

Remembering Alicia Markovich

Internet sleuths focus on Windber teen's cold case

Bruce Siwy and Eric Kieta

The Daily American USA TODAY NETWORK

(Editor's note: This is the first part of a series about Alicia Markovich, a Windber native who disappeared from Blairsville in 1987 at the age of 15.)

As teens, Lori Hiner and Alicia Markovich walked Windber together, teamed up on homework, and listened to '80s hip-hop and bands such as Bon Jovi.

"She was more outgoing than I was," Hiner said of Alicia. "We considered her ... 'funky' is the word we used for her. She was definitely more outgoing than I was."

Their fun times together ended abruptly after April 26, 1987, the day 15-year-old Alicia vanished from her father's Blairsville home.

In recent years, Hiner and a scattered community of web sleuths have worked to keep Alicia's case in the public light. The convoluted mystery has included anonymous letters linked to a series of other probable murders and has raised questions about a Subaru station wagon burned to a shell a year after Alicia's disappearance.

Missing person

Alicia's parents, John Markovich and Marcie Vitko, both grew up in the village of Rummel near Windber.

Vitko said that Markovich, who is several years older than her, reminded her of a "redneck Buddy Holly." The two of them married in 1971 when she was just 13. She gave birth to Alicia when she was 14.

During the period of her 1987 disappearance, however, Alicia was living with only her mother in Windber.

Alicia's parents had divorced in 1981. Vitko said her relationship with Markovich remained strained because they argued about child support.

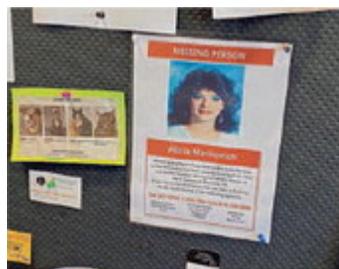
She recalled, however, that her daughter seemed to maintain a good bond with her father despite the friction between her parents.



From left: Marcie Vitko, the mother of Alicia Markovich, sits with friends Leah Altemus and Chrissie Boyer at Black Raven Metaphysical Shoppe & Reiki Salon in Windber. ERIC KIETA/THE DAILY AMERICAN



A photograph of John Markovich and Marcie Vitko from when they were married. PROVIDED BY LEAH ALTEMUS



A flier regarding the 1987 disappearance of Alicia Markovich pinned to a community post board of a Sheetz store in Blairsville. ERIC KIETA/THE DAILY AMERICAN

for motorists traveling to and from Pittsburgh, approximately 40 miles to the west.

The possibility that Alicia left her father's home to visit someone is one that's been considered by her

“They went to the Grand Canyon on vacation once,” she said. “Him and his girlfriend — I (didn’t) even know her — and Alicia went. And it was odd because the girlfriend kept complaining and carrying on, on this Grand Canyon trip, and John sent her home. And him and Alicia continued the vacation.”

On the day of her disappearance, Alicia was to spend time with her father at his home, which was 40-some miles away from her mother’s residence in Windber.

“There was some disagreement between them,” said Trooper Cliff Greenfield, a public information officer with the Pennsylvania State Police. “And she left and she’s never been seen since. So we have a lot of hypotheses about what could have happened to her.

“It’s possible that she was hitchhiking or trying to find a ride back to Windber, where she was from.”

Markovich had picked up his daughter at approximately 9:30 a.m. on the day that she vanished. He told police Alicia walked out of his home early that evening after they argued about her grades and her choice of friends.

Vitko said she began calling Markovich around 8 p.m. that night to ask when he was bringing Alicia home because she had school in the morning.

According to Vitko, Markovich didn’t call her back until 1 a.m. He told her: “Marce, she’s gone.”

Markovich lived along Dunn Avenue in Burrell Township. His home is just outside of Blairsville and within a literal stone’s throw of Route 22, a four-lane roadway that serves as a major thoroughfare

the public light.

‘Justice for Alicia Markovich’

Because Alicia’s case is so personal to her, Hiner has channeled the power of the internet to share information about the disappearance.

Hiner manages “Justice for Alicia Markovich” pages on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. She’s also worked on a digital case field for uncovered.com.

“I think we just realized that there is a lot more out there with social media that we can put her name into it,” she said. “And ... it’s just been phenomenal.”

family over the years. Vitko noted that her daughter had a friend or two living in nearby Blairsville.

Chrissie Boyer, another one of Alicia’s childhood friends, said she doesn’t think she would have attempted crossing the busy four-lane on foot.

Alicia was 5-foot-2 and weighed 120 pounds. She had brown hair, blue eyes and pierced ears, and on the day of her disappearance she wore a white crop top with red, yellow and blue stripes and white sneakers.

“No one ever seen her on (Route) 22,” Boyer said, noting that police never received a report of anyone matching her description walking the area at the time. “No one ever seen her go in the (Markovich) house and no one ever seen her leave the house.”

Unsettled by the nature of this mystery, an informal community of social media users and podcasters have been doing their part to keep Alicia’s story in

Coming Thursday

h Mysterious letters have sent Markovich investigators from New Hampshire to Florida

[MARKOVICH from page A1 to A5](#)



A view from the bottom of Dunn Avenue in Burrell Township leading up to the home of John

Hiner has also appeared on several podcasts related to Alicia's disappearance.

Another woman who has helped keep the case in the public light is Leah Altemus, a former law enforcement agent who now runs the Black Raven Metaphysical Shoppe & Reiki Salon in Windber. She said she's received several interesting leads since establishing a tip line on one of the websites she monitors in conjunction with Vitko and Boyer.

"Talking to the right people helps," Altemus said, "because we've over the past couple months, I've talked to a lot of people, and still to this day, they're terrified to speak about this. This has been 34 years, and the mentality, especially in the Blairsville area, is they're scared.

"Scared of what?" Others involved with spreading the word have been troubled by vanishing fliers about Alicia's disappearance. Kristin Nicole Pollard, an Indiana County criminal justice student, said that she has placed missing person posters in Blairsville, Derry, Latrobe and Bradenville — and that several of the ones in Blairsville were torn down.

"Some of them are missing," Pollard said. "But I have no proof of who took them."

Confession letter

According to Greenfield, Alicia's file is reviewed regularly by members of a state police cold-case unit.

Sometimes referred to as the "CIA," the Criminal Investigation Assessment Unit is tasked with looking

Markovich. His daughter, Alicia, was reported missing from his house in 1987 and her case remains unsolved. BRUCE SIWY/THE DAILY AMERICAN

at missing persons cases and other major active investigations. Their job is to assist the primary investigator.

As more time passes, Greenfield said, the case becomes more difficult to solve.

"In speaking with our investigators, this case certainly does present some challenges. One being that the location of her disappearance is so close in proximity to a major roadway like state Route 22, with a lot of traffic," Greenfield said. "So that's one challenge.

"Another challenge is certainly the amount of time that has passed. She was 15 years old at the time of her disappearance, she would be 49 years old today. And also the fact that no one was ever listed as a suspect. So those three things together make this a particularly challenging case for investigators."

More than 20 years ago, however, previous investigators were handed a figurative bombshell.

A writer claimed that Alicia had been killed. The person also provided a description of where she was buried.

Further, this writer may have also been responsible for similar letters about other teens who vanished in the 1970s and '80s.