

[Transcript] Crime Junkie / MISSING: Denise Pflum

Hi, crime junkies. I'm your host Ashley Flowers.

And I'm Brett.

And the story I have for you today is one that probably could have gone the way of so many other cold cases.

A little less attention year after year until finally forgotten completely.

But instead, this case has stayed alive for over 37 years, thanks to the tireless efforts of two parents who have never given up the hope that they'll one day know what happened to their daughter.

This is the story of Denise Flum.

It's March 28, 1986, and Judy Flum is getting home from her job at the local bank.

Now, it's like the middle of the day. It's Good Friday,

but the bank is closed for this like three hour break for the religious holiday.

It's from like noon to three.

And on this day, the weather is beautiful and warm.

It's one of those days when you can just tell winter is on its way out.

Well, when Judy gets home, it's just a little after 12 and her 18 year old daughter, Denise, is actually getting ready to leave because you see the night before, Denise had been at this spring break bonfire party out in this field, but at some point during the party, she lost her purse.

And so now she's planning to go back to where this happened at and see if she can find it.

So she tells her mom that she had asked a few friends if anyone could go with her, maybe to help her search, but everyone was busy.

So she's just going to go it alone.

So Denise heads out in her parents' Buick at around 12 30 and Judy starts doing some work around the house,

taking advantage of her time off to just get some things done.

Now, here's where my source material kind of varies a bit.

Most of what I read said that hours start to go by and that eventually Judy has to leave again and Denise still isn't home when she leaves.

But other sources say that not even an hour after Judy got home, which would have been around like one o'clock, there's a knock at the door.

And the person at the door is Denise's cousin holding Denise's purse in their hand.

Now, I couldn't confirm which version of events is correct,

but what is important here is that eventually Judy does head back to work, not knowing where her daughter is.

How far away is that field that Denise was headed to?

It was only like 15 minutes from their place, I think.

Okay, so let's say 15 minutes there, 15 minutes back.

What, maybe like 30 minutes in the field looking for the purse?

I mean, maybe, right?

Like there's not a ton of stuff like still in the field, I wouldn't think.

But I mean, either way, it shouldn't be taking hours.

Right.

Is there any chance that she could have gotten to the field, seen her purse wasn't there?

And then, I don't know, just went not home.

I mean, it's a holiday weekend.

You said spring break was starting.

She's 18.

Why not head to a friend's while she's already out?

It's a possibility.

But the thing is, Denise hadn't mentioned anything to her mom.

And I feel like she would have if it were part of her plan,

or she would have at least called her mom from a friend's house if she had stopped by.

So while Judy's at work, she calls back to the house a few times to check in with her other daughter.

That's Denise's younger sister, Jenny, to see if Denise has come home, but no luck.

And when she gets home later that evening, Denise still isn't back.

So at around 8.30, Judy and her husband, David, decide they can't just keep waiting around for Denise to show up.

So they actually go to the local sheriff's department to report her missing.

And again, like, I feel like we go through this every time.

Do I even need to tell you what the response is?

It's the same we always have.

Don't worry about it.

It's a Friday night.

Denise is a teenager, but also she's technically an adult.

She's probably just out having fun.

She'll come home soon.

Yada, yada, yada.

Yeah, you got it.

Yeah, pretty much the greatest hits of infuriating police responses.

Cool.

Pretty much, yeah.

But that doesn't stop Judy and David because this is their daughter and they know in their guts that something is wrong.

So they're not just going to sit around and wait for the police to take their concerns seriously.

So they start calling around to relatives to see if anyone has seen Denise, but no one has.

And so that's when David goes like full on dad mode.

He gets in his car.

He just starts driving around looking for his daughter himself.

Like he's driving up and down the streets of Connorsville, Indiana all night long while Judy waits at home in case Denise shows up or calls or anything.

Now, the thing you need to know is Connorsville is a small community.

So word starts to spread about the disappearance that night and the next morning.

And it rattles people like things like a missing teen doesn't happen here.

So people are on the lookout for anything out of the ordinary.

And it's because of people's vigilance that there's a break in the case.

According to a report in the Indianapolis Star, the previous day, some local farmers had been out working in their fields when they noticed that a car was parked in a secluded lane.

