DEADLY DISTRACTION
The First 72 Hours

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The Call

- June 10, 2016 at 1956 hours
- Aitkin County receives 911 calls reporting a hit and run injury crash
  - Callers indicate 9–11 year old girl hit
  - Might be dead
  - Possible suspect vehicle – white Ford pickup pulling 5th wheel trailer

The Response

- Troopers, Deputies and EMS responded
  - Law Enforcement initiated multiple traffic stops while in route to the scene
- State Patrol District Investigator was called out for investigation – Sgt. Lance Turcotte
- State Patrol Accident Reconstruction Specialist was called out for crash reconstruction – Trp. Dion Pederson
- State Patrol Supervisor responded to the scene – Lt. Adam Fulton
- MNDOT personnel were called out to block the highway
North end of Mille Lacs lake

The Scene
Preliminary information

- Great Uncle heard a loud bang, saw a white Ford pickup pulling a white camper.
- Niece (Caylin) was by the road using her cell phone.
- Called 911
- No witnesses
- No vehicle parts
- Locate a sandal scrape near the fog line – area of impact

Day 1 – Saturday
First 24 hours

- Phone calls/tips start around 0600 (Troopers cleared the scene around 0300)
- Day cars notified of the situation
- Lt. Benz and Trp. Fredericksen
  - Printed flyers in squad
  - Went to businesses looking for video
  - Spoke with numerous people in public
- Public provided with a TIP line
Day 1 – Saturday
First 24 hours

- Lt. Benz and Trp. Fredericksen follow a video lead
  - Sees possible suspects travel westbound Hwy 18 to southbound Hwy 169
  - Brainerd PD locates the suspects on video in Brainerd
  - Crow Wing Sheriff’s Deputies see the suspects on video entering BIR
  - 1300 Sgt Turcotte and Trp Pederson interview the drivers and obtain dried blood samples from the trailers
  - Receipts viewed

- Cell Tower Warrants

Day 2 – Sunday
First 48 hours

- Lt. Benz and Trp. Fredericksen following up on leads

- Talking to the public
  - Door / camper knocking
  - Encounter a person that:
    - saw a maroon Tahoe towing a white camper
    - a female driver with at least 1 kid in the vehicle
    - Wisconsin plates
  - Video shows Tahoe travel south on Hwy 169 from Hwy 18
0645 – Lt. Benz and Trp. Fredericksen notice a maroon Tahoe connected to a camper with Wisconsin registration at Myr Mar Resort

The Troopers speak with a male and female separately
  ◦ Stated they arrived around 2000 Friday evening
  ◦ She was driving the Tahoe with a bumper pull camper
  ◦ He was driving a Jeep pulling a boat / trailer combination
  ◦ Did not see anyone on Hwy 18
  ◦ Did not run over anything except maybe a turtle or two

Photos
  ◦ Tahoe
  ◦ Camper
  ◦ Jeep
  ◦ Trailer and boat

Camper does not appear damaged, undercarriage relatively clean

Casual conversation after formal statements reveals
  ◦ Male appears anxious and sweaty
  ◦ The female shows no remorse but stated she has a history of enabling people
Day 3 – Monday
First 72 hours

- BCA help requested
  - Agents, Lab testing and crime scene (if needed)
  - Morning – BIR vehicle samples rushed to the BCA
  - Afternoon – BIR vehicle test results – Not human

- 1600 – Provisional Autopsy and photos
- 1700 – Victims’ cell phone found inside the residence

- Starting to get reports she may have been sitting on the shoulder, near the fog line

Day 4 – Tuesday

- Aitkin Deputies, BCA Agents and MSP meeting
  - Working 2 Hit and Run fatal crashes (both from 6/10/16)
  - Organize and prioritize case resources

- Surveillance videos, door to door interviews, cell tower warrants, phone calls and business interviews

- Videos given to MSP, but can’t be viewed
Day 5 – Wednesday

- The Great Uncle is re-interviewed at the residence
  - thought Caylin was in the bathroom
  - thought she was on her cell phone by the highway
  - thought she was picking up rocks (some were in her pockets)
  - No new info

- Witness “saw”

