

TRUE CRIME / MARCH

LOOKING FOR APRIL



When a 30-year-old woman went missing in the San Bernardino County desert, her mother led the campaign to find her.

By Tammy Minn • Photography by Trina Gonzalez

Want to find a missing girl from Arkansas? I-15 3 miles east of Barstow." It was a creepy message and one Gloria Denton can't get out of her head. In fact, it's the last thing she thinks of before falling asleep and the first thing that comes to mind in the morning: Where is my daughter?

For more than six years, Denton, a 5-foot blonde with a thick Southern drawl and a supercharged spirit, hasn't stopped looking for her daughter, April Pitzer, a 30-year-old mother of two who went missing in the San Bernardino County desert in 2004. Denton's persistence has put April's case on missing persons websites, including "America's Most Wanted," and was recently featured on Investigation Discovery's "Disappeared" television program. Denton has done radio shows and newspaper interviews, and bonded with other families of missing persons. But she has also rallied search and rescue teams, mine experts, and hundreds of volunteers to cover the last place that April was thought to have been—somewhere in the 22,000 square miles of San Bernardino County, which includes a vast expanse of remote desert. Denton says she's just doing what any mother would do.

"When people go missing, they don't have voices, so someone has to speak for them," Denton says.

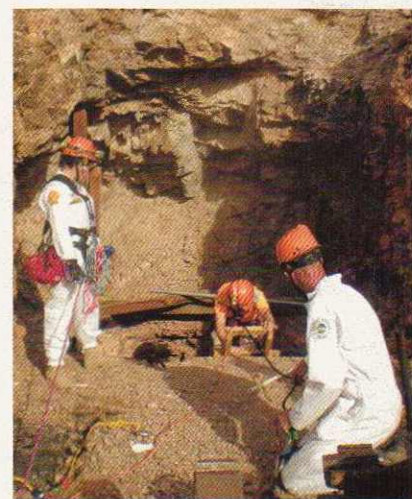
No one knows that better than David Van Norman, deputy coroner investigator and the unidentified-missing person coordinator for the San Bernardino County Sheriff Department Coroner Division. An outspoken advocate for the missing, Van Norman's place of business is often the meeting point for people who have gone missing and the families who are hoping to find them. He first heard about April Pitzer in August 2005 when he picked up his phone and heard Gloria Denton's voice on the other end. "I'm looking for my daughter," Denton said, words Van Norman says no mother should ever have to say to a coroner.

Detective Steve Pennington of the San Bernardino County Sheriff Department's Homicide Unit inherited April's case in May 2006. Sergeant Doug Hubbard handed him her file and said, "This is April Pitzer and her mother will call you every day," Pennington recalls. Denton laughs about that now. "It's true," she says. "I'm a pain, but it's all for April."

As a father, Pennington understands Denton's drive, but says April's case is a tough one. No one is talking and the key people involved are now dead. Still, he says, "Somebody out there knows what happened to her," knows how a young mother ended up missing in the desert.

It was late 2003 and April Pitzer needed a fresh start. After testifying as an informant in a federal trial that sent a man to prison, her marriage was on the rocks and April seemed different. Denton believes Pitzer suffered from stress and postpartum depression (she had two daughters under the age of three). Denton says April was wrongly diagnosed with bipolar disorder and was given medication for it. The

GLORIA DENTON (at right) after a search near Barstow, and (below) with a plaque in her daughter's memory at the Desert Discovery Center in Barstow. Below: Searchers at the entrance to the Golden Mine, where April Pitzer's body was rumored to have been.



result wasn't positive. "She was just zombified. She felt like she had gone crazy. It just wasn't April," Denton says. April's husband took custody of their daughters, and April's heart sank, Denton says.

When she was at a low point and living in Texas, some new acquaintances invited April to come to California with them. They ended up in the Barstow area, but things weren't as they seemed.