And they didn't really think much of it at the time.
They just assumed to belong to some mushroom hunters maybe that were in the area.
But when Saturday came around, they noticed it was still there.
And now there's word of this missing girl.
So they go ahead and report the car.
So local authorities come to the scene and they find that it isn't just a random car or any random 1981 Buick.
It is the Buick Denise had rode off in when she left her parents' house.
Is this the same field that the bonfire party was in?
No.
So this is actually a field that's maybe like four miles-ish away from where the party was held.
So it's not like it's parked right where she would have been looking for her purse.
Now, once authorities realize that this is her car, they finally start taking her disappearance more seriously.
Now, the farmers tell them that they first noticed the car sometime between 1230 and 115 on Friday.
Oh, so around the same time Denise left her house?
Yeah, like almost right after she left the house.
So police start processing the car right there at the scene.
And they search the surrounding fields looking for any clues about why the car was left there or where Denise might be.
The problem is they don't find anything.
I mean, the car itself doesn't even show any signs of foul play.
It is like someone just parked it there and walked off.
So Judy and David are notified and they're asked to come take a look.
And they're going to notice something significant that police are missing, like something that would only stand out to family or someone that knew her.
But when they look inside, nothing jumps out to them either.
I mean, the seat is even still in Denise's normal driving position.
The doors are locked.
The only thing is the keys are nowhere to be found.
Now, the only thing that they actually collect that feels like it has any kind of evidentiary potential are several fingerprints that were collected from the car itself.
Although I'm not sure where they were taken from.
And there's also a red handkerchief, but that actually shows up the day after the car was found in this area.
So I don't know if they removed the car or they're still processing the car, but basically they come back the next day.
And there's this red handkerchief that they know wasn't there before, which to them means someone came back, which they find really suspicious.
So they collect it.
And I think at first they might have thought that it was Denise's because she had one like that, apparently.
But they quickly learned that it couldn't have been hers because hers is later found in her room.

So they're thinking that this could be important.

They have something to hold on to.

Now, over the next few days, police, firefighters, volunteers, even Denise's fellow high school students search everywhere for her, but they come up with nothing.

I mean, I hate to come back to the police's greatest hits, but is there any reason to consider that Denise ran away?

No, I mean, all her friends and family say that Denise had so much going for her.

Like she was about to head off to Miami University in the fall to study microbiology, which she was super excited for.

She had track practice, different events.

Her prom wasn't far off.

Like there was nothing that indicates she was looking to escape anything.

What about the usual suspects, like any enemies or boyfriends?

No enemies.

No boyfriends even really, though there is an ex-boyfriend.

His name is Sean McClung, and he and Denise had been together for like three years, so like most of high school.

But she had decided to break things off about a month before she disappeared.

And according to letters that Denise wrote her friends, she painted their relationship as less than healthy, really.

And anything but friendly, she says that she was fearful for her life at some point and that Sean was possessive,

which obviously catches investigators' attention.

But when they talk to Sean, he has like a completely different story to tell.

He says that the breakup was mutual, that they were still friends, so he doesn't really have it out for her.

And on top of that, he says that he was out fishing with some friends when Denise vanished.

And I assume please verify this with the friends.

They tried. The problem is the friends say that he wasn't with them, but for some reason, like Sean isn't questioned much more.

Like it doesn't seem like police like thought this was as weird as you do or I do.

Like they just kind of take him at his word, which even though they like know his word is lying.

Yeah, I was gonna say, even though nothing he's saying is really lining up with what other people are saying about him, his relationship with Denise, everything.

Yeah, but police seem entirely unconcerned back then.

And you know who else seemed entirely unconcerned during this time?

The main man himself, Sean.

Because one of Denise's family members talks to him like the day after her disappearance and he doesn't even seem worried at all.

He doesn't even participate in any of the searches for her.

Yeah, I mean, even though they were broken up, I mean, this was someone he'd been in a relationship with.

He'd at least claimed to care for her at some point.

Yeah, I mean, you think he'd be at least a little worried about what happened to her, try to help as

much as he could.

I don't know.

Yeah, but all of this to Denise's family is like, okay, he isn't concerned.

