



Missing Clearwater boy's case like Jessica's

By: **Ned Roberts**

Clearwater, Florida - It's been two weeks since Jessica Lunsford's father discovered his daughter was missing from her room. The family is holding out hope the nine-year-old girl will be found safe, despite days of searching that turned up nothing.

The case is a lot like that of Zachary Bernhardt who disappeared on September 11, 2000. Like Jessica, the eight-year-old Clearwater boy was home at bedtime, but gone by morning. As with Jessica's disappearance there was an all-out search, still Zachary remains missing.

Denise Simpkins / Zachary Bernhardt's Aunt:
"It's gonna get tough for them now."

Zachary's aunt Denise Simpkins has a unique insight into what Jessica's family is likely feeling.

Denise Simpkins:
"Reality that it could be a few more weeks, or it could be a month. It could be a couple years. Hopefully it won't be. Hopefully it won't be, but reality is starting to set in."

To deal with her reality, Simpkins began working at Child Protection Education of America in Brandon. There, she helps keep other families from experiencing a similar tragedy. Meantime Zachary's mother has moved from the area, remarried, and recently had another child. All the while the family and detectives continue to pursue leads.

Denise Simpkins:
"It never goes away."

Simpkins says one difficulty Jessica's family faces is that as time passes law enforcement and the media can't devote as much time to the case. Long term, she says the most difficult thing to deal with is a lack of closure. At this point she would rather know her nephew has passed on, than continue wondering if he is suffering.

At right is an age progression picture of what Zachary would have looked like a few years ago. If you have any information about his disappearance you are asked to call the Clearwater Police Department.

Also at right is a picture of Jessica Lunsford. Call the Citrus County Sheriff's Office with any information about her.

Tampa Bay's 10 News



Zachary Bernhardt



Jessica Lunsford

