations which dispatched reporters to Woodsville. Police informed the media that no new leads had surfaced.

"We did an intense search of the crash scene area for evidence that she may have walked into the woods, but nothing like that was uncovered," Chief Williams told a New Hampshire TV station.

After wrapping up their own search that day, Fred and Billy met with reporters in an outdoor press conference in Bethlehem, N.H. on Thursday night. "This is very unusual," Fred explained to reporters. "It's not like her to just take off."

Fred pleaded for Maura to come home. "I don't know what the matter is, or the trouble you think you might be in, but it isn't anything we can't solve," he said through the media. "It's me - you can tell me. We'll work it out until we solve it."

Haverhill police were suspending their search efforts until new leads developed, Billy Rausch told reporters that evening.

Family members planned to continue their search into Vermont on Friday, reasoning that Maura could have been headed to Burlington or Stowe. But when Fred walked into Vermont police stations on Friday, he was dismayed to learn that local law enforcement officers knew nothing about Maura's disappearance.

"I could hit a three iron over the river into Vermont where there was no investigation," he said.

The frustration level was growing for family members. Fred was already distraught having learned that on Monday night, when Maura's car was found, the Haverhill Police had not called ahead to alert other police stations along Route 112.

"They should have put money and manpower where it counted -- February 9th and 10th," Fred said in a later interview.

New Hampshire State Police and Haverhill police officials no longer comment on Maura's case, referring all inquiries to the state Attorney General's office. In earlier reports they defended their actions on the grounds that there was no evidence of foul play.

Lt. John Scarinza, who is commander of State Police Troop F, which covers Grafton and Coos County, said at the time that he appreciated the family's frustration in not knowing what happened. "But it is also true that she was apparently leaving Mass. without telling her family or friends or her boyfriend," he told the Associated Press. He also speculated with reporters that Maura may have fled the scene to avoid arrest because she was intoxicated.

A manpower shortage could have hindered the abilities of the Haverhill Police. Due to sick time, training and vacancies the seven-man department was down to as few as three full-time officers and a chief at the time of Maura's accident, town records show.

Short of any new leads, official search efforts were curtailed as the days wore on.

Even so, more family and friends headed north to conduct their own investigations. Strangers who didn't know Maura also offered to help. They knocked on doors, made telephone calls and spoke with residents, including those who had called 911.

When Julie Murray finally got her leave from the U.S. Army and arrived in Woodsville the first thing she did was head to the scene of the accident.

"I wanted to see it as Maura had seen it -- after dark. I got out of the truck and walked up and down the road, looking at different angles and perspectives. There was a constant thought in my mind as I did this -- if I was Maura what would I have been thinking," Julie said in a recent email.

"It was very cold, dark and quiet; I felt stunned. I will never forget that eerie feeling," she wrote.

Fred was unrelenting in his pursuit. He chased down every new rumor, turned over debris, looked through rivers and scoured every remote trail for any sign of Maura.

After spending hours searching in the woods "down long dirt roads where you wouldn't hear a thing," Fred would emerge, as he said, "muddy, gooey" and covered in "200 ticks...mosquitoes and black flies."

It was 10 days after Maura went missing when Fred realized that some residents living within eyeshot of the accident scene had not yet been interviewed. He voiced his displeasure with police.

Authorities then launched a second search, on Thursday, Feb. 19. State police, members of New Hampshire's Fish and Game conservation team, three search dogs and a helicopter crew searched a two-mile radius in the Route 112 Woodsville area.

"We wanted to make sure we had done everything twice," Lt. Scarinza told the Caledonian Record. At a press conference held at the end of the day, Lt. Todd Bogardus of Fish and Game said the

search came up empty. "Ground crews checked trails and roadways...there are no conclusive clues to continue," Bogardus told the Union Leader.

Lt. Scarinza concurred, saying, "We have a very good feeling we have done everything we can do at the crash site."

