

How “Code Veronica” Has Been Developed

By Chief of Police

It happens every day, a child is playing outside, the parent loses contact with the child for some reason and the police are called. For the past twenty-two years I have responded to this type of call just to be cancelled before arriving because the child was found either at a neighbor’s house, around the block or even in the house sometimes asleep. Officers responding to these calls usually stop at the house, mill around the house or neighborhood or get in their cars and drive around the block several times until the child is found or it is a confirmed abduction then we start to get really serious. I’m sure everyone reading this can relate and can admit that these calls, for a small part are annoying but important. But for the thousands of times I have responded to these calls something has always bothered me. What if? What if the child is really missing? What if this is a real child abduction? It happens every day in the United States, why not in my city?

Last year I was given an opportunity to travel to Virginia to attend The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children’s (NCMEC) Chief Executive Officer training seminar. I became concerned that vital information is being lost during the very first hour of a missing child investigation. I posed this question to several administrators at the seminar who have had the daunting task of a missing child case in their jurisdiction: “If you could do it all over again, what would you do differently?” The answer was swift and nearly word for word: a better initial response and a better, more organized intelligence collection prior to determining the child was actually abducted. This would have made their jobs easier, faster and increased greatly the probability of recovering the child, not to mention looking more professional to the family and public.

For several months I hashed over my thoughts on how to collect important information in a constructive way that could be used by detectives after, god forbid we determined a child was abducted. I don’t think anyone reading this could argue their city, town or county is immune to this nightmare. I vowed to myself that if my city ever had a child abduction, I would be as prepared as possible for the child and his or her family. I felt so strongly that I owed it to them. I then became overwhelmed with horror; it very easily could be my child! If my child was

abducted I would want the police to do everything humanly possible to recover him as soon as possible!

I started off with the most obvious way to improve the response, go above and beyond expectations. Typically police get criticized for a too large officer presence in other calls but not so for a missing child call. If five, ten or even thirty officers responded to the call, set up an initial command post with one officer in charge, and in an organized and swift effort collect child information, search the house and make contact with neighbors and bystanders around the neighborhood documenting the names, dates and times contacted, that would make a big difference if it was determined to be an actual abduction. More times than not the child is soon found and the information we collected is never needed again. The worst thing that could happen is that officers would perfect this response and be even better prepared for when it really counted and build a better working relationship with each other. It was a win-win situation if I could get everyone interested, committed and involved.

So, I needed to do two things; one, set up a policy that all departments would agree to follow that would cover the organized collection of all information as early as possible as well as an organized and swift effort of canvassing the house and neighborhood making a faster determination of a confirmed abduction and second, make this policy meaningful. I needed to attach to this policy a deep rooted meaning that would drive officers to continually respond with a passion to make a difference and want to collaborate efficiently. I decided to name the program after an abducted child.

Weeks went by as I researched missing children in the Utah area. Should I dedicate this program to a child that has been missing but not found? Or a child that was abducted and confirmed murdered? It would mean more if I could find a local child but asking around I was not successful in finding him or her until one day.

As the chief of a small city I am also the public relations officer. I receive calls and visits regularly from the local media looking for stories or information on current events. I had received a visit one day from a local radio reporter by the name of Malia Bascom. I had been

working on this policy for most of the morning and was frustrated; I shared with her my frustrations of not finding the right child to name this program after. Malia remembered a local child murdered twenty years prior when she was in school in Vernal. This child had been abducted and murdered sometime around 1988. We started our search for a name and any information and found an old newspaper article online about a six year old Vernal girl who was abducted from her back yard in August of 1988 by a neighbor boy whom I will name only once in this article for two reasons. First, that neighbor boy will be up for parole in 2016, and second while it's my opinion he does not deserve to have his name even mentioned in this article, doing so will connect him to this horrific murder and prevent people from forgetting about sweet Veronica Fitzen.

Six year old Veronica Fitzen came from a humble religious family. Her mother Jeanette was from Costa Rica and at that time was still mastering the English language. Her father Jerry had some law enforcement experience in the Salt Lake City area but wasn't in law enforcement at this time. Veronica's older brother Pablo was eleven years old and Pablo and Veronica were very close. They lived in a home next to some apartment buildings just off Main Street in Vernal.

On a Sunday afternoon in August, 1988, Veronica and her family returned to their home from church. Veronica was playing in the fenced backyard of their home when Jeanette sent Pablo out to the backyard to check on Veronica. According to Jeanette, it was only minutes from the last time she had seen Veronica to the time Pablo came back from the backyard and told his mother he could not find her. Jeanette said she then called the Vernal Police Department and reported Veronica missing. Many things have changed from twenty years ago when it comes to missing persons, not considering the fact this was a small peaceful town where violent crime was rare. It wasn't until the next day it was decided that foul play was most likely responsible for Veronica's disappearance.

One week later the investigation turned up a confession from a neighbor boy by the name of Roger Strunk, sixteen years of age. He confessed he struck Veronica in the head as she played in the backyard, placed her in a pillow case and drove her out several miles from town to the mountains nearby. There, he sexually molested this sweet, innocent six year old girl and when he

was done with his disgusting desires he selfishly decided to strike her in the head numerous times with a log in an effort to kill her. According to Jeanette she was told by an investigator that during this time Veronica was begging the neighbor boy to take her to her mother. Not being able to kill her with the log, the neighbor boy decided to use one of Veronica's socks to strangle her. He attempted this several times and each time Veronica would pass out just to come to and again beg for him to take her to her mother. The neighbor boy succeeded at his last attempt at strangulation and killed Veronica, placed her in the same pillow case and buried her in a shallow grave.