"They dumped her," Denton says, something April didn't fess up to right away. "She didn't want me to know. She was trying to get on her feet," Denton says. But April made do. She took a job as a caregiver for a woman in Newberry Springs named Barbara. An older man, Frank, had a spare room and let her stay with him. April frequently called Denton, who was at home in Arkansas. In early June 2004, April told her mother about a weird coincidence: she had run into the wife of the man she had testified against. The woman knew the people who had brought April to California and the whole group frequented the desert area. (*Some names have been changed for privacy reasons.)

"I said, 'April, you've got to come home,'" Denton says. On June 22, 2004, April called Denton and told her that's exactly what she was going to do. She would catch a bus in the next few days and would call her mom back with details. The call never came.

"I started calling everyone who had anything to do with April,"

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Denton says. When she reached Barbara, the woman April had been taking care of, Barbara asked Denton, "How does it feel to have your baby home?" I told her I didn't know because April never made it," Denton says. Barbara said that April had been there about June 27th and said her goodbyes. "She was coming home," Denton says. "I knew something was wrong."

It was several days before Denton made contact with Frank, the man April had been staying with. "He said he'd been in Oregon helping a friend move and that he didn't realize there was anything wrong. He said that when he went to work on the morning of June 28, 2004 April was asleep in her bedroom, but that when he returned later that day, she was gone," Denton says.

With her mind racing and fear setting in, Denton spent days calling every number April had ever called her from. She repeatedly called the cell phone April had been using, to no avail. She called Barbara again. "I asked her to please call the sheriff out there. April was missing."

Detectives interviewed people and put up flyers. On September 7, 2004, a deputy in Oregon spoke to San Bernardino detectives. He said he had taken a call at a Love's truck stop in Roseberg, Oregon about a suspicious message written on a bathroom wall. It said, "Want

But something Frank's daughter found after his death sparked renewed interest in the mines. It was a photo of Frank and his buddy, the one who claimed Red Dog Mine, at a different mine. A woman was in the photo and Pennington recognized her, had even interviewed her. "We wanted to know where that mine was," Pennington says.

He went back to the woman in the photo who said she thought it was near Ludlow, but wasn't sure how to get there. Pennington needed someone well-versed in the area's mines, so he met with Joe Pizzitola, a Newberry Springs man familiar with the terrain, and they found the Golden Mine. "It was steep, but had a sturdy wooden ladder," Pennington says, so in they went. Inside, they found a pile of rocks with a cross on it. Pennington poked around to see what else was there and found a roach clip. When he got it back up in the light, he saw Frank's initials on it. Search and rescue teams conducted the first of several searches, but found no signs of April Pitzer.

In the meantime, Gloria Denton kept up her own hunt. Besides calling detectives every day, she kept in touch with people in the Barstow area who had known April. She got them to tell her what they'd heard, no matter how awful it sounded. On one of her visits, she tracked down Frank's friend, the one who claimed Red Dog Mine. She was

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to find a missing girl from Arkansas? I-15 3 miles east of Barstow." He thought it was cryptic enough to document, so he collected fingerprints from the bathroom and retrieved the truck stop's surveillance footage. Deputies in San Bernardino County investigated the area but found no sign of April.

On Sept. 9, 2004, another lead came. Someone at the bus station in Barstow sold a bus pass to a woman who, when seeing April's picture on a missing person poster, commented that she knew her. "She's dead," she said. Detectives found the woman who told them that according to rumors, April had been killed and her body had been hidden in the desert, most likely in one of the many mines left over from California's Gold Rush days. Detectives discovered that Frank and his best friend frequented the old mines. One, Red Dog Mine, was claimed by Frank's friend. Detectives searched there. They discovered a white suitcase and clothing nearby that Denton says belonged to her daughter. Denton had come out to take part in the search and saw the clothing herself. But nothing of forensic value was recovered.

Following leads and gut feelings, Pennington and Van Norman, along with other detectives, search and rescue teams, Gloria Denton and hundreds of volunteers, continued checking various mines.