In a phone interview following the second search, State Police Sgt. Tom York, now retired, said that while there was no longer an active ground search underway, investigators were still "charging forward," looking into background information and other leads. "We're concerned about where she is."

Sgt. York said that while police found no evidence of foul play to suggest a criminal investigation, he stressed that the term was just a "label" and that police would be treating the case much as they would a criminal investigation.

The second search had done little to assuage Fred's frustration. He feared the status of "missing person" would be a roadblock in pursuing an investigation, and told the media, "We should think of it in terms of a criminal investigation. ... Let's grab the bull by the horns and call it foul play."

As the second search came to a fruitless end, friends and family members began to return to their lives.

Billy had to get back to Fort Sill in Oklahoma, and about two weeks later, on March 2, Maura's siblings checked out of the Wells River Motel, fighting "utter exhaustion and desperation," a friend recalled.

Maura's belongings were returned to the family; Kathleen brought them to her house in Hanover. The car itself was released from police custody but remained at Lavoie's Garage in North Haverhill.

Bleary-eyed, but resolute Fred also checked out of the Wells River Motel after three solid weeks searching for Maura.

He was not giving up though; Fred would become a regular at the motel, returning nearly every weekend over the course of the next year.

Fred Murray was as determined as a man could be. The immediate search for Maura was over. His battle to find his daughter was just beginning.

Haverhill, N.H. Police Chief Jeff Williams displays Maura's missing person poster. Photo Courtesy Littleton Courier.



Though it clearly pained him to talk about Maura's disappearance, Fred welcomed the growing media attention the case generated, believing it to be a key in bringing his daughter home.



Part IV: The Aftermath

A song of gentle vocals played in the background as Fred Murray pulled down a faded blue bow from a tree on Wild Ammonoosuc Road in Woodsville, N.H.

It was February 9, 2005 just a few feet from where Maura's black Saturn was found pressed against a snow bank one year before. Joining him were family, friends, a local minister and a herd of media.

He stapled a bright bow and a fresh picture of Maura onto the tree. "I hope this is the last time I have to do this," Fred told reporters.

One year after his daughter's disappearance Fred Murray visited the scene of her accident and put up a new ribbon.

By now Fred Murray knew the area intimately. Ever since his daughter went missing, he had spent almost every weekend in the White Mountains, driving up from Bridgeport, Conn., to search for any clue to Maura's disappearance.

Earlier that same Wednesday morning, Fred tipped off the media that he was headed to the N.H. State House in Concord in hopes of meeting newly-elected Governor John Lynch. With media at his heels, Fred did meet with Lynch for about 10 minutes.

This was his latest plea for FBI help in the case. Since Maura was still considered a missing person, the FBI could only join the investigation if invited by New Hampshire State Police.

Fred also asked for the governor's help in releasing police records pertaining to the investigation. He had requested documents from police such as phone logs, and accident reports. The governor assured Fred he would look into the situation.

After the meeting, Fred told reporters he hoped Gov. Lynch would intervene on his behalf, but in an interview two years later he described the meeting as no more than "window dressing" -- an effort to show the public that the governor was a "good guy."

This was Fred's second appeal to a New Hampshire governor. In May of 2004, three months after Maura disappeared, Fred had petitioned then Gov. Craig Benson for help, based in part on a new lead that developed.

A local contractor named Rick Forcier had reported seeing Maura on the night of her accident around 8 about 4 to 5 miles from the scene of her abandoned car. Forcier lived on Wild Ammonoosuc Road about 100 yards from where Maura's car was found.

Forcier was returning home from a contract job in Franconia about 17 miles away when he observed a young woman who fit Maura's description running eastbound on Route 112.

When Forcier was first questioned by police, ten days after Maura disappeared, he did not mention seeing the girl running because he was confused about the dates and mistakenly thought it had been two nights after Maura's accident.

