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Parents, Friends Walk To Keep Hope For Missing Children

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6-CITY EVENT TO END SEPT. 8 IN TALLAHASSEE

TAMPA - A lot happened in Linda Dages' life in 10 years.

Her children became young men and women, moved out and started their own lives. Grandchildren were born. Milestones were reached.

Time keeps marching forward.

But, in many ways, time for Linda Dages and her family froze on April 28, 1993.

That's the day Linda's daughter, Bonnie Lee Dages, 18, and Bonnie's son, Jeremy Lee, 41/2 months, disappeared from the parking lot of a grocery store in Lithia.

Bonnie Dages had withdrawn \$10,000 from a bank account days before her disappearance, and her van was found in the grocery store parking lot, locked with her purse and Jeremy's baby things inside.

And it's in that parking lot that Linda Dages finds herself returning in her mind, never giving up hope that she'll find her daughter and grandson.

"People tell you to just move on with your life, and you do the best you can, because you have to," Linda Dages said Saturday. "But part of you is always holding out that tiny sliver of hope that they might be found. You can't stop hoping."

Dages and dozens of other families and friends of missing children in the Tampa area gathered Saturday to begin a six-city walk to honor missing loved ones.

The second annual "Have a Heart for Missing Children" walk started in Tampa's Al Lopez Park. Walks will be held this week in Miami, Fort Myers, Orlando and Jacksonville. The week will end in Tallahassee on Sept. 8, Florida Missing Children's Day.

Those gathered included friends and family of missing children, law enforcement officers and legislators from the Bay area.

After speeches and presentations, participants walked around the park, many wearing T-shirts emblazoned with pictures of their missing loved ones. Others held photographs.

The walk was created by Child Protection Education of America Inc., a national organization based in Tampa that assists in the search for missing children.

The agency offers free photograph distribution, safety education events and a fingerprinting program, said Don Smith, the organization's director of public relations.

"It takes a particularly strong person to take something that is so awful in your lives and try to turn it into something positive to help someone else," Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio told the crowd. "I know every one of you would physically walk to Tallahassee or walk 1,000 miles if you thought it would bring your loved one home."

An aunt and several friends and family members of Zachary Bernhardt attended Saturday's walk and plan to participate in the others.

Zachary, 8, disappeared from his mother's Clearwater apartment on Sept. 11, 2000.

"Tragic things happen to people every day, but it's so much worse when you don't know what happened or where that person is," said Billie Jo Jimenez, Zachary's aunt. "It is unbelievably hard. We need to bring all these kids home."

Jimenez said it was encouraging to see families who have been through similar experiences and to know that Zachary has not been forgotten.

"This has been our worst nightmare, but we will never, ever let his memory go," Jimenez said. "Please, please, don't stop looking for Zach."

Darlana Piazza, a friend of Jimenez's, said Zachary's disappearance has taught her to hold her two teenagers and 1-year-old nephew a little closer.

"These days, you have to be so careful," Piazza said. "You can't let your kids out of your sight for one second. In the blink of an eye, they could be gone."

Contact Child Protection Education of America at www.find-missing-children.org or 1-866-872-2443.

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