

Daughter vanishes while on Alaskan cruise

The strange disappearance of Merrian Carver

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The Arizona Republic
Nov. 10, 2005 12:00 AM

She boarded the Mercury but never got off. The cruise line called it a suicide. But her father's investigation has left him with as many questions as answers about her fate - and the cruise line itself.

Her words tumbled out of the phone, anxious and afraid. "Do you know where my mommy is? I've been trying to call her, and she hasn't called back for days. Is she with you?"

From his home in Phoenix, Kendall Carver forced reassurance into his voice and tried to calm his 13-year-old granddaughter thousands of miles away in England.

"Don't worry. We'll call her," he said. "We'll find out where she is."

Kendall knew his granddaughter had talked to her mother at least once a day ever since a divorce left mother and daughter living on opposite sides of the world. Hanging up the phone, he felt something must have happened to his oldest daughter. Something bad.

Three weeks later, Kendall and his wife would discover what it was: Merrian Carver had flown to Seattle from Boston for an Alaskan cruise and had vanished while the ship was at sea.

Even worse, as the Carvers continued to look for their daughter, they also would discover the ship's staff members knew Merrian had disappeared and never reported it. They simply packed up her belongings and stored them away.

The Carvers' desperate search, told through interviews, court records, private-investigator reports and documents from Celebrity Cruise Lines, is not just the story of a missing woman. It also is one that raises questions about the cruise line's actions: whether it turned its back on a missing

passenger, violated its own regulations and withheld critical information from the family during its search.

Celebrity officials acknowledge that an employee showed bad judgment by not reporting Merrian's absence. But even if they'd known she was missing, there was little they could do. The outcome would not have changed.

That is little comfort to the Carvers. Sitting in his home office, which has become command central in the search for his daughter, Kendall's voice cracks with emotion.

"We've learned that if something happens on a cruise, you are on your own," he says, choking back sobs. "No other parents should ever have to go through the crap we've been through. We don't know if Merrian is alive or dead. We don't know if there was an accident or murder or suicide or something else. . . . It is a very sad story."

Tracing her steps

Even as Kendall soothed his granddaughter, he pictured Merrian, the oldest of his four daughters. At 40, she was a bright, vivacious redhead with an independent spirit and a penchant for writing poetry.

Although most of the family had moved west when Kendall retired from his job as president of a New York insurance company, Merrian stayed on the East Coast. She lived outside Boston, where she had gone to school before becoming an investment banker and marrying. She didn't have a job at the time and was living off a trust fund and her investments.

After his granddaughter hung up, Kendall made a note of the date: Sept. 1, 2004. He turned to his wife, Carol, and told her their daughter appeared to be missing.

The Carvers phoned Merrian's apartment in Cambridge, Mass. Like their granddaughter, they didn't get an answer. They kept calling, but only the answering machine picked up.

Their other daughters were next. Relatives. Friends. One by one, names were scratched off, and the phone bill stacked up. Nobody had any idea where Merrian might have gone. She hadn't talked with them or shared any plans.

Two days passed. Panic set in. The Carvers thought of bizarre accidents

and emergency rooms, their daughter alone and unable to communicate. They called the police to check her apartment.

Cambridge police officers went there but found no clue to her whereabouts.

Carol said it felt like they had run into a wall. And the Carvers were forced to consider a dark possibility. Years before, in the midst of her divorce and overwhelmed with the thought of her marriage breaking up, Merrian threatened to commit suicide. She even disappeared for more than a month. Could the same thing have happened again?

The Carvers tried to dismiss the idea, but there it was, like an ugly stain they couldn't erase from their minds. At the same time, their granddaughter kept calling, wanting to know if they had heard from Mommy.

After a week had passed, the Carvers filed a missing-persons report with Cambridge police. Several days later, a detective assigned to the case accessed Merrian's bank records. On her credit-card record he found round-trip airfare and a single ticket for a Celebrity Cruise aboard the Mercury. The ship had departed Seattle on Aug. 27 and returned to Vancouver on Sept. 3.

The Carvers were instantly relieved. They finally knew where Merrian had gone. She had taken a vacation. It was the answer they'd hoped for.

But their relief didn't last.

Cruise downplays trouble

As soon as the detective told them Merrian had booked a cruise, Kendall was on the phone with Royal Caribbean International, the parent company of Celebrity Cruises. Had his daughter been a passenger on the ship?

Three days later, the company's risk manager called back with the answer. Nervous with anticipation, Kendall took the call in his office. Only a month earlier, the office had been used for his photography hobby, a place of refuge. Now it was a mess of papers, notes and jotted messages.

Kendall was struck by Royal Caribbean's cooperation and concern. The risk manager was providing him with the thing he needed most: details.

Yes, Merrian had been on the ship. But apparently she had stopped using her cabin after the second night of the cruise. Kendall's voice cracked with alarm. "What?" The manager was quick to reassure, adding that it is common for passengers not to use their rooms.