He doesn't have questions.

And to make matters worse, not long after her disappearance, Sean just up in the leaves and moves to Arizona.

So at some point, even if they wanted to ask him follow-up questions, he's not even around.

Yeah.

But I think, you know, this is a good time to point out that this early part of the investigation is kind of hard to get many details on,

because on top of the fact that for a while they kind of thought Denise would just show back up, what little was done in whatever investigation was done isn't documented well.

There's a three-part Vice News documentary called Small Town Secrets,

which is this really fantastic deep dive into the case, like I highly recommend watching it.

And according to that documentary, the lead investigator on this case, a guy named Ted McQuinley, he didn't really keep any notes.

So there's no official documentation of who was questioned, what leads were followed up on, what leads were like closed out, what's still lingering.

And to put it in perspective, like apparently Denise's bedroom was never even searched to see if there were any clues or indication that she might have been in trouble.

Like wasn't searched in those early days of the investigation or wasn't searched ever?

I don't think ever.

Did her parents at least look through it and keep stuff or, I don't know, go to the police, offer her room up.

It's like, hey, thanks for searching all those fields.

What about her freaking room for some clues or something?

I'm sure they wanted to at some point, but here, let me just tell you,

there's this big hurdle in this case that they faced early on that no one really even knew was a hurdle at the time.

So Detective McQuinley is actually a cousin of Denise's father, David.

And because of this weird dynamic, like Judy and David are naturally putting all of their trust in him and expecting that he's going to do everything he can to bring Denise home because she is quite literally family.

So the stuff that's making us pull our hair out 37 years later, like, I think in their minds, like, oh, it must not be important because if it was, surely McQuinley would be on it.

Like, you know, they believe he knows what he's doing.

They believe that he, like, has her best interest.

It's not only trusting law enforcement, it's trusting a family.

Yeah, so they're like, there must not be anything that they need from her room.

Because, you know, it's not like they know what goes into a missing person's investigation.

Like, they've never done this before.

They shouldn't have to be doing this.

And this goes back to even like Sean not being talked to anymore.

Like, in their minds, they're like, oh, well, he must have been cleared.

Like, that's why they've moved on.

They're looking at other people.

And actually, at least that sentiment wasn't totally wrong because there was someone else that police were looking at.

The Wednesday after Denise disappeared, police receive a tip that a 23-year-old wanted man named Mark Hughes is in the area.

He had police on a high-speed chase in a stolen car through an area that was about two to three miles from where Denise's car was found.

And again, this happened just two days before she went missing.

Now, initially he'd vanished, but police are now looking for him even harder to question him about Denise.

And lo and behold, it's not long before they find him.

So he's placed under arrest for the stolen vehicle.

And while he's held in custody, police decide to take the opportunity to see if he knows anything about what happened to Denise.

Great, they caught this guy. Good job.

But why are we talking about a car theft?

What's the connection to Denise?

Nothing, actually.

I mean, they know that he's had some run-ins with law enforcement prior to this.

And, you know, duh, he's like on the run from police when Denise went missing.

So I think he's more of just like a traditional bad guy in their minds, right?

Like, again, this is so, like, small town where it doesn't happen here.

Surely it's not one of us. It had to have been...

No one else would do this, but a bad guy would.

This is a bad guy. We should check him out.

Right. And we have this bad guy who's here two days before, who's on the run.

Right. And I think they're thinking, like, if he happened across paths with Denise by some coincidence, maybe something happened.

But it is a stretch.

And after questioning Mark and searching for physical evidence, police can't really see any link between him and Denise.

But Mark isn't the only person in the community that investigators have their eye on.

Because at the same time, there's a young man named Benny Johnson that has been acting kind of weird.

Okay, is this just another rando bad guy, or is it someone who actually knew Denise?

Yeah, Benny actually was an acquaintance of Denise.

He knew her through her ex-boyfriend, Sean.

Okay.

So within the first two weeks after Denise disappears, he apparently calls up Judy and David and says that he wants to talk to them.

So, I mean, they do this in person. They arrive at his place. They chat for a little bit.

Most of it seems pretty normal.

Until out of the blue, Benny says, I didn't kill your daughter.

