

LAWLESS

She Leapt From a Moving Car to Escape Her Rapist. Then, She Waited 18 Years for an Arrest.

Anna Sattler's rape kit sat untested since 2001 as Alaska's backlog got worse. Now, an ex-Iditarod musher faces charges, and she's speaking publicly about the attack for the first time.

by Kyle Hopkins, [Anchorage Daily News](#)

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Anna Sattler is one of nearly 300 Alaskans who have shared their experiences with the Anchorage Daily News and ProPublica as part of an ongoing investigation into sexual violence in the state. (Loren Holmes / ADN)



SERIES: LAWLESS

Sexual Violence in Alaska

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She met him at a bar on a windless January night. Anna Sattler, 30 years old at the time, was wrapping up a girls' night out when she got into an argument with friends and found herself without a designated driver. When this kindly stranger appeared, offering to drive her home, she accepted.

"The intention was never to pick anybody up. I was looking for a ride," said Sattler, who had grown up in the close-knit native Yup'ik communities of Western Alaska and was still learning to navigate life on the urban road system. The man seemed so nice, she remembers. Until she started saying no.

Sattler says the man parked along a dark stretch of highway on the Kenai Peninsula, a mountainous region dotted with a few small cities south of Anchorage. There, he raped her, dragging her back to his van again and again when she tried to escape and scrambled for the woods. Afterward, as he began driving again, he asked her if anyone knew where she was. Would anyone miss her?

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Sattler opened the door and tumbled from the moving vehicle. “If I was going to die that night, I was going to die by my own hands,” she said.

That was 18 years ago.

Like countless other reports of sexual assault in Alaska, the case soon went cold. Sattler told a state trooper what had happened and a nurse swabbed her body for DNA samples. In the months and years after the attack, she said, no one seemed to believe her.

“I’m someone’s auntie. I’m someone’s mom. I’m someone’s sister,” she said in a recent interview. “We are humans. We desire to have justice.”

Sattler gave up hoping he would ever be caught. Until now.

The Alaska State Troopers on Thursday announced that rape and kidnapping charges had been filed in the case against 57-year-old Carmen D. Perzechino Jr. A former dog musher who [competed in the 2004 Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race](#), Perzechino was a longtime Sterling resident whom the U.S. Marshals Service extradited from the Philippines to face the new charges. Perzechino has denied committing the crime. He could not be reached for comment.

Sattler says she can’t remember hearing much, if anything, from troopers after first reporting the rape. A troopers spokeswoman described the 2001 investigation as thorough and said it included witness interviews, seizure of surveillance video and other efforts. There is nothing in trooper records that indicate why the DNA evidence was not earlier submitted for testing, she said.

Over nearly two decades, Sattler had never stopped looking over her shoulder: The man had her driver’s license and purse, left behind when she jumped from the van.

Sattler said she wants her story to be publicly known as part of an ongoing investigation by the Anchorage Daily News and ProPublica into sexual violence in Alaska. She is [one of nearly 300 Alaska survivors who have come forward](#) to share their experiences from all corners of the state.

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Discussing Alaska's Long History of Sexual Violence Is One Step Toward Seeking Solutions

Seventy people, including elders and Alaska public officials, gathered in Kotzebue for a public conversation on a well-known but rarely discussed statewide problem.

Her assault raises questions about the Alaska State Troopers' efforts to find a suspect when she first reported the attack, and delays in processing DNA evidence that might have solved cold cases years earlier. It also hints at a new reckoning for perpetrators. Men who escaped arrest for decades are now being caught in a net of new evidence testing as police departments dust off old rape kits and cold case investigators [capitalize on advances in DNA testing](#) and [genetic genealogy](#).

According to the indictment filed on March 13 in state court in Kenai, but not made public until Thursday, troopers submitted evidence from Sattler's sexual assault examination for testing in 2018 under a project to reduce [Alaska's mountain of more than 3,000 unprocessed rape kits](#). As of June 1, [568 previously untested rape kits](#) collected by troopers, including the evidence in this case, had been processed by a private lab under a federally funded portion of the project. Troopers say Perzechino is the first person to be charged with rape in an Alaska case as a result of the newly tested evidence and follow-up investigations.

A longtime resident of the small town of Sterling on the Kenai Peninsula, 55 air miles southwest of Anchorage, Perzechino had recently sought to open a marijuana retail business. Investigators contacted Perzechino in January to talk about the 2001 attack. Two weeks later, he bought roundtrip tickets to the Philippines and skipped the return flight, an Alaska prosecutor said at his arraignment Friday.

Perzechino denied the assault and said he did not engage in any sexual activity with Sattler, the charges say.

Sattler, who said she was also sexually abused as a child by a relative, said she is sharing her story publicly now to support other survivors and fuel a conversation about rape in Alaska. The state's rate of sex crimes is nearly three times the U.S. average. This year, the Daily News and ProPublica have been reporting how gaps in law enforcement leave many communities unprotected.

