



RYAN SODERLIN/DN

**TODD SEARS, the 27-year-old former boyfriend of Candi Harms, said he spent two years suffering from the guilt of Candi's murder because he was the last to see her before she was kidnapped in 1992.**

“*It makes you feel so happy. It's like you feel reborn. But boy does it take a long time.*”

**PAT HARMS**  
mother of Candi Harms

# Family still grieves, but learns to live again

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They've found only one answer — her death must have been part of a divine arrangement.

“One of the few ways we can allow ourselves to live with this pain is we just feel like it's part of God's plan,” Pat said. “We don't know the plan. We just have to believe this was part of it.”

After Candi was kidnapped on Sept. 22, 1992, Stan, Pat and Candi's boyfriend Todd Sears, led a three-month search for her, spreading her name and picture across the world.

In December of that year, Candi was found, but not by a member of the public. Police were led to Candi's body by one of the men later convicted of killing her.

Pat, Stan and Todd's intense pain did not end with the discovery of her body. For Todd, the time following was the hardest for him to deal with, as he suffered two years of depression, sleeplessness and excessive drinking.

All their pain lasted years while Scott Barney and Roger Bjorklund stumbled through the courts. The two suspects were eventually sentenced for kidnapping, rape and murder — Barney to life in prison, Bjorklund to death.

Pat, Stan and Todd's grieving continues today, though they say they've healed from the worst trauma.

“For a long period of time we felt like we were living a nightmare and just kept waiting to wake up,” Pat said.

## Wave goodbye

Tuesday, Sept. 22, was a special night for Candi and Todd. Since July 17, only a few days passed that they didn't see each other. Because they had so much in common, their feelings had grown strong quickly, Todd said.

Three nights before, Candi and Todd said they loved each other. Tuesday they talked about

a possible future together.

That was the last time he ever saw her. Candi left that night in time to get home before her midnight curfew because she never wanted her parents to worry, Todd said.

One of the strange parts of the night Todd remembered was Candi's departure. Instead of her usual wave as she left, “she turned around and told me to have sweet dreams,” Todd said.

Earlier that night Candi told Todd about a dream in which she met God. Candi told him it wasn't a scary dream — God was just sharing jokes and laughing with her.

Todd said he didn't think about those things as he went to bed. The next morning he woke to a phone call from Pat asking if Candi was there.

Todd said he felt the first pangs of fear, confusion and frustration that morning as he and Stan wandered Lincoln looking for any sign of Candi.

Stan and Pat admit Todd had the most difficult time coping with Candi's disappearance. “He immediately started thinking he was at fault,” Stan said. “He started shouldering all the blame for what might have happened. There was no blame to be shouldered.”

They never held Todd responsible for Candi's death, Stan said. They couldn't hold Todd any more responsible than themselves, he said.

“After an incident like this, you always start doing the second-guessing, the what ifs,” he said. “You can definitely heap a pile of blame on yourself if you try or want to. But a person has to realize that things were out of their control.”

Todd didn't think so. He kept asking himself why he didn't follow her home that evening.

His guilt took the form of a nagging dream that haunted him almost every night for a year.

“(In the dream) I follow her home and Bjorklund comes up to grab her and we get in a fight and it's me he kills,” Todd said, “but

she makes it inside.

“I still think I should have followed her.” As Stan and Todd drove around Lincoln and UNL that morning when she didn't show up at home, they formulated many possibilities.

“Your mind definitely takes off in a million different directions,” Stan said. “I know I had a number of scenarios going through my head. All of them were bad. Some were as bad as what it turned out to be.”

Stuck between denial and instinct, Todd started imagining answers. Maybe she went to the library to study; maybe she had car trouble and went to a friend's house; maybe she loaned her car to someone.

“I kept thinking there's got to be a logical explanation,” Todd said. “This is Lincoln.”

They dismissed most of the favorable possibilities when a farmer called Stan Wednesday evening to tell him Candi's car was found in his field at North 27th Street and Bluffs Road.

When Todd saw the car and saw the driver's seat pushed back farther than Candi would have positioned it, reality hit him, he said.

