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OUT OF THE WOODS POLICE RESCUE FATHER, GIRL WHO SAY FOREST PARK WAS THEIR HOME FOR FOUR YEARS

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The radio call to Portland police came in as "suspicious people" in Forest Park.

A "hasher," or extreme cross-country runner, scouting routes in the dense, wooded area spotted an older man with bushy white hair and a beard and a young girl in a remote part of the park. They looked as though they'd been camping there for a long time.

North Precinct Sgt. Michael Barkley sent four officers to the park on all-terrain vehicles to find the pair. "We had very little to go on," Barkley recalled. "There's no way you could not do everything you could because it was a report of a child living up there."

After an extensive search, police located the pair the next day hiding a short distance from an elaborate camp dug into a steep hillside. Under a tarp-covered, wood-framed shelter, they found sleeping bags, a partially burnt log, a stack of old World Book Encyclopedias, rakes and other tools. A rope swing, a tilled vegetable garden ! and a small creek were nearby.

The man and girl told police they had lived in the park for four years. Police were amazed to find them clean, well-fed and healthy. They said the 12-year-old girl was well-spoken beyond her years.

After removing them from the rugged northeast section of the park, police questioned them extensively, had them examined by a doctor and evaluated by state welfare workers. They fingerprinted both of them and did a thorough national background check.

Within 48 hours, instead of leaving them at a shelter or with state authorities, Barkley found the man a job and a place for the two to live on a friend's horse farm in Yamhill County. They've been living in a mobile home for the past two weeks, getting used to heat, electricity and running water -- something they said they learned to survive without.

Police would release only the first names of the father and daughter to protect their privacy.

"The amazing part of this was the fact that Sergeant Barkley really evaluated what was best for these people," North Precinct Cmdr. Scott Anderson said. "Sometimes police would be a little quicker to hand things off to state workers. But instead . . . he saw this through to the end."

Disturbing sight

An Australian hasher and his wife called police at 9:06 a.m. on April 28. They were disturbed by what they saw -- a man and girl at a "well-established transient camp" in Forest Park, with two swastikas carved into the ground nearby. They relayed the location, citing the Thomas Guide map: Page 565, block G6, dispatch records show.

That afternoon, several officers on ATVs searched the slopes of the city park for more than an hour with no luck. The next morning, the hasher escorted police back, using a compass to lead officers on foot through the twisting, waist-high foliage way beyond marked trails. Barkley also had a police plane fly overhead to try to locate the camp, but the pilot said the dense fir trees concealed the ground.

After an hour-and-a-half hike, police found the tarp-covered shelter, about 500 yards above St. Helens Road. Inside the camp shelter, there was a sleeping bag laid out on top of plastic ground-covering, a makeshift table carved from tree bark, a large metal pot, several tools including a handsaw, a Bible and several volumes of World Book Encyclopedias stacked in a red shopping basket.

Girl's shoes and a doll were strewn on the ground.

But no one was in sight.

Police, armed with rifles and shotguns, stuck around for nearly an hour. They kept silent. Was this a child kidnapper? A marijuana grower?

"We were fairly heavily armed. We didn't know who'd we encounter," North Precinct Officer Joe Campbell said. "It kind of threw us all for a loop."

As officers left to go, a police dog named Lance disappeared over a hill. Officer Chauncey Curl, his handler, found Lance about 50 yards down a ridge, sniffing at a man and a girl huddled behind a tree. The man looked as if he was in his 50s, with a thick head of white hair and a beard. The girl appeared young. Police immediately split up the two. Barkley questioned the girl, while Campbell spoke to the man. The man said his name was Frank. He told police he was a 53-year-old Marine Corps veteran and college graduate who served in Vietnam. He said he came to Oregon from Tacoma without a job and virtually no money. Frank told police that the girl's mother was institutionalized in New Hampshire, where his daughter was born, and the two now lived on a \$400-a-month disability check.

Rather than live on the streets and expose his daughter, Ruth, to alcohol and drugs, they hiked deep into Forest Park and built a lean-to. Frank said they came into the city twice a week to stop by the bank, attend church, buy groceries and clothes from Goodwill, but would return to the forest, where he taught his daughter using the old encyclopedias. He described himself as a devout Christian and gave police a detailed explanation of the ancient Chinese interpretation of the swastika, before it became a Nazi symbol of hatred. For them, it symbolized prosperity, purity and good fortune.