Uh, did they think he did?

No, like this truly comes out of nowhere.

And understandably, Judy and David don't even know how to take that.

I mean, as far as they're concerned, their daughter is missing, by the way, not dead.

So that's red flag number one.

Red flags number two through 10 are when he starts confessing to people around town that he in fact did kill Denise.

In fact, one of Benny's friends from the time told Vice News in that small town secrets documentary that he heard Benny confess to the murder

three different times.

Okay, but I'm assuming he denies all of that when police asking about it, right?

Britt, you're assuming too much. You're assuming police are able to talk to Benny at all.

But that's not what happens.

Now, to be fair, investigators absolutely want to question Benny, but when they try, his family hires a lawyer and refuses to allow him to be questioned.

Apparently, they're kind of like a big deal in this community.

And without any evidence that they can use to charge Benny with anything, they can't like force him to participate in any questioning.

But, you know, what police can do and the red tape is different than like how locals operate.

We know that.

And this obviously leads to a ton of rumor and speculation in a small town because, hello, you've got someone confessing and police can't do anything about it.

And those confessions aren't even the only thing tying Benny Johnson to Denise's disappearance.

Because it turns out that just after Denise went missing, Benny was hosting a party at his family's cabin.

Now, before this party, he and a friend had gone there early to like clean it up, get it ready.

But while they're there, the friend noticed blood.

I'm not sure where I'm not sure how much, but it was enough blood that she was disturbed by it and asked Benny what happened.

And Benny told her that someone had lost their virginity at the cabin like just the night before.

And that blood was from that.

But the friend is not buying it and she tells investigators about what she saw.

But then nothing happens.

Like the cabin isn't searched.

Benny still isn't questioned.

And they just let the cabin sit there.

Now, on top of that, investigators receive another tip from a woman named Vivian.

She says that the day Denise went missing, she was at her home in Connersville when she heard three blood curdling screams from what sounded like a woman.

Now, when Vivian heard those screams, she was pretty sure they were coming from just southwest of her house.

And guess what's not far from that direction?

A large plot of land owned by none other than Benny Johnson's family.

And what is that plot of land close to?

Glad you asked.

This land is just a mile from where Denise's car was found.

Okay, so just to like recap this, please have a guy who's confessing to Denise's murder.

Check.

A witness who found blood in this guy's family's cabin the day after Denise's disappearance.

You are correct.

Another witness who heard screams the day of Denise's disappearance coming from a direction where land is owned by this same dude's family.

Yeah.

And no one's asking him any questions.

You are correct.

And I mean, to me, I don't know, like I get influential family in a small town, but this feels like it goes beyond that.

It seems like straight up incompetence.

But eventually the rumors are running rampant and becoming so loud that Benny's family steps up and they're the ones that kind of push for something to happen at this point.

They want to put this all to bed, so they decide to arrange for a private polygraph test paid for by themselves.

Okay, so I appreciate their willingness to do something, but I feel like this ain't it?

Yeah, it's not making me any less suspect.

Polygraphs are already very TBD.

Like, I mean, we just did an episode in fan club where the same results were read by different people and got completely different, like, answers, essentially.

I don't even know if those are different people.

Like, I think that I think it was the same people who looked at it like three months later and they're like, actually, we decided it's different.

But it's a two-point.

They just, like, change their minds on the results on it.

Yeah.

So the idea of, like, using this, but not just using it, literally buying a polygraph.

Yeah.

Doesn't really put my mind at ease, you know?

Yeah.

I don't think anyone's minds are put at ease.

But I don't know if they could have been, because as far as I know, I can't tell if the results were even ever shared.

Like, for the life of me, I don't know what the results are of this paid polygraph.

I mean, maybe for a reason, though.

Yeah.

Right?

Like, if they're bad, are they gonna, yeah, maybe.

I don't know.

Still, that seems to be the end of the road when it comes to Benny.

Time passes agonizingly slow for the Flum family.

There are no signs of Denise, and the three men who came on police's radar early on aren't being questioned.

Even though it's not like they're flying under the radar.

In fact, one of the original three men actually commits another crime right after the one-year anniversary of Denise's disappearance that should make everyone very suspicious.