Day 5 – Wednesday

- Numerous reports that Caylin was sitting down near the fog line

- Sgt Turcotte recalled a report from Benz / Fredericksen
  - Meier was pulling a boat trailer that had right side damage
  - Meier claimed the damage was from when he had a tire blowout
  - People through the area prior to Meier/Chandler reported seeing Caylin
    - Meier/Chandler said they saw no one
Sgt Turcotte is able to view surveillance videos (2 days to get access)
- Able to verify vehicle descriptions of reporting callers
  - Vehicle drivers that saw her alive and after she was hit
  - Vehicle descriptions that were reported
- 2.2 miles east of the crash site – closest vehicle in front of Meier/Chandler was 1 min 25 seconds and there was a 1 min 41 second gap after them
- The driver after them was the first on the scene

*Remember – Meier/Chandler didn’t see anyone

Medical Examiner photo
MSP trailer tire photo

MSP obtains/executes a search warrant for the boat and trailer
Day 6 – Thursday

- S/A Jaeche and Sgt Turcotte go to the metro to interview the suspects
- Meier 1st–
  - Said Chandler saw a lady on the road but he didn’t see her
  - Meier didn’t swerve, go off the road, hit or run anything over– no bumps
  - Boat went into 2 different lakes that weekend
- Chandler 2nd–
  - Admitted to lying at the campground
  - Thought it was a deer then realized it was a lady
  - Didn’t see Meier swerve or hit anything (about 15 yards in front of her)
  - She had to move over to avoid the lady
  - She felt horrible for not stopping and guilty for not telling the truth

Day 7 – Friday

- BCA boat and trailer results
- Verbal report only at this time
  - Suspected fabric imprint on the grommet by the marker light– passenger trailer tire area
  - Obvious wiping/scrubbing on the passenger side of the trailer, underside of the wheel well (passenger side)
  - No wiping/scrubbing on the driver side
  - Diamond plate foot step held on by velcro and underneath it was wiped/scrubbed
  - Blood was located on the passenger side of the trailer
Day 7 – Friday

Difficult to see, but there is an imprint on the lower right.
Day 7 – Friday

- Search Warrants
- Jeep, Tahoe, Camper, Meier cell phone, Chandler cell phone
  search warrants obtained
  - State Patrol initiates traffic stop with the Tahoe that now has new WI plates
  - Chandler not alarmed she was stopped regarding search warrants
  - Chandler says she wants to cooperate and that she hoped we found out who ran over that little girl - this prior to knowing what the search warrants were for
- All search warrants were sealed after their execution to prevent data from being released during the investigation

Day 10 – Monday

On Sunday, BCA– Tested 1 sample and it resulted in a DNA match for the victim

After checking with the Aitkin County Attorney, decision is made to arrest Meier and Chandler in Hastings

Chandler provided a statement, slightly changing it from before

Meier requested an attorney

Transported separately with audio/video the entire trip
Day 10 – Monday

- Statement from mother of juvenile passenger in Chandlers’ vehicle
  - Says daughter texted her saying they saw a dead body
  - Mom didn’t think much of it
  - Mom agrees to interview on Tuesday
  - Tuesday morning, mom says State Patrol not allowed to speak with daughter

Day 12 – Wednesday

- State Patrol obtains search warrants for juvenile passenger cell phone and her mothers’ cell phone
  - Numerous locations listed on the search warrant:
    - Residence, registered vehicles, any vehicle they were in, any premises they were found in and on their person

- Warrant served at their residence
  - Mom no security code, provided juveniles’ security code voluntarily
Timelines – Show suspect was there

- Video from businesses
  - 2 east of the crash site
  - 1 west of the crash site

- Most vehicle/owners identified (they called in)

- Tracked them across Highway 18
  - Average speed
  - Estimated time at the crash site
The actual 911 call time was critical in completing the investigation.

I learned of the discrepancy while working on the timeline.