They grew vegetables and used the nearby creek to keep clean. They stored perishable foods in a small pool of water at the creek's edge.

Before the St. Johns Bridge closed to pedestrian traffic, they used to hike down a zigzagging, rocky path from their campsite onto St. Helens Road and walk two miles to the Safeway in the St. Johns neighborhood. In fact, Campbell, a 10-year bureau veteran, said he remembered seeing them walk by North Precinct. More recently, they'd take a bus into Northwest Portland to shop at the Stadium Fred Meyer.

Two ask to remain together

The man and girl told police that the hasher was the first person to find their camp in the four years they were out there, and were stunned police found them.

Their biggest worry was being split up, police said.

"Please, don't take me from my daddy," the 12-year-old girl pleaded with Barkley, as they sat on a log talking for at least 30 minutes, the officer recalled.

Barkley, a 26-1/2-year bureau veteran who has a 6-year-old daughter, and Campbell, who taught grade school for 20 years in Montana before becoming a cop, were struck by the unusually strong relationship between father and daughter, which they viewed as sincere and healthy.

"What was so clear was that their living conditions were unacceptable, but their relationship was a real deep love and caring for each other," Barkley said.

Campbell agreed.

"To separate them would break their heart, their spirit," he said. "Their whole lives seemed to revolve around each other."

Police persuaded Frank and Ruth to leave the camp, promised to help find them food and shelter and said they'd try not to separate them.

The father and daughter, leery at first, led police down their familiar trail to St. Helens Road, carrying their belongings in two backpacks that held their birth certificates, passports and clothes. Ruth had a calico kitten tucked in her green pack.

"All of us had difficulty negotiating the path, except for Frank and Ruth," Campbell said. "And, they were in street shoes, and we were in boots."

Police took the pair to the Portland Police Bureau's Sunshine Division for clean clothes and food. Campbell enlisted the help of JOIN homeless outreach worker Mike O'Malley, who found them a spot in a family shelter for two nights.

The father, though, wanted to return to his old camp to retrieve a stove and tent before arriving at the shelter. Barkley let the two go back to the park but said he expected them to return to the shelter by 7 p.m. It was a risk. Barkley nervously sat at the shelter, waiting for the two, wondering if they'd show as Campbell waited in his car along St. Helens Road to give them a ride if he saw them.

"Sometimes you go with your gut feeling. You go with what's best for the people, and I was going to take responsibility regardless," Barkley said.

At 7 p.m., the father and daughter arrived at the shelter.

"There is a God," Barkley told Campbell.

A pediatrician who examined the girl found her free of any illness, any signs of physical or sexual abuse,

and was impressed that she had no cavities.

A criminal background check came up empty, police reports said. With some prodding from supervisors, Barkley alerted caseworkers from the state Department of Human Resources, who felt comfortable that there were no signs of abuse and the father and daughter could remain together, according to police reports. Barkley knew the shelter could house the father and daughter for two nights, but what about afterward? He thought of his longtime friend, a Portland businessman who owns a horse farm in Yamhill County.

"What am I going to do? Throw them into the system? I can't keep chasing them around," Barkley said.

His friend agreed to meet the two on April 30. Convinced Barkley had done his homework, the friend brought Frank and Ruth back to his farm the next morning. He said the 53-year-old is now mowing lawns, learning to drive a tractor, and that the father and daughter are riding bicycles to a nearby church on Sundays.

When Campbell and Barkley said goodbye to the father and daughter, they held out their hands to Ruth.

"She didn't want to shake hands, but she would give us a hug," Campbell said.

O'Malley, a homeless outreach worker for six years in Portland, said the case is remarkable because it involved a single father home-schooling his child in the woods, and because of the steps police took to help them out.

"The police really went to extraordinary lengths in trying to help the father and daughter," O'Malley said.

Campbell said he and Barkley put in extra effort, but it was worth it. "We're all kind of holding our breath to see that it all goes well."

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Caption:

3 Photo - Courtesy of Portland Police Bureau

Graphic - Map by The Oregonian

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RESETTLED FROM PARK, FATHER, GIRL SLIP AWAY

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Summary: Fearing they were being tracked by news helicopters, the man and his daughter, 12, leave a newfound Yamhill County home

Where have Frank and Ruth gone?