This A-frame home on Valley Road in Woodsville was the site of a search by private investigators in October, 2006. Cadaver dogs trained to track the fluids of decomposing bodies picked up scents in the house, according to investigators. Carpet samples from the homes were reportedly sent out for testing. No results have been released. The house is 3/4 of a mile from the scene of Maura's accident.

Nearly three months later, after hearing numerous news reports about the search for Maura, Forcier checked his work records and realized it was the same night as Maura's disappearance. Forcier told his story to Fred Murray, who relayed the information to police.

On April 29, Forcier was interviewed by State Police Lt. John Scarinza who checked out Forcier's time records at his job in Franconia and confirmed that his story was credible.

As a result of this new information, a search was conducted on May 8. Canine teams with six dogs and 15 Fish and Game officers searched the area where Forcier may have seen Maura running. No new leads were reported.

That same day Fred held a press conference at the Woodsville American Legion Hall with the parents of Brianna Maitland, a 17 year-old girl who was last seen after leaving her waitress job in

Montgomery, Vermont, about six weeks after Maura went missing. Montgomery is located about 90 miles north of Woodsville. Maitland's car was found abandoned about a mile from where she worked. At the same press conference were the parents of Aime Riley who was last seen leaving a bar in Manchester, N.H. in August of 2003. Her body was found in April of 2004 in a pond in Manchester, N.H. about 120 miles south of Woodsville.

The press conference was another attempt by Fred to push for FBI help. He and the other families believed the three cases could be connected and since the Maitland and Murray cases crossed state lines, the FBI should be involved, they reasoned.

"Why wouldn't [state police] want the best help in the world?" Fred asked in a later interview. The FBI had been involved on a limited basis shortly after Maura disappeared, but its role was restricted to interviewing Maura's family and friends in Massachusetts. The Bureau would later take a more aggressive role in the Maitland disappearance but it has not been publicly involved in Maura's case. Exactly one month later, on June 8, 2005, Vermont and New Hampshire State Police issued a joint press release stating there was no connection between the Maura Murray and Brianna Maitland cases. "Investigators believe that Maura was headed for an unknown destination and may have accepted a ride in order to continue to that location," said Lt. Scarinza in the release, adding there were "no signs of any struggle, or any other evidence, which would indicate that a crime had been committed."

Two weeks later, a N.H. State Police Trooper turned up on the doorstep of Maura's sister Kathleen's home in Hanover, Mass. The trooper requested that all items found in Maura's car be returned. Maura's belongings had been given to the Murray family within two weeks of the accident.

Police also confiscated the hard drive of Maura's computer, which had been in her dorm room and took custody of Maura's car, which had been sitting unlocked at a North Haverhill, N.H. garage since the accident. Police explained that a major crimes unit of the State Police was stepping into the case and wanted to conduct forensic tests of Maura's car and personal belongings.

The fact that the major crimes unit was just now getting involved in the case rankled Fred Murray, who said he was repeatedly assured that Maura's disappearance was being handled in the same manner as a criminal case despite the missing person label.

To this day, the Murray family is still in the dark as to why Maura's belongings were seized by police that day.

Another ground search was initiated on July 13. More than 100 searchers, including state police troopers and conservation officers, spread out across a one-mile radius of where Maura's car was found. No reason was given for why this search was conducted except to say police were looking for anything Maura may have left behind, such as the black backpack she was believed to have been carrying when she left the scene.

Meanwhile Fred Murray was conducting his own search. Nearly every weekend he drove to Woodsville to investigate any tip that came his way. Whether following up on supposed

sightings of his daughter or checking out eccentric local characters, Fred was first on the scene. "Any rumor, we'll look at," he said. "They are plenty of good suspects ... this is the worst place in the world to have an accident."

Fred was not the only one carefully watching the local crime scene for a possible link.

"Every time some strange crime happens here people start saying 'maybe it's related to the Maura Murray case,'" said Bryan Flagg, a publisher and editor of the local newspaper, North Country News.