On June 10
- Aitkin SO reports indicate 1956 hours
- MSP reports indicate 1958 hours
- Aitkin Dispatch indicates the 911 call was placed at 19:55:30
- The 911 machine was actually 2 min slow—true time was 19:53:30
TJ's Bar (Video):
7:42:00 PM: Meister travels westbound (Black SUV towing speedboat)
7:43:46 PM: Steve Meier travels westbound (White Jeep towing fishing boat)
7:44:03 PM: Debbie Chandler travels westbound (Dark SUV towing white camper)

TJ's Bar – Barnacles Resort (Video):
7:45:58 PM: Meister travels westbound past Barnacles Resort
7:47:19 PM: A silver SUV travels westbound past Barnacles Resort
7:47:47 PM: A white pickup with a topper travels westbound past Barnacles Resort
7:49:12 PM: Steven Meier travels westbound past Barnacles Resort
7:49:17 PM: Debbie Chandler travels westbound past Barnacles Resort
7:50:58 PM: Wendlandts travel westbound past Barnacles Resort
7:53:21 PM: Stiernagle travels eastbound and then north at Barnacles Resort
Barnacles Resort – Crash Location:
7:48:37 PM: Meister travels west past crash location and sees Caylin Donovan alive
7:49:58 PM: Silver SUV travels west past crash location
7:50:21 PM: White pickup with topper travels west past crash location
7:51:10 PM: Stiernagle travels east past crash location and sees Caylin Donovan alive
7:52:08 PM: Steven Meier travels west past crash location and does not see Caylin Donovan
7:52:12 PM: Approximate time of crash
7:52:15 PM: Debbie Chandler travels west past crash location and swerves to miss Caylin Donovan’s body
7:53:30 PM: Joel Jader calls 911
7:53:36 PM: Wendlandts arrive at crash location to find Caylin Donovan deceased in the road, no other vehicles around

Crash Location – Jct. Gas Station:
7:46:13 PM: Stiernagle travels east on Hwy 18 from the Jct. Gas Station
7:55:50 PM: Silver SUV travels west to the Jct. Gas Station
7:55:52 PM: White pickup with topper travels west to the Jct. Gas Station
7:58:39 PM: Steven Meier travels west to the Jct. Gas Station
7:58:41 PM: Motorcyclists (Stock) travel east onto Hwy 18
7:58:52 PM: Debbie Chandler travels west to the Jct. Gas Station
7:59:06 PM: Granholm travels east onto Hwy 18 from Jct. Gas Station
Myr–Mar Resort:
Steve Meier and Debbie Chandler spent the weekend at Myr–Mar Resort after the fatal hit and run crash.
11/01/2017 Testing

- Defense– driver wouldn’t know
- Similar vehicle, boat and trailer
- Video –
  - 2 Go Pro’s on the boat/trailer
  - 2 Cameras roadside
  - Squad following
  - Aerial cancelled due to snow
- Assignments for those involved in the investigation

Similar damage
Test dummy final rest was near the actual final rest
Prosecution

Meier pled guilty
- Felony
- Criminal Vehicular Homicide
  Leaving the scene

Overall Reminders

- Keep an open mind
- Follow up on everything
- Utilize all possible resources as soon as possible
Key points

- Assign an investigator and separate specialists
- Latitude given to those investigating the case
- Call for assistance early on
  - Troopers, Deputies, Police Officers and BCA going above and beyond
- Contact local businesses (video, flyers, getting the word out)
- Facebook
- Press Release/Conference
- Very open communication with the press

Case Management

- Statements – record, standardize
- File organization – discovery, duplicates
- Faster access to important computer programs
- Online, real-time data sharing and notes
- 1 person has to oversee everything; gets overwhelming. Maybe 2?
Compiled Data

- My MDC
  139 GB of data
  137,388 files

- Network drive
  79 GB of data containing 69,412 files

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Thank You!

- Aitkin County Sheriff’s Office
- Brainerd Police Department
- Bureau of Criminal Apprehension – Agents, Crime Scene Team and Scientists
- Crow Wing County Sheriff’s Office
- Dakota County Sheriff’s Office
- MNDOT
- MN DNR Enforcement
- North Memorial Ambulance
- State Patrol – Brainerd, East Metro, Flight Wing
A cross stands on the north shoulder of Hwy. 18 in memory of Caylin Donovan, 10, Lake Park, who was killed in a hit-and-run June 10.