The neighbor boy came back to Veronica's house just after killing her and was eager to join a search party so he could pretend look for her. Jeanette said she remembered seeing him all week outside her home as the police were talking to her and doing their investigation.

I was amazed that the local people who had been around at the time did not remember nor had even vague memories of this tragic event in 1988. How could the family of such a horrific event be forgotten about? Where were they now? How does someone cope with such a devastating and horrific event and still function in the day to day? I found myself moved and inspired because I had found what I was looking for: the child to put the heart into this program!

After some basic investigative techniques I found Veronica's mother living in a subdivision in Naples of all places and working at the local Wal-Mart in Vernal. Veronica's brother Pablo is serving his country in the United States Air Force and is currently stationed in Germany. Jeanette's husband passed less than a year before I made contact with her. Now alone, she survives by holding onto her faith in God and you can see and feel that faith when you are near her. *I could never be that strong in her shoes* I thought to myself as I asked her permission to use her daughter's name for our program. How she managed to make it through that horrific time without the support available now through bereavement programs and parent organizations is beyond me. I was absolutely horrified listening to Jeannette relay to me how she heard of that neighbor boy's confession to beating and strangling her child and how her little girl fought and begged for her mother. I knew I needed to get support for this program and do everything in our power to prevent another family from this devastation.

In April of 2010 I invited administrators from the Uintah County area to meet with me at my office to discuss a missing child program I wanted to implement. The group consisted of the Vernal City Chief and Assistant Chief, the Uintah County Sheriff and Patrol Sergeant, a Utah Highway Patrol representative, local dispatch supervisors, me and my Assistant Chief as well as Jeanette Fitzen. I told the group I had an idea for a response policy on initial missing child calls prior to the child actually being determined missing. A policy that we could use if and when a child is first reported missing to give us a significant head start on a criminal case. I wanted the program to be called Code Veronica and I wanted everyone in this meeting to commit to supporting and implementing it. It was brought up that we already had in place what I was asking for which consisted of a check list for an officer to use in a missing child case. A check list was a good start but not nearly the response I wanted to see utilized. And then Vernal Chief of Police Dylan Rooks spoke up.

Chief Rooks was new to his position as Chief. He was younger than me with close to six years less actual police experience than me but was, in my view, a hard working veteran officer with lots of insight into administration issues and was someone I admired. He first stated that his department was fully behind the program. He then explained to the rest of the group that Code Veronica was in essence the letter A in the alphabet of missing child investigations. B, C, & D representing the available programs like the Amber Alert and the CART Team from the Utah Attorney General's Office and checklist. I was impressed by the analogy and could not have said it better myself. Everyone in the room agreed and a working group of officers were appointed to iron out the details and set up training for officers in all departments.

Vernal Police Department Assistant Chief Keith Campbell, Uintah County Sheriff's Sergeant Bevan Watkins, Utah Highway Patrol Sergeant Nick Bowles and I meet on several occasions and laid out the program as well as implemented the check list mention earlier. It was decided that when the initial call of a missing child went out, dispatch would broadcast over the radio "Code Veronica at" the last seen address and would include any information collected over the phone. All police and sheriff's departments including available administrators and detectives as well as Adult Probation and Parole Officers, Animal Control Officers, Utah Highway Patrol Troopers,

State and Federal Park Officers and Bureau of Land Management Rangers would activate their vehicle cameras if equipped, and respond to the location given by dispatch. The first officer arriving would assume an Officer in Charge (OIC) responsibility until relieved. Using the check list, the OIC would assign arriving officers to numerous duties including collecting child information from parents, selecting a group of two to three officers to immediately search the house and yard as well as assigning one officer to be a perimeter supervisor. The duty of the OIC would be to direct officers in a coordinated effort to make contact with neighbors and bystanders inquiring about the child at the same time documenting who they talked with when and where. All information coming and going will go through the OIC as to prevent any confusion.

This extra effort in collecting information and documenting it accordingly is key to getting a jump on a confirmed abducted child case, not to mention each department working together is never bad practice. By the end of May we were trained and then we waited.

Three weeks later I was working in my office when for the first time an alert tone came over the radio and the following was said, "Code Veronica at 1658 East 5000 South: Missing five year old blond male wearing red shirt and blue shorts, last seen five minutes ago in the front yard by the babysitter". As I made my way out the back door of my office to my patrol car I heard on the radio every agency advising dispatch they were en route. I could hear the urgency in their voices and found myself anxious and yet proud to radio to dispatch "Control Victor One 10-17". As I arrived, we were all slightly hesitant and a little confused as to how to actually put this idea into action. Thankfully, the hesitance was brief as the check list came out, and assignments were made. The officers assigned to search the residence quickly came out and yelled "We found him, sleeping under the couch". The call was short lived but was worth watching the relief in the eyes of the mother who drove from work when she received the phone call from the babysitter that the child was missing. She said when she rounded the corner to her house she was relieved to see the street filled with police cars and officers.

From then on each Code Veronica call has been a little better and more complete. I've received many comments from the public, everything from "Wow, lots of cops" to "Man you guys really mean business". I'm confident that one day, as much as I wish it will never come, when we

determine that the Code Veronica call we are on is now a criminal case, all the effort put collectively into the initial response will pay off and recover the child. I think we owe it to them.