“I walked down the road a little bit and sat in the middle of the road. My dad came up behind me and all I could tell him was, ‘She's dead.’ That was the only time I can think of when I just, for five minutes, I gave up.”

## Painful truth

As time went on, questions arose with few answers. Todd spent his time at the Harms' and the three became a triangle of support.

“We formed a family overnight,” Todd said. If one of them was down, the other two were there to bring them up, Todd said.

They spent most of their time with a nationwide search for Candi.

People in Lincoln wore buttons with Candi's picture. Family members passed out fliers across the state. Posters were sent across the country, and some even made it to South America and Korea. The Harms and Sears families raised money to rent billboard spaces to put up Candi's picture.

“We never just sat around and said, ‘I guess there's nothing we can do,’” Todd said.

Immediately after Candi's disappearance, the idleness was hardest for Pat, who stayed home to take calls and wait for any news.

“It was real frustrating to sit there and do nothing,” she said. “There was nothing I could do but sit there and think. And I'm not very good at thinking feelings and feeling emotions. I keep those tucked under pretty good.”

Keeping themselves occupied was one of the first ways Pat, Stan and Todd began coping, they said.

But Pat and Stan both returned to work after a few days; Pat at Bryan Memorial Hospital and Stan at the Veteran's Administration.

Those days went slow as they were waiting for police to find something.

On Dec. 5, Stan said a prayer hoping for an answer to Candi's disappearance. Three hours later police called with that answer.

They had arrested two armed robbers, Barney and Bjorklund. Barney had said he knew where Candi's body was and led police to 134th Street and Yankee Hill Road. A couple days later an autopsy revealed that the body was Candi's.

Stan and Pat said they were relieved, in some ways, because the mystery was over. But they were disgusted when they heard the details of Candi's ordeal of how she was raped, strangled and shot.

At that point, their feelings changed from confusion and frustration at the mystery, to anger toward the two men suspected of the murder. “To me they were just two people, two names,” Pat said. “Then they were a photograph. Then, when we got the details, then more and more details, they became two hateful, disgusting human beings.”

“I didn't think they deserved to be classified as human beings, especially Mr. Bjorklund,” Stan said. “To this day I still feel he is the devil possessed.”

## Red light

Todd's feelings only worsened when he heard about the discovery.

“I was relieved for like a second,” he said. Todd said he then “shut everything down, so he didn't have to deal with it.”

Hearing the details only deepened his guilt, he said. He found himself often day-dreaming that he saw everything that happened to Candi that night from an aerial view. He followed her as she was taken and imagined everything that happened to her.

“And watching all of it happen, I couldn't do anything about it. That must of been how I dealt with it.”

“It definitely took its toll,” he said.

Without noticing, Todd became quiet and withdrawn, he said, and started drinking too much and smoking.

A reckless person evolved inside him, he said. He would get angry when people gave him advice or offered help. When driving, he would speed up for a yellow light or try to beat a train across the tracks.

“There was a feeling that I had that thought it should have been me instead of her that died that night,” he said. “I think I wanted to test it to see how far it could go.”

At the same time, Todd said, he also struggled with a sad relationship with Candi's best friend.

They clung to each other as the last link to Candi, he said. Many of their dates ended with them lying on a bed, crying and talking about memories of Candi.

Candi's friend was a constant reminder of Candi, and the relationship deepened his grief, he said. Because he was still depressed and better after he broke up with her, he said. His attendance at counseling was sporadic, but he didn't think the counselors were helpful. Todd said he had to deal with a lot of his feelings on his own.

A year later when he was working at the Lincoln Journal Star's advertising department, Todd reached a turn-around when he met Brenna Longstein, his wife.

On Sept. 23, 1994, exactly two years after Candi was killed, he was asked to work because his boss was out of town.

Although he planned to take that day off, Todd reluctantly went into work after visiting Candi's grave, he said.

He didn't want to be around people, but he



MATT MILLER/DN

**STAN AND PAT HARMS suddenly became public figures when their daughter was murdered in 1992. The public looked up to them for their bravery in coping with their tragedy. “Only through the power of God were we able to be these people,” Stan Harms said.**

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