To this day, Fred traipses through remote paths of the New Hampshire forest, peers into strangers' vehicles, rummages in dumpsters and basements and even knocks on the doors of convicted felons. He is fearless in his search.

Fred's persistence resulted in a formal letter of complaint from Haverhill, N.H. Chief of Police Jeff Williams in April of 2004. Williams warned Fred that complaints of trespassing and parking on private property had been filed by area property owners and that repeat offenders would be arrested. Police would not say how many complaints were filed or by whom, though one resident and witness to the accident, Faith Westman, later admitted to submitting an official complaint; many other Woodsville residents have said searches had not been a problem and were sympathetic to Fred's situation.

Fred chased down rumor after rumor. Most led nowhere, but every now and then something turned up that merited further pursuit.

In late 2004, a man came forward to Fred with a stained, rusty jackknife. The stains were a reddish-brown color, Fred said. The man told Fred he thought his brother may have been connected to Maura's disappearance. At the time of Maura's accident the brother was living less than a mile away, the man related. He described his brother as having a record of violence and said that his brother's live-in girlfriend began acting strange around the time of Maura's disappearance.

Fred tried to turn the knife over to police but did not get beyond the plate glass window at state police headquarters, "I have what could be evidence in a capital crime," he recalled saying to the dispatcher, but the dispatcher said no one was available at headquarters to accept such evidence. Fred was told to come back during regular work hours. Fred then mailed the knife to state police along with all the information he received on the suspect. A few days later Fred received a proof of receipt that his package had reached the police but was never contacted by police regarding the knife or the possible suspect.

The man who came forward with the rusted jackknife died earlier this year. Efforts to reach his brother were unsuccessful.

The brother's identity and the identity of the man who approached Fred are not being disclosed because there is no evidence he is considered a suspect in Maura's disappearance. Police refused comment when asked about the knife.

In March of 2005, Fred, always relentless, made another push for FBI intervention and the release of police records on his daughter's investigation. He met with Attorney General Kelly Ayotte, Senior Asst. Atty. Gen. Jeff Strelzin, State Police Sgt. Robert Bruno, who is now retired, and State Police Lt. John Scarinza. In this meeting Fred again passed along the information regarding the knife. When Fred still didn't hear back from police after that meeting, he later said, "I knew I was doomed."

Fred's frustration, coupled with failed attempts to access police records for the case, spurred him to file a lawsuit against various law enforcement agencies including the State Police in late 2005 (see sidebar).

Around this same time, about ten retired police officers and detectives volunteered to give fresh eyes to Maura's case. This team, called the New Hampshire League of Investigators, was not privy to confidential police records but analyzed the facts available to them, re-interviewed witnesses and family and generally attempted to provide a support network for the family, which was growing angrier and less trusting of police.

"It is our job to be sort of a buffer between police and the family, to help the family understand what the police are doing behind the scenes," explained John Healy, a former N.H. State Police officer who is one of the team's leaders.

Healy's team followed up with various other sources and after a year of reviewing available materials, the volunteer investigators organized a two-day search in the last week of October in 2006. Canine teams were dispersed to six different publicly owned areas within five miles of where Maura's car was found.

Healy would not provide specifics as to why certain areas were searched explaining only that 95 percent of homicide victims are found within a five-mile radius of where they were last seen. It was the goal of investigators to thoroughly cover this area, he said.

Gravel pits and sand pits were searched, as these areas are ideal spots to dump a body. The area around French Pond Road was also carefully examined because of its close proximity. French Pond Road was the route Butch Atwood had driven in his own search for Maura shortly after she disappeared from the scene.

Fred was also present for the search and aggressively pushed investigators to search an A-frame house on Valley Road near the scene of the accident. He suspected it might be somehow connected.

The property was on the real estate market, so Fred sought out real estate agent Stan Davis and asked permission to search the house. Davis confirmed that he gave Fred his consent and provided him with a key to the house.