According to Danny Lee's reporting in the Rushville Republican, Mark Hughes, that was the man who was arrested for that stolen car.

He spent the previous year incarcerated on charges related to theft and receiving stolen goods, but on April 2nd of 1987, he is released from prison.

Now, just two days later, Mark walks into a pay-less shoe store in Indianapolis and pulls a knife on a 16-year-old girl.

And he forces her out of the store into his car where he forced her to drive an hour away to Terre Haute, Indiana.

Clearly, whatever he has planned for her isn't good, and this girl knows that, but she is thinking on her feet.

She tells him that she needs to use the washroom.

He pulls over to this, like, drive leading into a farm, and that's when she books it.

And I can't even imagine, like, what is going through her mind, frantically hoping that Mark isn't chasing after her.

And luckily, he isn't, so she is able to get away, find help, return home safely, which starts another manhunt for Mark.

And it takes a week for police to track him down, but on April 12th, he is apprehended and placed under arrest and charged with kidnapping, robbery, and theft.

And he ends up being convicted and sentenced to 55 years, and he's actually still in prison today.

So you might think this would land him back on investigators' radar for Denise's case, because, yes, the first time stolen car, he's just a bad guy in an area,

but now you've got him, like, pulling a knife and kidnapping a teenage girl, taking her to another city.

But based on what I could find in my research, police aren't suspicious or it doesn't put them back on the radar.

Or if it does, no one's ever talked about it publicly.

And again, we know documentation from the original investigators is sparse, to say the least.

So to be fair, maybe they did do their due diligence and maybe they ruled him out.

But if it's not documented, it leaves a huge question mark.

I mean, this situation especially feels like sort of if there's smoke, there's fire kind of thing.

And you don't have to convince me. I mean, I think there are like three billowing piles of smoke in this case, but no one's even looking for a fire.

So nothing happens for another year.

But then on August 10th of 1988, Judy gets a very strange phone call.

It's a Wednesday, but Judy is home because that's her usual day off from her job at the bank.

And when the phone rings and she picks it up right away, she hears that automated message telling her she's getting a collect call.

And this calls coming from all the way in Norfolk, Virginia, but she doesn't know anyone in Norfolk.

And as I'm sure she's standing there racking her brain about who this could be, her world suddenly begins to spin when the caller identifies themselves and says, it's Denise.

Now the connection on the call isn't great. So I don't think Judy can tell for sure if this is Denise's voice, but the accent is right.

The voice sounds right. And the fact that this person is calling on a Wednesday, a day that Denise would know that Judy had off.

What's she saying?

Well, all the source material says is that this girl just sounded like Denise.

Like there's nothing about what is actually said, which I would love to know because I feel like the context would be so important.

But she could say whatever like Judy and David immediately contact authorities who are able to trace the call actually to an apartment building in Norfolk.

Now, even though this is just a week before their younger daughter Jenny is set to go off to college, Judy and David cannot let this opportunity slip by.

They get in their car, they go all the way to Virginia themselves, hoping that this could finally be the end to their nightmare.

I get doing anything to get back to your kid, but why is it them and not the police?

Do you want me to just have the editors take that clip and play it on loop?

Like you can just take the rest of the afternoon off because like, that is the only question in like all of this case.

Well, and I mean, the police, where the fuck is Detective Cousin?

Right.

I know, I know, I know.

So they make the trip to Virginia and when they get there, they're helped by the least the local police there and the management of the apartment building where this call was placed.

And they find this young woman who made the call, but it isn't Denise.

It is a 19 year old girl who used to live in Connorsville before moving to Norfolk with her husband.

So what, she just thought this would be a fun thing to do on a Wednesday?

Well, I mean, at first she says that like she did it because she thought she saw Denise at a mall, but. Great.

If you saw her at a mall, call the police.

You don't call the missing person's parents pretending to be her.

That's sick.

Yeah, I mean, it's a clear lie and she eventually admits that.

Some of her neighbors tell the flums that she had been claiming the family had a lot of money.

So Judy and David kind of suspect that that was her ultimate goal was to get money from them somehow.

You know, this is the straw that breaks the camel's back for Judy and David.