A month ago, a man and his 12-year-old daughter abandoned their 4-year-old hermitage in Forest Park for a Yamhill County horse farm. Now, they have seemingly vanished into the spring air of Oregon's coastal range.

Portland police Sgt. Michael Barkley, who found a place for the homeless pair to live on a friend's farm, said he has been unable to find Frank to tell him about \$6,500 deposited into a relief fund by donors around the country.

Barkley said he last spoke to the 53-year-old former Marine two Saturdays ago. While he was happy to have a job on the farm, Frank was uneasy with news stories about him and his daughter.

Police have withheld their last names to protect their privacy. Still, Frank said it had gone too far. He told Barkley that television-news ! helicopters kept showing up in the sky over the farm.

Frank felt "hunted" by the helicopters, Barkley said, and feared that kids would call Ruth "the Forest Park hillbilly" if her face showed up on TV.

"He was talking about leaving the state," Barkley said. "He said, 'We love it here. We don't want to leave.' But he expected the TV cameras to show up any day."

Frank and his daughter were living in a mobile home on the farm.

If there were helicopters trying to find the pair, they didn't belong to any of Portland's news stations, according to news directors. None of them tried to track down Frank and Ruth from the air.

Barkley said their departure was more of a flight than a disappearance. Last Monday, Frank and Ruth gathered their belongings from the mobile home, expressed their gratitude to the owners and left.

Parishioners at Emanuel Lutheran Church in Cornelius, where the father and daughter showed up at services and other gatherings on bikes, said the pair departed without leaving a phone number or address.

"I have a feeling they have gone under again," said the Rev. Ronald McCallum, pastor of the church.

"They're trying to stay private. And if they stayed in Forest Park for four years, they could be almost anywhere."

The father and daughter were discovered in late April by extreme cross-country runners "hashing" through a dense, wooded area of Forest Park above U.S. 30.

The pair told police they had lived at their elaborate camp dug into a hillside for four years. Police questioned them extensively.

They were clean and healthy. Ruth, who was home-schooled with a stack of thrift-shop encyclopedias, was well-spoken beyond her years, police said. A physician and state child-welfare investigators found no evidence of abuse, according to police reports.

Frank, a college graduate who served in Vietnam, told police that he came to Oregon with no job and little money. The girl's mother, he explained, was institutionalized in New Hampshire.

A devout Christian, Frank said he didn't want to live on the streets and risk exposing Ruth to drugs, alcohol and crime, so they hiked deep into Forest Park.

Last Wednesday, a pack of runners revisited the creekside campsite. Some reported seeing Frank and Ruth there. Bret Lubic, who was at rear of the group, didn't see them. "But I saw books stacked up there," he said. "The lean-to shelter was up, and the garden looked tended to."

Although it is possible that the father and daughter visited the site, Barkley said he doubts they have re-established the camp. "Frank knows that if he ever goes back up there to live, Ruth will be taken from him," he said. "It's crystal clear to him."

A North Precinct officer went back into the woods to check the area Friday. Although park crews had yet to tear down the old shelter, the officer reported that there were no signs it was being used again.

Department of Human Services officials weren't tracking Ruth and her father because there were no signs of abuse, said spokeswoman Patricia Feeny. "And the child being educated, and apparently well educated," she said. "It was just a beautiful human interest story."

Moved by the story, which appeared everywhere from newspapers to outdoor adventure Web sites, many people responded by donating money to a fund to help with living costs and the girl's education.

About \$6,500 deposited at Bank of America branches has been transferred into Frank's personal account at Wells Fargo Bank through direct deposit, Barkley said. It is impossible to know if the man has withdrawn any of it.

Eleven days ago, when Barkley last spoke to Frank at the horse farm, he said he was preparing to enroll his daughter in the local middle school. He said he wanted Ruth to experience a normal Oregon childhood.

Yet nothing seemed certain.

Frank said news helicopters seemed to be flying along the coast range, searching for the right farm. He said they sometimes flew so low he could clearly see their station logos.

Sunday morning, Barkley drove to Cornelius and waited for the pair to show up for services at the Lutheran church. They didn't come.

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