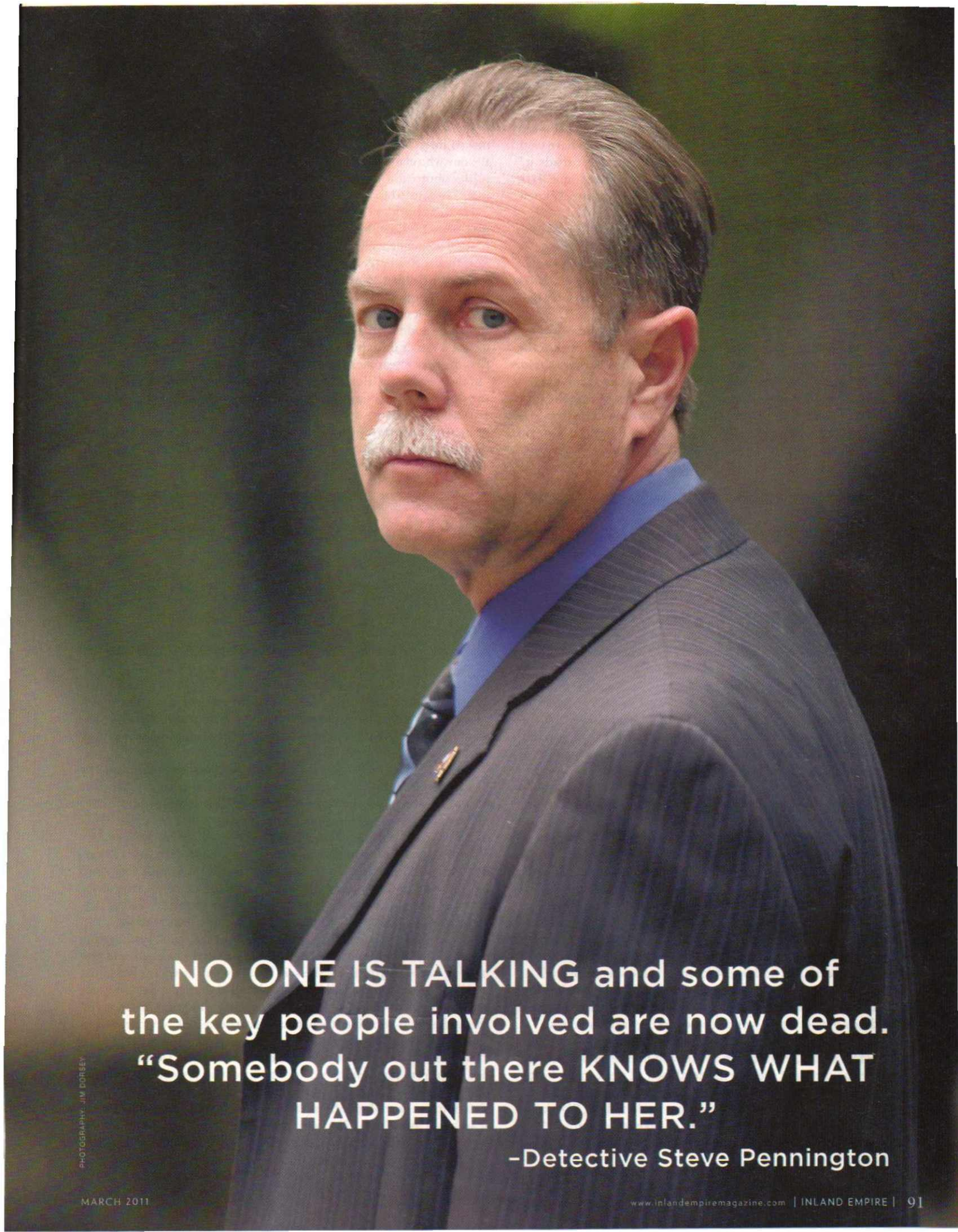
In 2006, Frank, the man April had been staying with, died of cancer. But before he did, Pennington spoke with him several times. His story never changed, not even on his death bed. "I went to the hospital one day to see him, but he had been discharged. So I went to his house and his sister let me in to talk to him. I said to him, 'You know you're dying. Is this something you want to take to your grave?' But he insisted he had no knowledge of what happened to April," Pennington says.

