

# Continuing to bring Jacob's Hope: Co-authors Wetterling and Baker visit Barrett

By Karrie Carlson, Daily Journal Media, June 26, 2024

Patty Wetterling and Joy Baker spoke to an audience in Barrett on June 24, sharing the book they co-wrote about the abduction of Patty's son, Jacob. This important event was brought to the community by Steve and Jacky Hensley, managers of the Knotty Pine in Elbow Lake.

In October 1989, 11 year old Jacob Wetterling was abducted at gunpoint while riding his bike. He was a half mile from his home in St. Joseph, with his younger brother, Trevor, and his best friend, Aaron Larson. Patty got a frantic phone call from a neighbor saying that Trevor and Larson had run back to the Wetterling home, but Jacob disappeared with the masked man who had appeared from out of the ditch. Patty and her husband, Jerry, who had been out for the evening, raced home.

Patty described the amount of support the family received during those first moments and beyond. "The response to the community, and all of you, everybody in Minnesota, just stood up and said 'no!' It was the most united the state has ever been, I think. It was collectively a voice for children." Because of the large media coverage, the story was able to move across the country quickly. That made the case complicated for police as they sifted through the 40,000 leads just in the first year searching for Jacob.

In order to get through the first holiday season without Jacob being safe at home, Patty began writing letters to him, something she continued to do. "I kept writing them over the years. When his cousins got married, Grandpa and Grandma both passed away, just keeping him engaged, and it was also a way of journaling with keeping Jacob in our lives," Patty said.

Journalist Joy Baker had started a blog called "Joy the Curious" while taking a hiatus from full time employment. Among the first blog posts she wrote was a story about Jacob. She didn't know the Wetterling family at the time, but she began digging into the case. She did research by reading articles, spending time at the library and getting case information.

Baker went on to say that over the next few years of writing about Jacob, it wasn't until she was working at a hospital that the two women met. Patty was a keynote speaker at an event Baker attended.

The two women would cross paths over the years and Baker continued to write and look into the case of Jacob's disappearance. She talked to former persons of interest, retired law enforcement, neighbors and she began asking questions that no one else had asked before. Patty said, "Jerry and I both thought that maybe this was different. Maybe it's time we paid attention to what she (Baker) had to say."

Through her research, Baker had come across the case of another boy, Jared Scheierl, from a town near St. Joseph. He had been taken and victimized by a man just nine months prior to Jacob's abduction.

Now a grown man, Scheierl met and spoke with Baker. She found an additional article that had been written decades earlier, concerning similar incidents of boys being victimized. All were in close proximity, time and with similar details as Jacob's case. She shared this with the Stearns County Sheriff's Office and the Wetterlings, who had never heard of these other stories before.

With Baker's work and other agencies joining the efforts, around the 25 year mark in the search for Jacob, the case got new energy. The FBI Child Abduction Response Deployment (CARD) agency offered its resources the Sheriff accepted.

The CARD team looked at the information Baker had gathered and the map where she had marked all of the assaults. Patty recalled that they said, "If you've got a cluster, they're related."

Scheierl had contacted the survivors from the related cases and they all came together to offer their help. Baker said, "I can't say enough nice things about that group of young men who came forward, because they really are the heroes in this story."

As Baker continued blogging, going from 100 to 40,000 views a day, momentum in the search for Jacob was growing again in the search for answers. At that point, Patty asked Baker to help her write a book to share her story. They were beginning to organize and get started when Baker said she saw a headline in a newspaper announcing authorities had a new person of interest in Jacob's abduction.

The CARD agency was able to positively identify the person of interest as being the man who assaulted Scheierl, but the statute of limitations prevented the man from being charged with that offense. The man was held in custody on other charges that resulted from the execution of a search warrant on the man's home.

Patty and Jerry were next asked to go to Minneapolis and meet with the U.S. Attorney's office. They were informed that the man in custody is the man who had taken Jacob. The man was willing to confess what he had done to Scheierl and Jacob, and take authorities to Jacob, if all charges but one would be dropped.

Patty and Jerry were asked if they would agree to the deal, meaning no charges for what was done to Jacob, but they would know what had happened to their son. "I was looking for Jacob," Patty said, "I'll let the rest of the world deal with the guy. I just needed my son back."

In September 2016, for the first time since October 22, 1989, Patty knew where her son Jacob was. Baker said, "I'd never seen Patty so broken. It was devastating to see this woman who had been so fueled by hope and who also had the courage and fire to light us all up, too, that there was hope that Jacob might be found alive." She said she felt like she was partially responsible for breaking the woman she had grown to love so much. "It was awful."

Patty explained the devastation that followed, "I had nowhere to go, everybody went back to work or school or being parents, and this was my work for 27 years. When you work, you retire, but now with this, who was I? I represented hope to all these searching parents and now I didn't feel like I could even offer that anymore. I was lost." She said she had to redefine herself once again.

In time, and with a pandemic allowing more time to do so, the two women decided to get back to the book, knowing they had to re-write it because the story had changed since they started.

The book was finished and Patty's story of transforming from a young mom and housewife, to an activist and hero for children, to a grandma and author, was written. The story of hope, Jacob's Hope, was captured on pages written by two dedicated and determined moms.

Patty said, "Whenever I see an eagle, or a rainbow, I think, 'Hi Jake.' He's still with us. Thank you for carrying him in your heart."