Perhaps Merrian used a friend's cabin or met someone on board. Yes, Merrian had left some clothes and personal effects in the room, but that also isn't uncommon; guests leave lots of things. When Merrian didn't collect her belongings after the cruise, her clothes had been given to charity. Her purse, which contained some papers, keys and computer disks, had been put into storage.

Kendall asked the risk manager to open the computer disks and e-mail the contents, hoping it would give him something to go on. Within hours, he had them. But the only things that the disks contained were poems Merrian had written. Kendall and Carol pored over the writing, hoping for clues to Merrian's mind-set and her whereabouts.

Dejected, Kendall called Brian Branley, the Cambridge detective assigned to Merrian's case. He had confirmed Merrian was aboard the ship.

Branley didn't offer much hope. They did have enough to get the cruise line to file a police report. Branley called Royal Caribbean and told it to file a report with Vancouver authorities in case a crime had been committed.

At this point, Merrian had been missing for almost a month, and the Carvers were running out of options. Kendall started to think of his daughter as "gone." He had begun the legal process of taking over her accounts and finances.

But accepting the possibility of their daughter's death did not mean the Carvers understood what happened to Merrian.

Haunted by the idea of giving up on their daughter and frightened that they might have missed something, the Carvers hired private investigators to find out what had happened on that ship.

Suicide or murder?

In November, two months after Merrian's disappearance, California investigator Tim Schmolder met with cruise officials for a tour of the Mercury while it was docked in Monterey.

In his report to the Carvers, Schmolder said Royal Caribbean Cruises Manager Katy Yaziciyan was "initially defensive." Although she agreed to allow Schmolder to walk through the ship, Yaziciyan limited his time to a couple of hours because the ship's crew was scheduled for training that day.

Yaziciyan refused to name a cabin steward who had contact with Merrian during the Alaskan cruise. She said the employee, whom she described simply as a "male Indian," was now working on another ship. Likewise, the hotel manager, who oversees the ship's hotel operations, was on vacation and could not be interviewed.

Yaziciyan also refused to let Schmolder interview the security officer in charge of video surveillance. Video cameras aren't used to track guests, and the tapes are reviewed only after an accident report is filed, she said. They're stored for a couple of weeks before being reused. The tapes from Merrian's cruise would be erased by now.

"It was apparent early on that the level of cooperation from Royal Caribbean was not high enough to produce a thorough investigation," Schmolder reported.

Ship records confirmed that Merrian had never used her Sea Pass, an onboard credit card that also acts as identification. She never bought a single drink or made any other purchase. There also was no record that Merrian left the ship in any port during the cruise. But Yaziciyan acknowledged that the ship does not keep records of passengers getting off in Vancouver.

Schmolder surveyed Merrian's room on the Panorama Deck, more than 100 feet above the waterline. Although her cabin had an ocean view, the windows were bolted shut. Still, Schmolder said it was a short walk to an elevator or stairs leading up to an open-air deck.

"It seemed highly plausible that someone could go overboard without being observed," Schmolder reported, adding that Merrian's "sudden disappearance is most easily explained by the suicide theory."

But he couldn't rule out foul play on the Mercury. "A harmful encounter with a stranger would almost certainly have been swift and fatal."

The investigator's report made the Carvers angry. It raised as many questions as it answered. Why were cruise officials, who had been so

helpful before, suddenly throwing up roadblocks? Didn't they want to find Merrian? Why wouldn't they grant interviews with employees? Kendall decided to force some answers. He put lawyers to work in Massachusetts and Florida. They obtained court-ordered subpoenas for crew members, then made the cruise line comply.

Finally, in January, two Royal Caribbean employees testified in a telephone deposition. The Carvers were stunned. For the first time, they found out that cruise members were actually aware, even concerned, about Merrian's absence. Yet they did nothing about it.

Cabin steward Domingo Monteiro described meeting Merrian on the first day of the cruise. He noticed she was missing two days later. "I told my supervisor that this lady didn't sleep in the room," he said. "He say, 'Do your job.' That's it. He didn't say anything else."

Monteiro said it was not unusual for rooms to go unused. But he noticed \$107 had been left on the dresser, under his name card. Although cruise guests are expected to leave tips for the staff, it's customary to wait until the last day of the cruise.

Monteiro said he didn't take the money. He simply made up the bed, placed the day's program on the coverlet and left the room.

That night, he found the room unchanged, money on the dresser, program on the bed. He turned down the bed as required and left a chocolate in colored tinfoil on the pillow.

The next morning, the chocolate and money remained undisturbed, and he again reported Merrian's absence to his supervisor.

For the remainder of the cruise, Monteiro said he continued making the unused bed in the morning, turning it down in the evening and swapping out the uneaten candies on the pillow. He left a different color for each night. He also kept reporting Merrian's absence to his supervisor.

"I just informed him the lady didn't come in the room. I informed him," Monteiro said.