sure he either killed April or knew who did and she wanted some answers. She went to his house and when he didn't answer the door, she went to the neighbors. They said he was in the intensive care unit of a local hospital, seriously ill.

"Then I guess he's not going anywhere," Denton said, and she headed to the hospital. When she got there, "The nurse must have thought I was family because she pointed to a tray and said, 'They just brought his lunch, you can help him with it.' I thought, 'Well, okay.'" She sat down and began feeding him as she questioned him about her daughter. He said he had nothing to do with April's murder, but he did tell her that he had taken one of the people that April had traveled to California with—the people who knew the wife of the man she had sent to prison—to his mine. Frank's friend died of natural causes in 2009 without offering any further information.

Not long after his death, an acquaintance of his called Pennington. She said the man had been like a son to her, driving her around and helping her with groceries. She said that one day he was at her house and was very upset. He told her the police had searched the mines for April's body, but didn't find anything. "They didn't go far enough," she said he told her. Since then, teams have been back out for a deeper look, but have had no luck.

Besides official efforts by search and rescue teams, Denton has rallied help from many sectors. Among those who responded are Mike and Bridget Melson of Trinity Search and Recovery (TSAR), who assisted in an aerial photo search and several multi-day ground searches. Last March, The Mojave Underground, a nonprofit mine exploration and preservation group from Utah, helped with a search, as did Underground Explorers from San Diego. Also, Tim Miller, who



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founded Texas EquuSearch after his own daughter, Laura, was abducted and killed in Texas in 1984, has helped. Costs of the searches by private parties are usually covered by donations.

Pennington, Van Norman, and even Denton believe that April is dead. "She would have called me, she would have called her girls," Denton says. They may never find justice, but Pennington hopes they will at least recover her remains. "She left behind two little girls and they have no idea what happened to their mom," he says. They, along with Denton, need that closure.

Van Norman, of the coroner's office, seconds that hope, but points out flaws in the system when it comes to missing persons.

"If April is dead in San Bernardino County, and if she is ever found, we will identify her—because I have ensured that her fingerprints, dental records, and DNA are in searchable databases. This is because California mandates submission [of those identifying records]. If she was murdered and taken out of the area, the chances that the agency investigating her death will enter her identifier records into the appropriate databases decreases, and in some jurisdictions there is almost no chance at all because not all states mandate submission," he says.

Missing persons records in the FBI's National Crime Information Center database number just under 100,000, Van Norman says, a figure that barely scratches the surface of the number of people who truly go missing each year. He says many agencies don't take missing persons reports seriously, nor do they enter the critical identifying information into the NCIC database.

In 2008, a memorial butterfly garden was dedicated to April at the Desert Discovery Center in Barstow.

"I don't want people to forget about her," Denton says. That won't happen as long as Denton is alive. She recently heard a rumor that April might be buried in the desert in a spot that requires heavy equipment to access. The lead was logical enough that Denton couldn't sit on her hands. She reported it to Pennington, then got to work. "I've got to find someone with a backhoe," she says. "I just want to bring her home."

Information about April Pitzer's disappearance may be reported to Steve Pennington at (909) 387-3589; Detective Kelly Craig at (760) 256-4838; or anonymously to WeTip at 1-800-78-CRIME (1-800-783-7463); www.wetip.com.



PHOTO: JIM DORSEY

DAVID VAN NORMAN, deputy coroner investigator and unidentified-missing person coordinator for the San Bernardino County Sheriff Department Coroner Division