

WILL I EVER SEE MY SON AGAIN?

Nicky Durbin's 19-year-old son Luke went missing in May 2006. Here she tells us her devastating story

It's funny how your memories of someone become more vivid when they vanish from your life. I can clearly recall the day my family organised a surprise party for my 32nd birthday. Luke, who was 14, sat down with his sister Alicia, then 12, and strummed on his guitar a song he'd written for me called *Why We Love You*. I was so overwhelmed. They'd been practising for weeks – I wept as I hugged them both.

Today, I can just about laugh at the irony. Over the years I'd been driven mad by the sound of Luke practising that guitar. Now I'd give anything to hear it again.

A LOVING FAMILY

Luke was just a normal boy from a stable loving home, who had a passion for life. He didn't yet have a girlfriend but he had a wide circle of friends. He was highly intelligent, sensitive and creative and had a fantastic grasp of language. And he was always smiling. We were very close and could talk about everything. He had no qualms about throwing his arms around me, planting a kiss on my cheek and telling me how much he loved me. The children's father and I had separated when Luke was five and Alicia was three, and that had made the three of us very close.

At 19 and still considering which direction to take in life, Luke had a job in a local deli and was a budding cook. Two or three times a week, I'd come home from work to find a delicious meal on the table – albeit with the kitchen in chaos!

The last time I saw Luke was the evening of Thursday 11 May 2006. Before



leaving for a night out in Ipswich with his friend Alex, he gave me a big hug saying, "I'll be staying at Alex's house tonight, Mum, so I'll see you tomorrow." We lived 10 miles outside Ipswich, so Luke would often stay over with friends to avoid paying the expensive cab fare home.

A NORMAL NIGHT OUT

That night, after drinking at a bar, Alex left early, but Luke and another close friend, Zach, went on to a nightclub. Luke enjoyed a drink like any 19-year-old boy, but he certainly wasn't a heavy drinker. Zach later described how, at around 2am, he was waiting to be served at the bar when he turned around to find Luke had vanished. He spent half an hour looking for him and called Luke's mobile, but it went straight to voicemail. We later found out that Luke had left his phone in his bag back at Alex's house. Unable to make contact, Zach concluded that he must have gone home. Unlike girls, who are more safety-conscious, boys often go home separately. Luke, like most teenagers, was convinced he could look after himself, but in many ways he was still a boy – he took everyone at their word and always thought the best of people he met. I'd constantly drilled into him to be careful when he was out – but this was, after all, a regular night out with his friends.

The following morning, I got up and went off to my job as an administrator for a holiday company. I didn't expect to see Luke until later that evening, but when I got back and he still wasn't home, I called his mobile. There was no answer, so I wrote him a note telling him to call me and left it on the kitchen table. I was going out to see some friends with Alicia and at that stage I wasn't remotely concerned – I just assumed Luke must have come home during the day and had gone out again. It was Friday night, after all, and he was an outgoing, independent young man.

It wasn't until the following morning, when Alex called to speak to Luke, that I realised something was seriously wrong. Apparently he hadn't seen Luke since Thursday night. In a panic, I called Luke's work, only to be told that he hadn't shown up to collect his wages. It was then that Alicia suddenly came rushing in having spoken in more detail to Alex and gasped, "Mum, something's not right. Luke left his bike at Alex's house on Thursday night and hasn't been back to pick it up. It's still there."

I can't begin to describe the wave of absolute terror that swept through me at

that moment. Any mother will know the sickening nausea that comes with the fear that something might have happened to her child. Desperately fighting back tears, I made frantic calls to every one of his friends, but no one had seen Luke since the nightclub. On the verge of hysteria, I called the police and reported him missing.

Within an hour, the police were at the house, but we'd already lost precious time – Luke had now been missing for well over 24 hours. The last person to see him was Zach, at 2am on Friday morning, but he was also caught on two CCTV cameras in the centre of Ipswich two hours later – first at the station checking on train times, and later at a taxi rank where he'd desperately asked the female cab controller to take him the 10-mile journey home. She later told the police that she'd suggested he call his mum to pay for his fare by credit card over the phone, but he'd replied, "No, I don't want to wake her up – she's got to go to work in the morning." I later received a letter from this poor woman saying how sorry she was. So many of us have been shouldering awful feelings of guilt, but of course none of us is responsible.

The final sighting of Luke was on a CCTV camera in the centre of Ipswich, walking in the direction of home. Nine minutes later, just after 4am, a car was caught by the same camera, driving in the same direction. And then nothing. The driver of that car was never traced and has never come forward to eliminate himself from the investigation. I wonder, to this day, if it had anything to do with my son's disappearance... if the driver could give us some valuable information.