I mean, they're done waiting around for breaks in this case, a random phone calls.

They know that if they want people talking about Denise again, they're going to have to be the ones to start the conversation.

So they go public with the story of this prank, telling the details to Daniel McFeely of the Rushville Republican.

Their hope is simply to get Denise's case back in the media and hopefully shake out some new leads

and probably put pressure back on law enforcement.
And it works, kind of, sort of, maybe not at all.
But something shakes police into action after a few years.
About five years after Denise's disappearance, they finally get a search warrant for Benny Johnson's cabin, that one where the friend discovered the blood.
And I'm not sure why this is happening now and not, you know, five years earlier.
But regardless, they go and search the house hoping to find any sign of Denise or this blood.
But it doesn't seem like this search turns up any physical evidence.
And if there were any items collected, that has never showed up in any documents or been told to the public or anything we have.
Okay, honestly, none of this is shocking to me, though. It's been five years.
Of course nothing's there to be found anymore.
Yeah, obviously, I know.
I mean, are they doing any digging into the other guys at this point?
Like, is a full reinvestigation actually happening?
Right, it's so cute that you're calling it a reinvestigation.
Like, anything happened the first time around.
True, like, is investigation finally starting? How's that?
But to answer your question, yeah.
So no, it seems like this search was kind of a one-off.
And when that turns up nothing, everything kind of comes to a screeching halt again.
And then years start to pass.
A new millennium rolls in, all the while, same old same back in Connorsville.
But there is finally a shakeup in 2007.
That is when a new detective, Scott Jarvis, is assigned to the case.
And he's going into it with fresh eyes.
And his first priority is reworking all of those tips that came in over the years.
According to an interview with Christine Guerra of Indie Star,
he's looking at every possible angle.
Nothing is off limits.
At this point, it's been over 20 years, so plenty of time for people
to come up with their own theories as to what happened.
And Detective Jarvis investigates all of them.
He talks to people who claim to know where Denise's remains are buried.
He interviews prisoners who claim to know exactly what happened to Denise and who did it.
But ultimately, he finds himself back at square one every single time.
That's not to say all hope is lost, though.
Because around 2014, Denise's DNA and the DNA of her family
are entered into the national databases in the hopes that someday
a match might be made, maybe to a Jane Doe.
Wait, how did they get Denise's DNA?
Well, Judy and David had been like holding on to everything of Denise's this whole time.
I mean, like everything from her room, her trophies, her books, her clothes.
And it was actually, they kept this baby tooth that had been pulled when she was a child.

And so that's what they used to pull DNA from.
Like, that's where they got their sample.
But even though her DNA is uploaded, there are no remains that match to Denise.
And you can imagine after all of these years, not a whole lot of fresh tips are coming in.
So once the old ones are kind of run down, Jarvis feels like all he can do is wait,
wait for Denise's remains to be found, wait for a tip, a lead,
anything that could create a spark in this case.
And finally, in 2017, there was a small spark.
That's when ex-boyfriend Sean McClung moves back to town.
And he's coming back with a criminal record that isn't exactly squeaky clean.
We're talking instances of domestic violence, assault, intimidation.
And the detective assigned to Denise's case now at this point in 2017,
they decide to try their luck and see if maybe he'd be willing to come in for an interview.
And he agrees.
Now, in questioning, Sean denies his involvement in Denise's disappearance.
He agrees to do a voice stress test.
And when Sean takes it, he fails on a few key questions.
Most importantly, did you kill Denise Flum?
And do you know where she is?
Okay, I mean, those are basically worse than polygraphs.
I don't know if anyone's voice wouldn't sound stressed in that situation, to be honest.
Yeah, fair.
But the thing is, they're not like taking this to court or anything.
I think they're just looking for something, something that gives them motivation, encouragement,
whatever to at least keep digging and moving forward.
Because by this point, a lot of people have forgotten about Denise, but not everyone, right?
Obviously, there's Judy and David and Jenny,
but they're also supported by a woman named Stacy Reese,
who is actually a detective in another jurisdiction.
Now, Stacy grew up in Connersville.
And although she was just three years old in Denise Vanna,
she remembers her parents talking about the case, like her mom used to babysit Denise.
Her dad was part of the initial volunteer searches for her.
And over the years, she had become so invested in Denise's disappearance,
that now she's dedicating her personal time to promote the case
and chase down whatever leads she can find.
Now, since she's from another jurisdiction, she doesn't have access to any of the original case files.
So she's pretty much on her own.
But her support means a lot to the flums.
I mean, it shows them that even all these years later, their daughter hasn't been forgotten.
In 2018, a Facebook page called Justice for Denise Flum is set up.
And based on what I can tell, it looks like her parents actually manage it.
And it pretty quickly goes kind of viral, specifically a post made by Stacy.
And it does what social media is meant to do on social media's good days for these types of cases.

