

**LAWLESS****“No More Silence”: Her Kidnapping, Sexual Assault and Murder Stunned a Town, and Started a Movement**

The Anchorage Daily News and ProPublica will hold an event in Kotzebue, site of 10-year-old Ashley Johnson-Barr’s killing, to explore sexual violence in Alaska.

by Michelle Theriault Boots, Anchorage Daily News, June 4, 2019, 12:30 p.m. EDT



Children play at Rainbow Park in Kotzebue on Monday, Sept. 17, 2018. The park was the last place Ashley Johnson-Barr, 10, was seen alive. (Bill Roth/Anchorage Daily News)

*This article was produced in partnership with the Anchorage Daily News, a member of the ProPublica Local Reporting Network.*

Nine months and a long Arctic winter have come and gone since the abduction, sexual assault and murder of 10-year-old Ashley Johnson-Barr in the northwest Alaska hub community of Kotzebue.

Signs of Ashley can be found everywhere in this town of 3,200. At the cemetery, groups of kids gather at the purple-painted wooden cross marking her grave. They leave trinkets, teddy bears, necklaces, even sports medals. People slip bouquets of artificial flowers through the chain link fence at Rainbow Park, where the fifth grader was last seen playing on a Thursday evening in September.

Her death lingers in other ways. The crime stunned Kotzebue and the rest of Alaska, galvanizing calls for everything from more robust public safety protections to action against the state's high rate of child sexual abuse.

Mandy Hill, who has worked with kids in Kotzebue for 16 years, said some parents who'd allowed their children to roam the town are hesitant now.

"You hold your kids closer. You watch more. You kind of hold back on letting them play out," she said.

Ashley's death also spurred a new level of public conversation about sexual abuse, one of Alaska's most wrenching problems.

"Our daughter started something," Scotty Barr, Ashley's father, said. "No more silence."

This year, the Anchorage Daily News is partnering with ProPublica's Local Reporting Network to examine sexual violence in Alaska. In some ways, Ashley's killing provided the impetus for that collaboration.

On Thursday, the Daily News, the Arctic Sounder and ProPublica will partner to hold a public event called "Breaking the Silence: Stopping Sexual Assault in Alaska" at the Kotzebue Recreation Center. The event will feature local residents, speakers from Maniilaq Association (the regional social services organization), local officials and journalists, and it will explore the origins of the region's high sexual assault rate, resources available for victims and possible policy solutions.

Though a full school year has passed since Ashley's murder, the people of Kotzebue are still reckoning with the very personal loss.

"It's still very present in town, every day," said the town's mayor, Lewis Pagel.

## **Missing**

For an anguished week after Ashley went missing from Rainbow Park, hundreds of people searched for the schoolgirl who loved basketball and church so much she'd attend a rotating menu of Bible study groups and church services up to five times a week, according to her dad.

Her body was found on tundra outside of town a week later. Peter Wilson, a 41-year-old local man, was soon arrested and charged in her murder. It's unclear whether Ashley knew Wilson, but he'd been to her home before, her uncle said in September.

Charging documents in the case allege that Ashley left the park with Wilson on a four-wheeler before he sexually assaulted and strangled her to death.



ATV tracks lead across tundra towards the area where the body of Ashley Johnson-Barr was found outside Kotzebue. Photographed Tuesday, Sept. 18, 2018. (Bill Roth/Anchorage Daily News)

Wilson, originally from Kiana, had lived in Kotzebue for years before the killing but made few connections. He had been on a weekslong drinking bender before Ashley's abduction and slaying, a relative of Wilson's told the Daily News in September.

Now he faces state charges of first-degree murder and sexual assault, as well as federal charges of lying to FBI agents investigating Ashley's disappearance. A conviction on the murder charge could mean a sentence of life in prison.

Wilson has pleaded not guilty to the state and federal charges.

It's not unusual for a defendant to be prosecuted on both federal and state charges at the same time, said Jenna Gruenstein, a district attorney with the state Office of Special Prosecutions.