SEARCHING FOR LUKE

The day after I reported Luke missing, a police officer telephoned to tell me, "We're going to drain the river near the nightclub." He said it was 'routine' when someone went missing. I put the phone down silently before walking out into my garden, where I sat on the patio and wailed. The next 24 hours were agonising as I waited for the call saying that they'd found his body. I tried to comfort myself by thinking that if he'd tripped over and drowned, it would at least have been a relatively painless way to die. But then came the call saying they'd found nothing. Helicopter and dog searches of the local area proved equally fruitless. In a way I had a strange sense of relief – that there was still hope – but it was tinged with the



Luke, 12, Nicky and Alicia, 10



Luke with his grandfather



The location of the last sighting

"We were very close. He had no qualms about throwing his arms around me and telling me how much he loved me"

most terrible dread. It's the not knowing that's so hard to deal with.

Over the following nights I had nightmares about him being kidnapped and held somewhere. I wanted every police officer in the local force out there looking for him and I became convinced that they simply weren't trying hard enough. But on the whole the police were, and still are, very sympathetic and supportive. They were particularly understanding as they knew my son was not involved in drugs or the victim of any sort of domestic abuse.

As the weeks turned to tortuous months, my parents and close friends rallied round, providing comfort and support. Luke's >

“Keeping busy is good for me because it’s as close as I can be to the person I was before Luke went missing”

friends stopped by with messages and cards, telling me what a void there was in their lives without him. It sounds harsh, but their kindness rang hollow – because for me, there will never be any respite from the agony of Luke’s disappearance. As long as he’s missing I can no longer read or listen to music – things that I loved – because if I stop thinking about my son, even for just a second, I become overwhelmed with guilt for not protecting him and feel the need to punish myself.

At first, unable to sleep at night, I’d go into his room, put on one of his sweatshirts and sit on his bed crying, inhaling the smell of him on the cuffs and collar. Then the next minute I’d feel such an acute sense of rage and frustration, I really believed that I was going insane. Luke seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth and there were simply no clues as to what might have happened to him.

TRAGEDY FOR THE FAMILY

The effect of Luke’s disappearance on Alicia was heartbreaking. I wanted so desperately to take away her pain, but there was nothing I could do. At 17, she withdrew into herself and started having nightmares, waking up in floods of tears. She was taking her AS levels and one morning when I was out trailing the streets of Ipswich looking for witnesses, as had become my routine, I got a phone call from her school. They told me that they’d had to pull her out of an exam because she was just sitting staring blankly at the sheet of paper. I felt totally helpless.

Until then, Alicia and I had always had a great relationship, but now it started to suffer. It wasn’t that she blamed me, but she started staying out late because she couldn’t bear to be in the house when her brother was so painfully absent. Before she went out, I’d grill her about where she was going;



when she’d be home, and I’d then keep calling her to check on her, often in tears. Understandably, she became frustrated and angry with me, which created a distance between us. Later, Alicia went to university, but she dropped out, unable to cope with the pressure.

I, too, became increasingly unable to function normally and resigned from my job. Instead, I spent my days printing out ‘missing’ posters and setting up the website findluke.com. I had to feel as though I was doing something to help find my son. I just couldn’t give up on him. When his favourite band the Red Hot Chili Peppers came to Ipswich to play in concert, I distributed 6,000 leaflets, printed with Luke’s picture, to the teenagers attending the event. But by the end of the evening, the ground was littered with a carpet of discarded leaflets and I felt total, utter despair.

But I’ve now rebuilt my relationship with Alicia and we’re closer than we ever were. The breakthrough came when she went to Thailand last summer for a three-month teaching placement. I was desperately afraid I’d never see her again, but I knew it was time to let go. And that re-ignited the trust and love between us.

I now have a new job working for a charity and I’m coping better. Keeping busy at work is good for me because it’s

RELATIONSHIP PSYCHOLOGIST SUSAN QUILLIAM COMMENTS:

Losing a child is like a bereavement; you pass through the stages of denial, shock and grief, then you experience anger and depression. But when it’s not clear what has happened, the bereavement process can’t progress to a resolution because the mother still hopes her child may return. Some mothers get trapped in the denial stage, unable to come to terms with the loss. Nicky has risen above this in three ways. Firstly, she is taking a positive view, telling herself that she has no regrets, that her son’s life was lived to the full. Secondly, she is remembering Luke and keeping him in her heart as part of her family. Thirdly, she is helping others and therefore feeling positive about herself and her experience. Nicky is an inspiration to all mothers.

• If you have seen Luke, call the charity Missing People on its confidential 24-hour Freefone 0500 700 700 or email seensomeone@missingpeople.org.uk. Just £25 provides 10 families with Missing People information packs, which offer invaluable support. To make a donation, visit missingpeople.org.uk.

as close as I can be to the person I was before Luke went missing. But I still cry.

I live each day in limbo. I’m grieving, but not yet mourning. In many ways, I feel Luke hasn’t really left me. I couldn’t keep his room as it was, like some morbid shrine, so I’ve redecorated it as a study, which I use.

It’s so important to me that something positive comes out of losing Luke. I have found great respite in befriending the families of other missing people and every spring I organise a march through London with them. I know I can’t turn back the clock but I am grateful that I have no regrets – and that every day I told Luke how much I loved him. **SHE**

READ OTHER WOMEN’S REAL-LIFE STORIES at allaboutyou.com