It gets people talking about Denise again.

So that's possibly why that same year, investigators decide to revisit some locations that had been rumored to be connected in some way to Denise's disappearance over the years. And the primary location that they're looking at is the Mary Gray Bird Sanctuary, which is this large nature preserve in the area.

It's like over 700 acres.

But there's a particular pond that's of interest to investigators.

And it's of interest to them because of a story that has gone around featuring none other than Benny Johnson.

Wait, before we move on to Benny, whatever happened with that voice stress test from before?

Well, nothing, right?

Like, so to your point, like, again, I think they were just looking for something.

Like, are we moving in the right direction or we whatever?

But like, you can't use that in court.

That's not proof of anything.

And so, yeah, they have it.

Yeah, they might be suspicious, but they couldn't do anything.

So nothing happened after that.

And, you know, this, so then again, that's where Stacy comes in.

They set up this Facebook page.

Now they're searching this bird sanctuary because of the story they heard about Benny Johnson.

Now, it's not super clear to me when police learned this,

but apparently less than two months after Denise's disappearance,

Benny invited his girlfriend to this park after school,

saying that he wanted to show her something.

But as soon as she heard this, alarm bells were kind of ringing for her.

Because remember, Benny had this habit of, you know, confessing to Denise's murder.

And although his girlfriend wasn't really sure if he was 100% telling the truth,

she also knows when a situation is kind of sus.

So she actually wrote a note to one of her friends telling them what the deal was.

And she said, if I'm not home by 4pm, I'm with Benny.

I'm at this bird sanctuary.

Call the police.

Yeah.

Sounds like a rock solid relationship.

Oh, yeah.

You know, no red flags there.

Also, like, I can't stress this enough.

I know we've said this before.

If you have to write that note, like, you should not be going.

This is where everyone thinks like nothing bad can happen to them.

Just do not go.

Trust your gut.

It is telling you something.

But she goes with them.

They drive to the sanctuary, they park near the pond,

and Benny leads his girlfriend through a clearing towards this denser area of trees.

But at this point, his girlfriend started to get scared.

Not because she thought Benny was going to do something to her or kill her or whatever, but because she thought he was about to show her a body.

And that's the point where she, like, trusts this inner voice and she's like, nope, I'm good.

I want out.

Take me home.

And he did.

Now, like I said, I don't know for certain if she told authorities this at the time.

All of this information came from an interview that she gave as part of the small town secrets documentary.

But it seems like this is just a place that has a lot of rumors tied to it over the years.

And part of me wonders if it's just because, you know, it's a big park and a small community.

I can imagine people speculating.

You know, if someone had, like, gone missing, that maybe something was there.

And I do know that police attempted to search the sanctuary sometime in the 80s, but I don't know what prompted that search.

All I know, again, it's so hard to piece this stuff together because there's just so much missing.

I just know that in the 80s, whatever search they tried to do was never fully completed because of bad weather.

And then it seems like maybe was never picked back up.

But now in 2018, they're back.

And this time they've got two cadaver dogs on the scene.

And wouldn't you know it?

Both dogs hit on the exact same spot right near the pond.

So plenty of officers and volunteers get to work examining the site and even draining the pond, which isn't easy because, of course, as soon as they start draining and excavating the pond, it starts to rain for, I kid you not, 30 days straight.

But after weeks, they're able to basically examine the entire area, go through everything by hand, and it turns out to be yet another dead end.

