

MISSING STUDENT
INVESTIGATION

Life Without Lauren

NINETEEN MONTHS AFTER LAUREN SPIERER DISAPPEARED, HER PARENTS OPEN UP ABOUT THEIR GRIEF—AND THEIR QUEST TO FIND ANSWERS
by KRISTEN MASCIA • photographs by NIGEL PARRY

PAINFUL
REMINERS

“You wake up every day with this hurt,” says Charlene (at home Nov. 24 beside Lauren’s unopened boxes). “And it doesn’t go away.”



It's the little things, say Robert and Charlene Spierer, that hurt the most. For Robert it's the flash of a blonde ponytail on a city street that leaves him aching; for Charlene it's the arrival of the cell-phone bill that still bears her daughter's name. Nineteen months after Lauren disappeared, her boxes from college remain stacked against her parents' den wall. Long ago they gave up hope that Lauren might unpack them herself. “I can't bear to move them,” says Charlene. “I know they're just boxes. But I can't.”

It's difficult for the Spierers to grasp that it's been nearly two years since Lauren, 20, a bright, beautiful sophomore at Indiana University Bloomington, left a friend's off-campus apartment



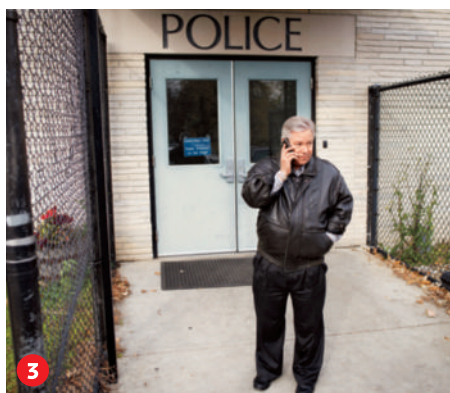
after a night out partying and never returned to her own. In that time their lives have utterly transformed. For seven months in 2011 they lived in Bloomington, helping coordinate search efforts and hiring their own private investigator. And last year they planned a wedding without her, celebrating in October the marriage of their older daughter Rebecca, 26 (see box). Yet as much as their lives change, the status of the search for their daughter remains the same. “They’re not getting the same frequency of leads,” says Robert of the investigators working on the case. “It’s frustrating because 19 months later we still don’t have answers, and we still don’t have our child.”

Compounding that frustration, the Spierers say, is the “code of silence” kept by the young men who saw Lauren last that night. Within days of her disappearance they had all acquired lawyers; to this day they’ve refused to take FBI-administered polygraphs—tests investigators say would help them narrow the field of persons of interest. “These are all still actively people that we and the police have not been able to question to the full extent,” Bo Dietl, the Spierers’ lead private investigator, tells PEOPLE. Why they won’t just take the tests is something the Spierers can’t understand. “I don’t think Lauren survived the night, but I don’t think this was some random abduction,” says Charlene. Adds Robert: “We know there is a person on this earth that knows what happened.”

In the meantime they remember—and try to cope. In a rare emotional interview at their home in the New York City suburb of Edgemont, N.Y., Robert, 60, a certified public accountant, and Charlene, 58, a homemaker, recalled the dynamo daughter they miss so much. As she looked at old photos, Charlene wiped away tears. “I made this for her bat mitzvah,” she says of the 24” x 48” photo collage hanging above the upstairs landing and featuring Lauren in more than

two dozen poses: as a towheaded toddler flower girl; as a precocious grade-schooler in red star-shaped sunglasses; as a tanned, coltish tween grinning with summer camp friends. As a kid she loved playing lacrosse, until a heart arrhythmia diagnosed at 14 required medication and forced her to quit. Living at home surrounded by memories “is really hard because Lauren is everywhere,” admits Charlene. Upstairs she

Looking for Clues



1. During a June 2011 news conference, Robert holds up a surveillance video image taken the night Lauren vanished. **2.** “We see Lauren in their faces,” says Robert of her friends, including Blair Wallach (with the Spierers in Bloomington Nov. 14). **3.** On Nov. 14 the Spierers met for over two hours with Bloomington police.

stops short at the door to Lauren’s bedroom, where she hasn’t changed a thing. “I can’t,” says Charlene. “I still can’t go inside.”

At IU Lauren had been thriving in the school’s renowned undergraduate fashion program. “She loved being in school,” says Robert. “It was a happy place for her.” In spring 2011, at the request of her boyfriend of two years, Jesse Wolff, she stayed behind in Bloomington while he took a summer course so they could drive home together. The night of Thursday, June 2, after trading texts with Charlene, Lauren visited a friend’s apartment, where, according to student accounts, she drank wine and may have also used cocaine. After moving on to friend Jay Rosenbaum’s place, at 1:45 a.m. she was off again, this time headed to Kilroy’s Sports Bar with Rosenbaum’s neighbor Corey Rossman. She used her fake ID to get in; there, eyewitnesses later told investigators, the petite, 4’11”, 90-lb. blonde appeared intoxicated.

While the Spierers say they knew nothing about Lauren’s possible use of drugs, “we know she drank,” says Robert; during her sophomore year she received a ticket for underage drinking and was fined and made to do community service. Still, “for Lauren to be in the condition she was in,” he says, “we believe she may have been drugged.”

When Lauren left the bar 45 minutes later, she forgot her shoes and cell phone. And the scene grew messier. At Lauren’s apartment complex, Rossman got into a fight with student Zach Oakes. Then, on the way to Rossman’s building, Lauren fell at least twice, hitting her head so hard, investigators say, she developed bruises around her eye and drew concern from passersby. When they arrived at Rossman’s he went to bed; Lauren ended up with his neighbor Rosenbaum, who says he asked her to stay because she was drunk. Lauren refused and at about 4:30 a.m. left to make the five-minute walk home.