"None of this stuff is my fault," she said. "We have to start saying something."

"You're Going to Die Today"

Here is what happened the night of the attack, according to Sattler's recollection and a detailed account filed in state court by prosecutors.

On Jan. 19, 2001, Sattler traveled from her home in Anchorage to Soldotna, about 145 miles away on the highway, where she and friends went barhopping. The group split up and Sattler began talking to a man later identified by prosecutors as Perzechino.

Perzechino offered to give Sattler a ride, the charges say, and she accepted. They climbed into a vehicle that Sattler later described to troopers as a white or light-colored van with bucket seats.

The body of the van had no windows, Sattler noticed as they traveled the highway. She began to feel uneasy.

"After the male [Perzechino] had been driving for awhile, he began to tell [Sattler] that he wanted to have sex with her and began talking sexually aggressive to her," prosecutors wrote in charging documents. "[Sattler] told him no, and that she wanted to go back to the bar."

Sattler said Perzechino's demeanor changed. He told her he was going to have sex with her, she said. He wasn't asking.

Perzechino parked in a wooded area, Sattler said. It might have been along the highway, or a back road. "I was so disoriented. I didn't know my way around back then."

No cars passed. She saw no house lights.

“When I attempted to run away from his parked vehicle, he would tackle me and drag me back,” Sattler said. She remembers feeling the sting of ice on the ground after each tackle. Perzechino took her back to the van, pulled down her pants and raped her, she said. He told her, “You asked for this.”

Eventually they returned to the road, Perzechino talking as he drove. The charges say he told Sattler she was “pathetic” and threatened to kill her.

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We're continuing to report on sexual violence and need your help with what's next.

Sattler says she believed him. “He said, ‘You’re going to die today.’”

She pretended to be in shock, leaning her head against the cool window. Lying motionless. If she jumped from the van, would her legs be injured, she wondered. Could she run? She said, “I wanted to make myself as small as possible so I can figure out what he was going to do next, and I could counter that.”

The van had traveled about two miles when Sattler saw the lights of a state Department of Transportation truck.

“As we passed the DOT truck, I turned and looked at [Perzechino],” she said. The two made eye contact.

Without a word, Sattler opened the passenger door of the van and rolled, spilling out onto the highway, she said.

The state transportation employee, who had been working to place a road sign, heard the squealing of brakes. According to the charges, he looked up and saw Sattler “rolling in the road” as a van sped away.

“He’s going to kill me!” Sattler yelled. She asked the DOT driver to follow the van.

“I had wanted to figure out who he was,” she said. After a short, failed chase attempt, the DOT worker took Sattler to troopers who began a sexual assault exam. The investigator seemed uninterested, Sattler said. She believes troopers could have done more.

“I knew that they wouldn’t actively search for him,” she said.

The charges say troopers tried to identify the white van by looking for similar vehicles in the area.

“Unfortunately, it was a popular vehicle ... and [the trooper] was unable to develop a lead through this process,” trooper spokeswoman Megan Peters wrote in response to questions about the investigation. The Department of Public Safety “takes all reports of sexual assault seriously and strives to investigate each case to the highest of professional standards.”

But by January 2002, a year after the attack, the state closed the case because of a lack of leads.

“He Did More Talking Than Running Dogs”

Perzechino, meantime, was making a life for himself in Alaska.

A short profile published on the Iditarod website says he had come to the state in 1996 from New Hampshire, where he owned a mechanical installation company. In 1999, he pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor, domestic violence assault charge and filed for bankruptcy the following year.

By the winter of 2001 Perzechino was competing in sled dog races, entering short Eagle River contests and finishing second to Lance Mackey in the Chugiak 50. Perzechino ran the Tustumena 200 and Copper Basin 300 before entering the Iditarod as a rookie.

“I’ve been a nervous wreck for the last two to three weeks,” he told a Daily News sports reporter on the day of the race. He didn’t finish the 1,000-mile competition, scratching about a third of the way through. He never entered again.

“Seemed like he did more talking than running dogs,” said longtime Kenai Peninsula musher and former Iditarod champion Dean Osmar, who remembered Perzechino as an occasional presence in the area mushing scene.

“He was sort of around the fringes of it. He was buying dogs,” Osmar said.

A few weeks after the Iditarod, his wife wrote a request for a protective order saying Perzechino threatened to shoot their sled dogs after she withdrew money from a joint savings account. Among the family possessions, the filing noted, was a 1998 Ford van. It is unclear from online court records if Perzechino responded to the accusations; Kenai courthouse filings show a judge or magistrate granted the protective order.

In 2005, the couple began divorce proceedings, public records show. (His ex-wife did not respond to interview requests.) That year two women filed requests, one in Kenai and one in Anchorage state court, asking that domestic violence protective orders be placed against Perzechino.

