

Finding Kathleen

Canberra's Kathleen Bautista's survival was nothing short of a miracle – with a little help from some great police teamwork.

It was a remarkable story that first captivated the national capital, the nation and ultimately the world. Canberra's 19-year-old Kathleen Bautista was a gregarious and bright young woman who was having a rough point in her life. After a night on the town in Canberra with her friend; she left on her own, depressed and unhappy.

Kathleen was last seen driving her black Hyundai i30 at 7am on Saturday 5 September, 2015. Even more concerning, Kathleen texted "I'm sorry forever" to her family and boyfriend and that was the last they heard from her. Kathleen drove to a remote bushland area in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and drove her car off the road. The vehicle rolled several times and came to rest in a small creek bed at the bottom of a ravine.

It could have been a tragedy. Yet, this story happily blossoms into an astonishing account of survival and one that captured the heart of the national capital. Kathleen survived for six days without food. She was badly bruised with abdominal and leg injuries. Kathleen eventually tried to crawl to the road to find help – but disoriented, had crawled up the wrong side of the ravine and was further away from help than before.

How Kathleen survived is still a mystery, but how she was found came down to the tireless work of ACT Policing (the AFP's community policing service in Canberra). The police officers and their partners at the Emergency Services Agency were instrumental in Kathleen's story ending happily. When police and emergency services found her on Friday 11 September, 2015, medics said she was inside her last 24 hours.

"Honestly, I cannot describe it," says Detective Sergeant John Giles from Woden Crime. He was tasked as police forward commander for the search effort and was one of the first people to reach Kathleen. It was clear that Kathleen was in poor health and had not moved for some time.

"I approached her with a little caution," he says. "I thought 'she is probably not going to be with us'. As I

got near her, she said 'excuse me, can you help me, I'm stuck'.

"I stopped in my tracks," Detective Sergeant Giles says. Even now there is relief in his voice as he relates the story. "I just turned around and rang her dad. It was the first time Ronnie [Bautista] was not upbeat. He just said 'hello, John'. I said, 'Ronnie, we've got her'.

"He just screamed. He just screamed and he asked me to repeat myself about three times. I've got to tell you, it was an emotional moment – for all of us. It was a rough ride."

A rough ride

From the time Kathleen's family alerted police, it was a race to find their daughter. Detective Sergeant Giles says right from the go there was an understanding within the investigation. He says "if this was my child, what would I like the police to be doing". That was the impetus that drove the investigation.

The investigation brainstormed five plausible options from abduction to parking her car in a friend's garage. Detective Sergeant Giles says 19-year-old kids just don't disappear off the grid. The investigators' process of elimination distilled into a remarkably accurate assessment of the situation.

Kathleen was a careful driver and had no traffic infringements – so she was hardly likely to speed or crash the car at terminal velocity. The safety features in the vehicle were such that at modest speeds she would survive. Intelligence was also able to view footage from point-to-point traffic cameras, all but eliminating the possibility that Kathleen had travelled to Sydney or Melbourne. Detectives believed she had most likely crashed her vehicle somewhere in the ACT and was still alive.

Numerous teams were called upon to put the pieces together and to determine Kathleen's last movements and location. On Saturday 5 September, ACT Policing Operations attempted to locate Kathleen's mobile



Kathleen Bautista's disappearance in a remote area of the Australian Capital Territory sparked a massive six-day search.



Police and emergency services rescue Kathleen Bautista after six days of survival in a remote area of the Australian Capital Territory.

Social media stats

ACT Policing uploaded six Facebook posts from the start of the search to the final statement from Kathleen.

- Reach: 3 million
- Comments from the public: 4200
- Likes: 100,000

Facebook comment:

“To those outside of Canberra who say the place has no soul you are mistaken. To see the whole community get around this young lady and her family is truly warming. Kat, all the best with your recovery.”

“You are a huge inspiration to girls our age and such a fighter, from one stranger to another, I’m so happy you’re okay and you deserve all the good things that are to come.”

“Moved to tears of gratitude again ... we were all for you Kat through the long search! You have your future ahead of you, many blessings.”

“So glad you are smiling & safe. Well done to this brilliant town. Well done to you sweet young lady, for having the strength to get through the days until your rescue.”

phone through Vodafone. Although this avenue appeared inconclusive at the time, the information they were able to obtain would later become paramount in finding Kathleen.