A VIBRANT LIFE
“I miss her desperately,” says Charlene of Lauren (left, second from right, with friends in ’10; top, with Rob in New Orleans in ’07; right, in Charlene’s lap with sister Rebecca on Cape Cod).



That’s what Rosenbaum told police. But the Spierers say that his and the other men’s actions following Lauren’s disappearance raised questions. Within days Rosenbaum, Rossman, and two other friends who had been with her hired lawyers and cut contact with the Spierers. Rossman’s silence left them particularly upset. He claims the punch he took at Lauren’s apartment complex fogged his mind and he can’t recall the night beginning 15 minutes before he was hit, a statement the Spierers find absurd. “How would he possibly know that?” says Charlene. Rossman’s lawyer Carl Saltzman told PEOPLE, “Corey has cooperated with the police any time they have asked.”

The Spierers aren’t convinced Lauren’s boyfriend, Jesse Wolff, has been entirely forthcoming either. It was Wolff and two other students, investigators say, who reported Lauren missing June 3 after Kilroy’s contacted him with Lauren’s cell phone. At first he seemed eager to help. “That Monday he was texting me, ‘We’ve got to have everyone take polys,’” says Charlene. But according to the Spierers, the next day, as search parties fanned out for miles around IU, Wolff left for home, which struck Robert and Charlene as odd. Since then he’s refused to take a police polygraph; contacted by PEOPLE

Dec. 5, he declined to comment. “He was in love with Lauren as far as we knew,” says Robert, “so we can’t understand why he’s chosen not to do everything possible to help us.” For their part, IU students still aren’t sure what to believe. “I constantly change my mind,” says Blair Wallach, 21, a senior who had been best friends with Lauren since childhood. She adds that the

boys involved “need to come forward with everything they know, because parts of the story don’t add up.”

For the first several months after Lauren disappeared, the Spierers lived in Bloomington, where they plastered the campus with posters, set up “Find Lauren” Facebook and Twitter accounts and organized searches. Desperate for clues, they sent out 750 stamped enve-

Message to a Lost Sister

Last year, during a morning walk with her mom in a wooded preserve, Lauren Spierer’s older sister, Rebecca, couldn’t go on because it reminded her of searching for Lauren. She expressed her grief in an e-mail she shared with PEOPLE: “When I received the call on June 3rd that Lauren was missing, I never could have imagined that over a year and a half later we would still not have answers. The pain of living without Lauren is indescribable. We have to cope with the grief of missing Lauren and we still struggle with the unknown. I think about Lauren and miss her every minute of every day. My heart aches without you. I love you, Rebecca.”



“I miss you more than words can express,” Rebecca wrote of Lauren (inset, at age 5; top, visiting Rebecca at college; above, holding Rebecca’s hand).

LEFT PAGE FROM TOP: MICHAEL CONROY/AP; PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID BUTOW/2; THIS PAGE: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY EMMA LOMACCORREN; COURTESY SPIERER FAMILY(S)



HER PARENTS' ANGUISH

To spare his wife added pain, Rob hid a DMV notice mailed to Lauren before her 21st birthday. "We try to shield each other," Charlene wrote on Facebook Aug. 2. "It is impossible to do."

lopes addressed to a P.O. box to students at Lauren's apartment complex, imploring them to respond with information but were met with silence. "I think we only got one back," says Charlene. "One of the hardest things has been getting through to her peers." These days, they devote between 10 and 25 hours a week to their search. Most mornings Charlene spends hours trawling message boards on the Web for leads or rereading documents she keeps in a thick blue binder, "looking for something we missed," she says.

At times she comes undone. On Aug. 2, a month after a fisherman found a skull in a river that turned out not to be Lauren's, while waiting for DNA test results, Charlene wrote a searing letter

on Facebook titled "To Whom This May Concern," saying, "It sickens me to write to you once again. . . . Somehow I doubt that you are a parent. I guarantee you have no idea what it's like, waiting to find out if the remains recovered from any number of places are those of your child." Charlene admits it was a moment of raw agony. "I constantly think about the ways they could've disposed of her body," she says, breaking up. "It's awful."

Remembering the kindness of people who have tried to help brings the Spierers comfort. Recently, during a visit to Bloomington, though they

"ached for Lauren, thinking about the 'what could be' rather than the 'what is,'" says Robert, they drew strength from visiting friends they made while living there. As hard as it is to see Lauren's old pals, says Charlene, their desire to stay in touch also "makes me feel like Lauren's not forgotten."

Certainly the Spierers have done everything they can to keep their daughter's memory alive, even in

**“
Somebody knows exactly what happened. I promise you, we're not giving up. We want to bring Lauren home”
—ROB SPIERER**

moments as difficult as Rebecca's wedding in October. Lauren surely would have helped plan the event; doing it without her, Charlene says, was difficult: "Can you survive going to look for a wedding dress? By the same token, I wanted Rebecca to be happy." In the end, Rebecca stood under a chuppah, the canopy in traditional Jewish weddings, made of Lauren's prayer shawl. Many times throughout the night—walking down the aisle; during Robert's reception speech—the three of them fought back tears. Lauren's absence was palpable, but so, too, the Spierers say, was the love in the room. "I think people were happy for us," says Robert, "to have some happiness."

It was an affirming moment, proof there's life yet to live and joys yet to come. With that in mind, the Spierers are pressing on, dedicated to finding their child—if only to say goodbye. "She deserves that respect," says Charlene. "And I promise you," adds Robert, "we're far from giving up."

With Jeff Truesdell in Bloomington

If you have any information on Lauren Spierer's disappearance, contact the Bloomington Police Department tip line at 1-812-339-4477 or helpfindlauren@gmail.com.