He said the last time he had seen Merrian was on the second night of the cruise, when he brought her two sandwiches from room service. He also said she did not appear sad, upset, angry or in any way out of sorts.

On the last day of the cruise, Merrian's clothes and belongings were right

where she had left them. Monteiro said he collected the money from the dresser, turned it over to his supervisor and asked what to do with Merrian's belongings. The supervisor told him to pack them up and store them in a locker.

Monteiro said he asked the supervisor if they should report it.

"I ask him, and he told me that he will take care of it," he said.

Kendall and Carol were drained. They couldn't believe the cruise line would just pack up their daughter's belongings and say nothing about her disappearance. They thought the search for Merrian couldn't get any worse.

Cover-up alleged

The next day, with the Carvers again listening via telephone, lawyers questioned Christos Hadjipetris, the manager in charge of hotel operations on the ship.

Although ship officials had not acted on Merrian's disappearance, Hadjipetris testified that the company had begun its own internal investigation and had fired Monteiro's supervisor for failing to report Merrian's absence.

The investigation had begun at the end of September, after Branley, the Cambridge detective, had contacted the cruise line. Despite the detective's request, no police report was ever filed in Vancouver. Instead, about five weeks after Merrian's disappearance, Royal Caribbean filed a missing-persons report with the FBI.

Hadjipetris said the supervisor was fired for poor performance. He called it a case of bad judgment, saying, "We felt that it would be better for the (supervisor) and the company that he would not be employed with us anymore."

To the Carvers, it appeared that Royal Caribbean was cleaning house. They wondered what other pieces of the puzzle might have been swept away.

In desperation, Kendall wrote to Royal Caribbean's chairman and board of directors, begging for intervention. Kendall appealed to the director as a former company president, hoping to cut through the legal bureaucracy.

"I am reaching out to you in the hopes of achieving some closure," Kendall wrote. "The response from your corporation's employees and agents has left me with a deep concern that I have been betrayed by, at the least, a failure to disclose, and at the worst, a concerted purposeful cover-up."

Kendall poured his heart into the letter. He wrote that despite all their requests for documents about Merrian and the cruise, the only thing Royal Caribbean had provided was a snapshot of his daughter boarding the ship.

Days passed. Carol watched her husband sink into despair as they waited for a response.

About a week later, Royal Caribbean's risk manager called the Carvers and promised the company would provide any and all information it could.

Kendall quickly asked for security reports, the captain's records, investigation reports and affidavits from employees.

In the middle of February, the Carvers received a copy of a security report about Merrian's disappearance. The Sept. 30 report from Royal Caribbean's manager of fleet security noted that company regulations had been violated. It said the ship's captain, the bridge and the security office should have been notified the moment Merrian disappeared.

The report also suggested Merrian's belongings should not have been moved.

"Evidence found at the scene of an incident must be left where found and must not be touched," the report said. "The ship's security staff must secure the scene and maintain the integrity of the incident scene, ensuring nothing is touched or tampered with, until outside investigators arrive on board."

In March, the entire Carver family was gathered at the United Methodist Church in Paradise Valley. The Carvers had so far spent about \$75,000 looking for their daughter. Now they felt it was time for a ceremony to remember Merrian.

They refused to call it a memorial service. Merrian's picture was on display. Her poems were put to music. It was both sad and uplifting.

The Carvers recently had cleaned out Merrian's apartment. They kept personal items and gave the rest to charity. But among the family gathered for the ceremony, there was no agreement on Merrian's fate. Even Kendall and Carol disagreed. Kendall thought his daughter was dead. Carol believed Merrian was still alive.

What Kendall felt most was rage at the cruise line. As he thought about Merrian during the service, he decided the only thing left to do was to sue.

Through the spring and summer, the Carvers and their lawyers continued to request documents from Royal Caribbean. But the cruise line didn't respond. Kendall had gotten into a routine, calling and sending e-mails to the police, the Coast Guard and the FBI, trying to keep the search for his daughter alive.

In August, the Carvers sued Royal Caribbean for damages in a Miami court. And when reporters questioned the cruise line about the lawsuit and Merrian's disappearance, the company issued a statement that stunned the Carvers.

Royal Caribbean declared Merrian dead.

"Mrs. Carver had severe emotional problems, had attempted suicide before and appears to have committed suicide on our ship," the cruise line said in the Oct. 26 statement. "The death of Merrian Carver is a horrible tragedy, but, regrettably, there is very little a cruise line, a resort or a hotel can do to prevent someone from committing suicide."

Contacted by The Arizona Republic, officials with the cruise line declined to elaborate on the statement, saying the case was in litigation.

For the Carvers, the statement was the ultimate insult. Sitting forward in his chair recently, Kendall jabbed at the one-page statement. He had already typed up a response on his office computer accusing Royal Caribbean of omitting some facts and misstating others.

"This was just their way of trashing Merrian," he said. "That's all this is." He shook his head, ran his hands through his hair and looked at his wife.

"How do they know for sure she is dead?" he said. "Do they know something we don't?"