ACT Policing’s Intelligence Team Leader Sergeant Ivan Naspe says his team was able to work closely with Vodafone to further understand the ‘ping’ between Kathleen’s mobile phone and Black Mountain Tower. This initially led the search and rescue team to the lower Molonglo Nature Reserve.

Search and Rescue First Constable Lachlan Ryan and Leading Senior Constable Mark Travers coordinated the search, which involved considerable resources and began on day three of the investigation, initially concentrating on bushland west of Telstra Tower.

Specialist Response Group (SRG) Air Support used the police helicopter to search the western edge of the ACT from Kings Highway to Batemans Bay while SRG Maritime searched Lake Burley Griffin with Side Sonar Technology and rafted the Murrumbidgee River from Cotter to Uriarra.

Other search teams from ACT Policing included Crime Reduction, Traffic Operations, Rural Patrol and General Duties. On Wednesday 5 September, ACT State Emergency Service (SES) volunteers joined the search which continued around the reserve.

Media

It was also on day three that Detective Sergeant Giles opened up the investigation to the media. He says the investigation needed more people mindful of the black Hyundai and was willing to take the chance of the inevitable ‘distraction calls’.

ACT Policing’s Senior Media Advisor David Packwood was in contact with the Bautista family over the course of the week, coaching them through the growing media interest and managing requests for interviews with the family.

“The Kathleen Bautista missing person search is something that I will never forget,” David says. “On a personal level it consumed me from day one when John Giles called me and said ‘we’ve got a missing person and you’ve got the green light to open up to the media in our search for information.’”

“We engaged media outlets early, providing access to the search and rescue effort, which allowed the public to see what police were doing to find Kathleen and how they

could help,” he said. David also credited AFP Policing social media channels for getting the community talking about Kathleen and looking for her black Hyundai i30, essentially increasing the eyes on the street. Media also were given access to police internal briefings, which David says is something that doesn’t normally happen.

Then the breakthrough all had been hoping for occurred. ACT Policing Intelligence further scrutinised telecommunications records. Detective Sergeant Giles highlights the tireless efforts of Mandy Rankin and Amanda Canham and says they were the backbone of the intelligence analysts. He says it was they who really engineered the breakthrough with the telecommunications company.

A second tower at Isaacs Ridge had registered Kathleen’s mobile phone on Saturday 5 September. They cross checked this information against the Black Mountain Tower ping and were able to further define the search to a number of strategic locations in the Cotter area.

First Constable Ryan and Leading Senior Constable Travers, using this intelligence, directed resources to a number of locations in the Cotter area including Settlement Road. SES member Lisa Mitchell soon found Kathleen’s crumpled car at the bottom of Cotter Gorge.

About 10am that morning, Constable Gareth Hipwell of ACT Policing’s Rural Patrol saw a hand waving in the scrub a few hundred metres from the car, which turned out to be Kathleen.

The contact team that first approached Kathleen included members from Search and Rescue, Criminal Investigations, Rural Patrol, SES, and ACT Parks and Conservation.

When they found her, Kathleen was in poor condition, lying in the foetal position with clear signs of exposure. She was unable to move and had clearly not moved for a long time. Still, she was in remarkably good spirits, even telling jokes.

On the day Kathleen was found, a press conference was held involving Kathleen’s father, Detective Sergeant Giles, Senior Constable Ryan, Sergeant Naspe and SES representatives.

“This is why we come to work every day,” said Detective Sergeant Giles, who told the media he was overjoyed that he could make the call to Ronnie Bautista.

He credited the success of the mission to the incredible teamwork between ACT Policing Intelligence, SRG, Media, Operations, Crime Reduction, Rural Patrol, Traffic Operations, Search and Rescue, ACT Ambulance, SES workers and Vodafone.

On Tuesday 22 September, Kathleen released a statement of thanks to the police and emergency services that helped find her. She continues to recover from her ordeal with the support from her family.

“It was certainly one of the best days of my policing career,” says Detective Sergeant John Giles.

The emotional intensity of the situation brought all involved closely together. So close was the bond between the Bautista family and police that Detective Sergeant Giles and David Packwood were invited to Kathleen’s 20th birthday party.

“Possibly the most tragic story has the most uplifting outcome,” Detective Sergeant Giles says. “Of course, this young girl has got a new lease on life. She is a beautiful, healthy 20-year-old now. She is an amazing kid.”

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Kathleen Bautista takes a selfie with her father, Ronnie, safe and well in hospital.