

## The white coat Tori Stafford mystery

**Woman seen walking with missing 8-year-old is the key to a puzzle riddled with contradictions in Woodstock**

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Who is the woman in the puffy white jacket?

She is the key to the mystery surrounding the disappearance of 8-year-old Victoria Stafford, a puzzle that is riddled with contradictions:

Police say the woman walking across a Woodstock schoolyard with Victoria is someone she knows, but the missing girl's mother says she has provided names of possible suspects "but nothing has come up."

Investigators also say the girl appears to be walking willingly with the woman in a security videotape captured last week, but the mother, Tara McDonald, says her daughter "is not her normal self" because she "never walks but hops, runs and bounces."

While police do not suspect foul play in the disappearance last Wednesday of the girl known as Tori, residents of this southwestern Ontario community are fearing the worst.

Yvonne Kirby, a neighbor whose daughter is a friend of Tori's, said the lack of any evidence is "terrifying. It is almost as if she disappeared into thin air."

What the police do know of the mystery woman captured on a surveillance video from a nearby high school has been gleaned from a grainy image: Tori is walking with a young woman with straight dark hair dressed in dark trousers, a white puffy jacket and a bag slung over one shoulder. She is described as white, 19 to 25 years old, about 5-foot-2 tall and 120 to 125 pounds.

Yesterday, police in Woodstock called off the ground search for the girl. That decision was sharply criticized by locals, particularly Lee Graves, a friend of Tori's father, who vowed: "We are not going to stop."

Police then released an enhanced version of the video that shows the girl leaving Oliver Stephens School, where she is a Grade 3 student, a little after 3:30 p.m.

"The focus is on the mystery woman," said Const. Laurie-Anne Maitland of the Oxford Community Police. "We are still searching for Tori but she (woman) is the key. We are trying everything to identify her."

In the new video, the woman's face is still not clear but police believe the enhanced version can help people identify her.

"We just need one tip, just one," said Maitland, adding that experts had been working on clearing up images on the video since Friday

Members of OPP's behavioural sciences unit are now in Woodstock examining the video.

Yesterday, Sgt. David Rektor, a spokesperson for Western Region OPP, said such investigations always present challenges, but there are advantages in smaller communities.

"In a small town you've got the benefit of people knowing each other and being involved in each other's business, knowing what's common and what's not common and what's suspicious," he said.

So far, there have been more than 300 phone tips to police and a Facebook group called Help Find Victoria Stafford had more than 35,000 members last night, almost equal to Woodstock's 36,000 residents.

According to Robert L. Snow, a retired homicide captain from Indianapolis, abductions by strangers are tough cases to crack because they are so complex and rare.

"If you're looking for a missing person, the media is your best friend," said Snow, the author of *Child Abduction: Prevention, Investigation and Recovery*.

Statistics by the RCMP highlight how rare abductions by strangers are. In 2007, of the 60,582 children reported missing in Canada, 56 were kidnapped by an individual other than the child's parent or guardian and 285 were abducted by a parent. There were more than 46,000 runaways.

An American criminologist at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va., said there are a number of reasons why a woman might kidnap a girl she does not know – maternal fantasies, to retaliate against the child's family or to secure a ransom.

"There haven't been enough cases to allow us to do in-depth research into these people's motives and personality," said Dianne Cyr Carmody, a criminologist who has studied patterns in child abductions.

David Finkelhor, the director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, said the more typical case of a woman abducting a child involves "women who have lost a child or are in a relationship where they need a child to stabilize the relationship."

"The other kind is a family member who abducts in the course of a custody dispute. They may feel that the child is being badly cared for. It's a kind of vigilante justice. Some of these cases involve someone who is not a parent, but who feels the same way – a teacher or a child care worker who has a strong affiliation with the child. That's a conceivable dynamic, though it is very rare."

Victoria's parents, Rodney Stafford and Tara McDonald, have been separated since December.

"Children are sometimes abducted – though less and less – for economic or retaliatory motives," added Finkelhor.

"They're going to try and get a ransom; it's a drug deal that went bad. Sometimes the woman is in cahoots with a guy. She's being used as a decoy, to take the child off in a way that wouldn't be as easily detected."