

Evidence being carefully collected, cataloged by experts in Nina Keown case

Written by Marty Randall

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As of Monday, August 30, human remains found in a heavily wooded area in northern Clark County on Friday morning, August 27, are still being evaluated by the Kentucky Medical Examiner's Office in Louisville, Ky.

"We're 99% sure that we've found Nina Rae Keown. We're waiting for the experts to confirm it," stated Sheriff John Lizenby during an interview he gave on Monday afternoon.

Keown, 26, is the young woman who was reported missing by her mother, Debbie Conover, after Conover had not heard from her daughter for two days.

Reports were that Keown and her ex-husband, Robert "Bobby" Petty, had gone to a small, privately operated music festival known as "Hopstock" near Petty's mobile home off Plymouth Road on Saturday night, August 7.

"Witnesses (at the festival) told us they had argued and that they left together," related Sheriff Lizenby. Petty's story was that Nina and he argued again, and she decided she wanted to go back to the festival. Petty said his ex-wife got off the four-wheeler on which they were riding around 11:30 p.m. at the intersection of Plymouth and State Road 3. He said Keown walked into a bordering cornfield as a shortcut back to the festival.

After nearly three weeks of searching, what is thought to be Keown's body was found about ten feet down a steep, thickly forested incline off a northern Clark County road outside of the tiny community of Bethlehem. Sheriff Lizenby and Deputy Rachel Lee and detectives with the Clark County Sheriff's Department were with the small group of searchers who were reportedly led to the area by Bobby Petty.

Lizenby and his staff were set the task of finding Nina (pronounced NEE-nah) Keown when her mother walked into his department on Monday, August 9. From the first, the Sheriff felt "...something was just not right..." after listening to Petty's story about that night.

On Tuesday, August 10, deputies and area residents began searching for Nina where Petty had said he last saw her. Sheriff Lizenby called for aid from Indiana State Police, and soon the search became a serious, concentrated effort, using four-wheelers, Sheriff's Posse members on horseback, canine rescue and cadaver dogs, the ISP helicopter and even para-sailers and ultra-light pilots from Scottsburg Airport.

Debbie Conover and family members created posters with contact information on them. Conservation officers scoured local ponds and lakes. A Facebook page, findNina, was developed, and tips started pouring into the local department.

The Sheriff developed three teams, those who were actively investigating the woman's disappearance, such as Chief Deputy Wayne Williams and department detective Rick Barrett, deputies and reserves; search and seizure personnel from the ISP Sellersburg post who meticulously looked over Bobby Lee's vehicles and home; and persons handling calls from area media, such as Louisville and national television stations and programs that included "The Nancy Grace Show" on Headline News, newspapers and radio.

Members of the Kentuckiana Search and Rescue provided personnel, animals and equipment. A field headquarters was set up by the Scott County Emergency Management Agency at the Lexington Volunteer Fire Department. Local churches, American Legion Scott Post 234 and LeRoy's Food Mart sent food. Scott County EMS covered the scene. Individuals simply showed up, willing to walk the neighborhood in hopes that some sign of where Keown was could be found. Many people sent their prayers that Keown, known to have some heart and seizure problems, would be found safe and alive.

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Everyone came up empty-handed. It was discouraging, said Sheriff Lizenby.

"We went over that area and over it again. She wasn't there," he said. Subpoenaed records showed Keown had not used her cell phone nor credit cards since she disappeared.

Efforts really built up by August 12, with eight or nine fire departments involved. Lizenby said it was probably the most massive search for an individual which has ever taken place in the county.

Lack of results caused the Sheriff and searchers to expand their efforts, covering more ground but having no luck.

Throughout the first week, Petty remained cooperative with officers, allowing them to examine his home and belongings. When Clark County Sheriff Danny Rodden was handed a warrant issued by that county's court system for Petty's arrest on an unrelated probation violation, he sent the warrant to Lizenby. Petty managed to evade Sheriff Lizenby's efforts for a few days, but was eventually located at his mobile home. He refused to come out, so deputies battered down his door and placed him under arrest. Petty appeared to be intoxicated when that arrest was made, said Lizenby.

"I was able to talk to him a little some time later. His van was missing, and he wouldn't tell us where it was," Sheriff Lizenby stated.

After three or four days in jail in Jeffersonville, Bobby Petty said he wanted to talk to the sheriff. "He did talk, but it was a lot like he was saying what was going through his mind again and again. It wasn't much help to us," Lizenby explained.

They even got a tip that Keown was seen at a Greenwood restaurant, so ISP information officer Sgt. Jerry Goodin alerted police in that area to look for the woman.

Finally, late last week, Petty told jail officials that he wanted to talk to Sheriff Lizenby and Chief Deputy Williams again. With Deputy Rachel Lee acting as a go-between, Sheriff Lizenby made it very clear to Petty that he wasn't going to talk to him again unless Bobby was serious.

Petty allegedly agreed to take the Sheriff and others to the spot where he thought Nina was located, near the junction of Bethlehem and New Washington Roads in northern Clark County.

"We knew that Bobby was familiar with a lot of the farms in the area because he worked for a company delivering equipment and farm supplies. That's what had us so concerned. If she was dead, Nina could be anywhere," recalled Lizenby.

On Thursday night, August 26, Bobby Petty allegedly pointed to a spot along the lonely county road. Searchers went in and came up with nothing.

Friday morning, the search was expanded by 60 or 70 feet. The body was found halfway down the sloping, rocky, brush-covered incline around 11 a.m.

Before noon, Scott County Prosecutor Jason Mount arrived on the scene, where he remained with evidence technicians the rest of that day and most of Saturday. Mount declined to comment about the on-going case, saying conclusions have not been made about any aspect of the case.

Evidence is still being gathered from where the body lay, evidence that will point to how long it was there and possibly who might have handled it. Extensive testing of both it and surrounding material will provide conclusions being sought by Nina's family, Prosecutor Mount and an exhausted team of searchers.

"We are all pretty much beat to the bone. But I must say I am certainly proud of the effort each and every person, including Nina's family, put into this operation. I know Debbie (Conover) has expressed her appreciation. I want to express mine to everyone who helped in any way," said Sheriff Lizenby.

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He also noted there's still a fair amount of work to be done on the case. "We need to know conclusively if this is Nina; we need to know how she died. All of this evidence has to be put together in a coherent, chronological order and presented to Prosecutor Mount. I guess you could say that we're still tying up loose ends and getting our questions answered," said Sheriff Lizenby.

He did not offer a guess as to when or what type of charges may be laid against Bobby Petty. "We'll get our homework done first. Then, we'll see where we stand," he advised.