The fight for the house search was worth the effort.

On the first day, a cadaver dog searched the house and had hits on the second level; the next day four more cadaver dogs were put to work in the house and went "bonkers," Fred said. The

strongest hits by the dogs were in a downstairs closet. Cadaver dogs are skilled in sniffing for decomposing bodies but are not able to distinguish the identities of bodies.

Though a dead body could have been stored in this closet, the dogs were not capable of identifying if the body was Maura.

The investigators took a few trash bags filled with items from the house and a piece of carpet from the closet. According to Fred, the carpet was to be divided into two pieces: a portion of the carpet was to be given to state police, who were not present for the search, and the other portion was to be held by the group of volunteer investigators. A medical laboratory examination was to determine if stains on the carpet were blood, and if available DNA matched Maura's. Seven months later, laboratory test results have not been made available from either group.

There is confusion over who has custody of the carpet. Private Investigator Healy was ill the weekend of the search, but said that police were not at all interested in the evidence and would not take the carpet into their possession. Healy said the carpet is in the custody of an investigator who no longer "has business relations" with the group.

Private Investigator Don Nason, who is the current president of the volunteer organization and was present at the search of the A-frame house, said all evidence was turned in to State Police. "We don't have the proper storage facility to hold evidence," he said.

Nason assured "everything possible was being done" to obtain a successful outcome in Maura's case and was enthusiastic about police efforts, "I have every faith in their work."

Healy believes the homicide unit has put more hours into Maura's case than any other in recent history. Jeff Strelzin, chief of the Homicide Unit and senior assistant attorney general, confirmed that State Police have put "hundreds of hours" into the investigation.

In a court hearing Strelzin argued that having records available to the public would hamper the prosecution if criminal charges were to be pressed in Maura's case. He predicted a 75 percent likelihood of prosecution.

"We do have information that we are pursuing that this may involve a crime," said Nancy Smith, senior assistant attorney general, while testifying in court.

As an investigator, Nason is also sensitive to the police investigation for fear of "compromising" the case. Nason said most information volunteer investigators gather is only released to State Police and the Attorney General's Office; "It doesn't even go to Fred."

Fred has given up hope on the effectiveness of the police, believing "shoddy work" is likely the reason they won't release records. "They didn't do what they were supposed to do, and they've been covering up ever since." He is also disillusioned with the league of private investigators.

Fred continues with his own search.

"Anything I want done, I do it myself," he said.

It's now a warm weekend in June. Nearly three-and-a half years have gone by. Maura's story still has no ending.

Fred Murray is back in New Hampshire. He's checked in to the Well Rivers Motel, the same motel he stayed in the first day he looked for Maura.

Fred sits in an easy chair in the corner of the modest room, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, rubbing his hands together and mostly looking down as he recalls many months of court hearings, suspects and searches.

Suddenly, Fred jumps up. He stands squarely in the middle of the room with his hands on his hips. He is talking about Maura. He remembers a hike they took not long before she went missing. These are some of his most cherished memories. Maura tailed him along the steep pitches of Bond Cliff, a three peaked mountain trail in New Hampshire's White Mountains, Fred explains. The two climbed 23 strenuous miles of ascents and descents. When they finally reached the last peak, Maura pulled a Long Trail beer out of her backpack and handed it to her father. It was a celebration of their accomplishment together.

Fred finishes his story and the motel room is silent. He walks to a window overlooking a parking lot, his hands still on his hips.

The anguished father, who does not go more than minutes after waking each day before thinking about his missing daughter, stares out the window.

"Jesus," he sighs.

The Epilogue

"Do a story about the disappearance of Maura Murray," my editor told me, "and make it the most in-depth piece ever done on the case." At first it was a daunting task, but later a privilege.

I poured over old news articles, checked websites and jotted down questions. Then I called Fred Murray, Maura's father. My editor thought this would be a good start. He was wrong. Fred didn't return my call, or the next one, or the next one.

