

SEARCH CONTINUES FOR O.C.'S MISSING KIDS

CRIME: Strangers have taken at least three children whose families have yet to find them.

By ANN PEPPER

The Orange County Register

Bitter solace that it is, Polly Klaas' parents at least know what happened to their daughter.

Many families whose children were abducted by strangers don't know and must live with both the hope and the dread of their unresolved losses.

The Adam Walsh Center for Missing and Exploited Children lists three youngsters who were once Orange County residents.

April Ann Cooper was 7 when someone took her from a campground near her home in 1986. The Riverside County Sheriff's Department missing-persons unit has her file.

Carlos Alvarez was 3 when he disappeared from in front of his house in February 1988. The Downey Police Department is handling his case.

Most recently, Jaycee Lee Dugard vanished while waiting for a bus at Tahoe Paradise in June 1991. She was 11. El Dorado County sheriff's deputies are looking for her.

The children could be anywhere now.

As time passes, cases are less actively pursued, although they are never closed. The chances of finding the missing youngsters grow slimmer, experts say.

"There should be pictures of



LEONARD ORTIZ/The Orange County Register

LIVING WITH PAIN: Gloria Stratton's daughter, Tracy, was kidnapped and killed 12 years ago. Her killer has not been found. 'I live to have the answer,' Stratton says.

these children everywhere," said Toby Weiner, a case worker with the Adam Walsh Center. "The ones who are found are often found because they were spotted by someone who was able to recognize them."

Officer Mike Streed of the Orange Police Department, who works on child-abduction cases, hopes to provide more visibility for such children.

This week he began developing age-progressed images of Orange County's missing youngsters.

Using techniques he learned at

the National Center for Missing Children in Arlington, Va., Streed can create pictures of how children who've been missing for several years might look now.

"The more a child's face gets out there in front of the public, the better. The chances of recovery go way up," said Streed, a 15-year police veteran.

The pictures usually are sent out in ad circulars or sale catalogs from discount and department stores such as Montgomery Ward. They go to several million households each week.

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Streed said his skills can also be used in making composite drawings of people such as the pair of possible baby kidnappers spotted in Buena Park this week.

The man and woman, working separately, have approached mothers at local malls and picked up their children, allegedly to admire them. Police fear the pair may be baby shopping.

Streed advises parents to have their children fingerprinted at a local police agency and take photographs of them on a regular basis. Both steps might one day help in the recovery of a lost child, he said.

"And the reality is that parents will never believe that their child isn't coming home until they have a body," Weiner said. "There is always that one sliver of hope. And it's probably the hardest thing to live with."

Gloria Stratton's daughter, Tracy, was 16 and a student at Santiago High School when she vanished from Garden Grove's Westhaven Park. Her body was found eight days later in a rocky ravine off Highway 330 near Running Springs in San Bernardino County.

That was 12 years ago. The killer has not been found.

"People can say to you that they know how you feel," Stratton said. "But they don't, not unless they've been there. Well, I've been there. And you survive by clinging to the hope that they'll be returned to you."

Stratton, of Garden Grove, relived the pain of her loss when Polly Klaas, the Petaluma schoolgirl, disappeared in October. She relives it every time a youngster's kidnapping makes news.

She remains dedicated to finding out who kidnapped and killed her daughter.

"I live to have the answer," she said.

To ease her loss, Stratton tries to help other families of missing children by working as a volunteer with the Adam Walsh Center.

Besides the three Orange County children involved in abductions by strangers, Weiner is working on about 20 family-involved abductions and about 10 cases of missing children believed to be runaways.

The center and other efforts have helped increase public awareness of missing children since her daughter's abduction, Stratton said.