Wilson had been held at the Anchorage Correctional Complex in Anchorage but was taken to Seattle for a psychiatric evaluation requested by his federal public defender. He is expected to return to Alaska after the evaluation has been completed, Gruenstein said. (Barr said he was told by the state and federal prosecutors that the psychiatric evaluation was necessary to ensure both cases could move forward.)

Meanwhile, a Fairbanks judge is currently overseeing the state case. Wilson is now on his third state court-appointed attorney. The first two assigned to the case were removed because of potential conflicts of interest with other cases handled by their respective offices, according to court documents.

Ariel Toft, Wilson's current lawyer, has not returned a phone call and email seeking comment.

Wilson is scheduled for trial in September, but that's likely to be delayed. Trials in high-profile homicide cases typically take years to resolve, whether they go to trial or end with a plea agreement.

People in Kotzebue have been watching the progression of the criminal cases closely, Pagel said.

"If anything happens — something gets moved, gets changed — that information gets out pretty quickly," he said.

## A Father's Life

In the nine months since his daughter's death, Barr has become an activist and an appointee on a statewide public safety panel.

In January, Barr and his daughter Aaliyah were invited to Gov. Mike Dunleavy's State of the State address in Juneau. Dunleavy addressed Barr directly in the speech, along with Edie Grunwald, the mother of murdered Palmer teen David Grunwald.

"Your loss is going to be the catalyst that will push us forward into a safer Alaska," Dunleavy told Barr.

Dunleavy subsequently appointed Barr to the Executive Clemency Advisory Committee, a panel that advises the governor on applications for pardons and sentence reductions.



Children play in Rainbow Park in Kotzebue on Monday, Sept. 17, 2018, the last place Ashley Johnson-Barr, 10, was seen alive. (Bill Roth/Anchorage Daily News)

Barr said he hears from people, some strangers, on a weekly or even daily basis about his daughter's death and the implications for public safety in Alaska.

"They're scared. They want stuff done," he said. "We want a safer place to live in."

## **Confronting Abuse**

After Ashley's death, people close to the man accused of killing her began telling stories of their own about Wilson.

Two female relatives accused him of raping them repeatedly throughout their childhoods without consequence. That brought back a question that has confronted Alaska for decades but is now being asked aloud: Did a culture of silence protect him?

"Some ladies, and young girls, sure did try and go speak up. Guess what happened? Nothing happened," Barr said. "People told them: 'They never did this to you. You're just making up stories.'"

Wilson and his attorneys have not responded to the abuse allegations.

Hill, who has worked with Kotzebue children for 16 years, said a fundamental change in the way people talk about sexual assault and child abuse is still far off.

"We're such a tightknit community and region, it's hard for people to speak up," she said.

Kotzebue showed its heart and soul in the way people banded together to search for Ashley and organized to mourn her. But there's work to be done.

"We still remain short on public safety," Hill said. "We still remain with alcohol and drug problems."

It's summer again, and playgrounds are growing busy with kids "playing out" in the endless Arctic daylight. Barr said he and many other parents in Kotzebue are now struggling with how much freedom to give their children, he said. Ashley had a curfew and a cellphone on the night she disappeared from Rainbow Park.

That's one change that many people in Kotzebue say they feel.

Gayle Ralston, who was mayor of Kotzebue until October, is a relative of Scotty Barr's through his wife's family. One of his grandchildren was a close friend of Ashley's.

Since her death, Ralston said he's been emphasizing personal safety to his grandkids with a new urgency and vocabulary.

"We remind them that, unfortunately, there's evil out there wherever you go," he said. "We tell them, don't be alone. If you see something, say something."

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*Reach out to the reporting team anytime: [alaska@propublica.org](mailto:alaska@propublica.org).*

**Correction, June 4, 2019:** This story originally misspelled the last name of a woman who has worked with kids in Kotzebue for 16 years. She is Mandy Hill, not Hall.

**Filed under:** [Criminal Justice](#), [Sex and Gender](#)