Plan B was more effective. I got in touch with Helena Murray, a relative who keeps Maura's case alive through a website. She explained that media attention so close to home can be difficult for Fred. "It means people will come up to him more frequently and want to talk about it on a day-to-day basis," she wrote in our first email correspondence.

With my editor's nudging, I persisted. I reached out to anyone who would talk to me. Investigators working on the case answered my most basic questions. Residents living in the area gave me new insight. Reporters reflected on when they first covered the story, and Maura's friends gave me a sense of who the pretty, brown-haired girl in the picture was.

On three occasions I visited the scene of the accident in Woodsville, New Hampshire. The last trip, when I retraced Maura's drive, is still vivid in my mind. It was past dusk when I crossed over the N.H. border. The night was foggy and I hugged the steering wheel tightly trying to get a better

view of the road in front of me. I thought back to that cold February night when Maura risked the chance of snow while driving her worn out Saturn. At a snail's pace, I navigated onto the exit for Haverhill and wondered aloud, "What were you thinking?"

I found the Woodsville locals to be especially friendly, but whenever the topic turned to Maura, people usually clammed right up. A few spoke quite freely but only off the record.

After years of being hounded not only by media, but by investigators and family, some key witnesses such as Faith and Tim Westman, Rick Forcier and Butch Atwood are reluctant to speak further about the case.

I felt especially fortunate to score a conversation with Atwood, the bus driver, who was the last known person to speak to Maura. Atwood moved to Florida not long after her accident and has avoided the media ever since. He even refused to talk with a private investigator who traveled to Florida and showed up on his doorstep.

Unfortunately in a case with so little available information, it does not take much for some to cast a suspicious eye. Atwood's story and motives have been questioned in some online forums and clearly he has grown bitter from the entire ordeal.

"People think I had something to do with her disappearance," he said during our phone interview, "I can hear it in your voice; you think I did too."

Atwood explained that as a witness, the case had grown tiresome. "You think you're doing a good thing for someone, but I've learned, next time not to stop, I'm not stopping," he said.

Getting any information from police was even more difficult. I was continually referred to different departments of law enforcement for information requests and ultimately the Attorney General's Office stepped in to handle my questions. Unfortunately, the Attorney General's Office was no better able to answer my questions. Senior Asst. Atty. Gen. Jeff Strelzin agreed to produce certain documents pertaining to the case, but there was always a delay and no records have reached our office to date. Despite this we were able to obtain some key documents from other sources.

Fred must have heard about my trips up north - my meetings with Helena Murray and Maura's mom and sister - because four months after I began digging up information on Maura's case, Fred called. He wasted no time and got straight to the point. He was heading up to New Hampshire and I was welcome to join him.

I met Fred at the Wells River Motel in the town of Wells River, Vermont, just over the New Hampshire border. The Wells River Motel is the same motel Fred stayed at during the first search for Maura. Where do you begin when interviewing someone who spends much of his free time looking for his daughter's killer? I didn't need to know where to begin. Fred dove right in; he explained what he was doing that weekend in New Hampshire, what he had done his last trip and what the future would bring. He talked about the ongoing court case and liberally shared his criticism and mistrust of N.H. law enforcement.

One line Fred repeated throughout the day was, "it doesn't matter." If you ask what he did for a living, or why Maura packed her things, or didn't tell anyone where she was headed, he'll just answer, "It doesn't matter." "We'll never know why she came up here," Fred said.

All that matters to Fred is "what happened on Wild Ammonoosuc Road."

So what really happened to Maura? I'm as puzzled as most of you. I don't think it's much of a leap to dismiss the suicide theory so favored by police in the immediate aftermath of the accident.

Why did Maura bring her cell phone charger, birth control, insurance forms or school textbooks? Why would she have called a condo resort in Bartlett, New Hampshire just before leaving (A phone call that was not investigated by police for nearly a year). Maura was not driving aimlessly. She had some sort of a plan, a destination.