One of the women described herself as an ex-girlfriend. She wrote Perzechino told her he would “never let me go” and had vowed to slice a tattoo from his skin and mail it to her. “He said he needs to beat someone up and it might as well be me,” she wrote.

In 2009, Perzechino pleaded guilty to a charge of misconduct involving a controlled substance. A trooper smelled marijuana during a traffic stop and seized his truck. Three years later he was visiting Anchorage when he saw a woman and yelled to her from his car. He had \$20 to spend, he said.

The woman told him to pull into a parking lot and they agreed to trade money for sex, according to criminal charges filed by the city of Anchorage. The woman turned out to be an undercover police officer, and Perzechino pleaded no contest to a charge of soliciting prostitution. A magistrate ordered him to pay a \$1,000 fine and serve three years of probation.

More recently, Perzechino attempted to launch a retail marijuana business, according to Marijuana Control Board records. Regulators denied the application, citing prior violations at the address.



In March, Carmen D. Perzechino Jr. was indicted for the 2001 rape and kidnapping of Anna Sattler. (Marc Lester / ADN)

There is no indication Perzechino was considered a sexual assault suspect prior to 2018, when the state announced an effort to reduce the backlog of untested rape kits across the state. Some of the testing, for evidence gathered by dozens of police departments, would be paid for with a one-time appropriation from the state Legislature. Testing of evidence from trooper investigations was funded with a \$1.5 million federal grant.

Under the federally supported effort, troopers submitted DNA swabs collected from Sattler in 2001. It matched a known profile for Perzechino, according to the charges.

It's unclear how and when Perzechino's DNA came to be included in the national database, known as the Combined DNA Index System, or CODIS.

In January, an investigator with the Alaska State Troopers, Mike Burkmire, called Perzechino and asked him about the sexual assault reported all those years earlier by Sattler. Perzechino told the detective he did not go out to bars at the

time and said he did not drink. He was married back then, he said, and “never had sex with anyone he picked up from a bar and that no female had ever jumped out of his van while it was moving.”

Perzechino could not explain why his DNA matched evidence collected in the case, the charges say.

Sattler had told investigators the man who attacked her was 5’8” to 5’10” and about 190 pounds. Perzechino is 5’10” and currently 225 pounds. When the cold case investigator searched vehicle records, he found Perzechino had owned a full-sized silver van in 2001, similar to the vehicle Sattler described to police and witnessed by the state transportation worker who drove her to safety.

A grand jury handed up the indictment on rape and kidnapping charges in March, with a superior court judge in Kenai issuing a warrant for Perzechino’s arrest.

“People Like Him Are Not Welcome in Our Country”

On April 4, members of the Philippine Bureau of Immigration’s Fugitive Search Unit found Perzechino in an apartment in Angeles City, Pampanga, and took him into custody at the request of the U.S. Embassy, [according to a state-run news agency](#).

“People like him are not welcome in our country. If he did that in the U.S., then there is a possibility that he might commit the same crime in the Philippines,” Immigration Commissioner Jaime Morente of the Philippines said at the time. “Criminals like him ought to be barred from ever setting foot in our country.”

The Philippine News Agency reported that Perzechino was to be held at an immigration facility in Camp Bagong Diwa, Taguig, pending a deportation order. Troopers say he was extradited to the U.S. in August and is expected to face the charges in Alaska state courts.

The Daily News attempted to reach Perzechino, family members or an attorney representing him via several email addresses and phone numbers that he had listed in public records. One such email received a reply.

It said, in part: “Carmen has not been convicted of a crime. ... I do not communicate with Carmen and have no information as to his circumstance.” The sender did not respond to requests for additional information or explain his or her relationship to Perzechino.

At his first Alaska court appearance on the charges Friday, Perzechino asked Kenai Superior Court Judge Jennifer Wells that he be released on bail. He only lives 20 minutes from the courthouse, he said, and he promised not to leave.

Wells, who said Perzechino faces 20 to 99 years in prison if convicted, wasn't buying it.

"It looks bad, that the troopers talked to you and you went to the Philippines," she said, setting his combined bail at \$550,000.

Sattler had learned Perzechino's name this year when called by investigators and said she never stopped worrying about encountering the man who raped her. She said she's grateful for the new effort to test rape kits and to prosecute cold cases.

She also hopes to start a conversation about sexual assault in Alaska. It was a scary step to go public with her story, she said. At the time of the attack, she kept it to herself and she knows other Alaskan women who carry similar wounds.

"I want to hold everybody's hand who has been through something like this," she said. "It's not easy, but I have enough strength to go through this and I have enough to carry people through this with me. But I can't do it alone."

Update, Sept. 6, 2019: This story has been updated to reflect details from the suspect's arraignment on Friday.