No doubt something was going on in Maura's life. Maybe she was unhappy or confused. Perhaps she was pregnant or preparing to drop out of school. There were certainly some issues with her relationship with her boyfriend, perhaps more than have been reported. Friends have described Maura as a private person and it is obvious she was a high achiever. Maybe she just wanted to get away as some of her friends suggest.

It is strange that Maura did not tell even her boyfriend Billy where she was headed. But then again Maura did attempt to reach Billy by phone and email on the Monday she disappeared.

It's also strange that Maura bought so much alcohol before her trip: bottles of vodka, Kahlua and Bailey's Irish Cream - none of which were found in her car. Where did the bottles go? They could have been stolen. Maura could have made a stop before reaching the snow bank in Woodsville or she could have brought these bottles with her to wherever she was headed. Was Maura meeting someone? Was she simply treating herself to a mudslide - a beverage made of vodka, coffee liqueur and Irish cream?

Some believe Maura was never at the scene of the Woodsville accident. Investigators who attempted to reconstruct the accident say the damage to Maura's car was not caused by the snow bank on Wild Ammonoosuc Road, where her car was found.

According to Atwood, who apparently spoke with Maura that evening, Maura had her hair down. Interestingly, Atwood later told a family member that Maura did not look like the pictures running in newspapers. Atwood clarified in our interview that the woman he spoke with did look like the pictures on the Missing Person signs, though it is worth noting that he and Maura remained 15 to 20 feet apart throughout their entire conversation and their encounter was past dusk.

Fred said there was an empty beer bottle found in Maura's car. I was told by others that the bottle was in the back seat and the rear driver's side window was open a crack. Perhaps someone was in the back seat of Maura's car at some point?

Nearly everyone I have interviewed over the past months suspects foul play. Fred believes Maura may have been drinking while driving as a soda bottle with an alcoholic smell was found by

Maura's car along with a box of wine found inside the car. Maura may have feared a confrontation with police and tried to flee the scene by taking a ride from a passing motorist.

One detail I have not been able to wrap my mind around is the rag Officer Cecil Smith found stuffed in the Saturn's tail pipe. Even stranger, is that the rag was from Maura's trunk. Some people assume the rag indicates a suicide attempt while Fred believes Maura was tending to her rickety car. Maybe there is another explanation. Maura could have broken down earlier and received the help of a stranger. She may have opened her trunk to access her emergency kit and the stranger snuck the rag from her trunk and stuck it in her tailpipe without her realizing.

Considering search dogs lost Maura's scent in the center of Wild Ammonoosuc Road, it is quite possible she got into a passing car. Why would Maura get into a stranger's car? Maybe she knew the person driving by, maybe the person appeared harmless, trustworthy even. Perhaps Maura was unconscious or forced into a passing vehicle. Odds may be slim that a passerby happens to be a murderer but Maura could have been followed from a rest area or gas station. Her gas tank was nearly full.

Many residents in the Woodsville area own police scanners leaving some to theorize that Maura's accident, or the mysterious 7 p.m. accident, caught the attention of someone with nefarious intentions.

Theories abound about possible suspects living in the woods near the accident scene. This is not the forum to toss out names of potential suspects without specific evidence. If you sit in a room with Fred Murray you will easily walk away with a list of five or six suspects - basically the underbelly of Haverhill society.

While covering this story I found many sources mistrustful of police and hopeful that media involvement would shed light on the truth, while others were protective of the police investigation, believing I could interfere with future prosecution. I was also cautioned to not aggravate Fred's relationship with police, though this warning never came from Fred.

In the beginning I was not sure why I was writing this story. After unveiling new information, encountering the bureaucracies of N.H. law enforcement and witnessing a father's pain and determination, particularly his ongoing court battle, it was clear that Maura's story is very much alive and wanting to be told.