Despite the dogs hitting on that spot, there was no trace of human remains to be found, which means once again, it seems like there's no real way for investigators to establish a connection between Denise and Benny.

Okay, but that doesn't mean she was never there.

I mean, sure.

I mean, after decades, if she was there, she could have totally been moved, but there's nothing to prove that she was.

So even though this felt so promising, nothing comes of it.

And that's kind of it for a while.

The next thing that happens isn't until June of 2020,

when Sean McClung is hospitalized with a serious illness

and Judy takes the opportunity to confront him in a letter.
In it, she simply pleads with him to do whatever he can to give her
and the rest of Denise's loved ones closure.
You know, she's like, you know, me and David are getting older
and their greatest fear is never knowing what happened to their oldest daughter.
And that's all she's really asking for in this letter.
She just wants information.
She just wants answers.
Now, around the same time that Sean receives Judy's letter,
he is also arrested on fraud charges.
Is he still in the hospital at this point?
No, I think he's been released from the hospital
and he's now being held in the county jail
on whatever these fraud charges are.
Though, once again, investigators take this opportunity
to talk about Denise's case.
And at first, it's the same old story, nothing new.
But after Sean has spent a few days in custody,
then that's when the lead investigator gets a call.
Sean is finally ready to talk about what really happened to Denise.
When investigators talk to Sean,
he agrees to tell them what happened on two conditions.
The first, he wants the fraud charges dismissed.
The second, he wants immunity in Denise's case.
But when investigators reach out to Judy and David
to let them know the situation, they're actually okay with it.
They say, you know, their one condition is
Sean has to lead them to Denise's body.
Because I wasn't kidding when I said all they want is answers
and information, like they just want closure.
And I have to wonder if, you know,
the fact that Sean is already super ill
is kind of playing into this for them.
Like they probably feel like time is of the essence here.
Like at least tell us where she is.
Like you're not even going to be around probably long enough
to go to trial if there was one.
So the terms of the deal are set and Sean lays out
what happened the day Denise went missing.
He says that she came to pick him up that day
and they went for a drive.
They ended up at a place called Three Mile Bridge
where they started arguing a bit
and things kind of got heated.

Sean says that at some point he pushed Denise
and she fell to the ground
and when she hit the ground, she didn't move again.
He says that he went to check on her
but there was no helping her.
She was just gone.
From being pushed to the ground,
did she hit her head on a rock or something?
Maybe the thing is he doesn't go into much detail.
He just says that after this he walked to town
and called some people who came and helped
like take care of Denise's body.
But he doesn't say who those people are
or like, again, what he means by take care of like nothing.
Or more importantly, where they took her.
Yeah, so that's the thing.
Because we know this is part of the condition, right?
So Sean takes investigators to several sites around town
but there's no sign of Denise's remains at any of them.
And that's when police start realizing
this guy isn't holding up his end of the bargain.
But isn't finding her remains like the crux of the whole deal?
Exactly.
So that means like deals off, no immunity.
But they still have this confession on the record.
And so on July 9th, 2020,
Sean is actually charged with a voluntary manslaughter.
However, just a couple of months later on September 26th,
before his trial can even begin,
he passes away from his illness.
And his attorney tells the Rushville recorder
that in his final days, he fully recanted his confession
and admitted that he only told police that he was involved
as a way to get out of jail and to be back with his family.
I mean, I guess I can kind of see it if you're dying
and you want to be with your family,
but you're willing to let everyone believe you're a murderer
for that?
I mean, even die be put to rest as a murderer?
I think it was more than just time with his family
that he was getting.
So I'm sure this isn't the first time that this has happened.
I feel like it's the first time I've heard about it.
And it might be the first time.

I mean, it's so outrageous.

But basically the other thing is his attorney claims that Sean was offered a \$25,000 reward as part of this deal as well, not just immunity.

Go home with your family and here's a check for \$25,000.

I don't even know what to think about that.

I think it gives you a lot more incentive to potentially make up a story because it's not just getting out of jail for your last few days.

Like if they were experiencing any kind of financial hardship, even if they weren't, \$25,000 is a lot to be able to like set your family up before you are about to pass away.

Oh, totally.

I mean, he never led them to a body.

He never said if there was anybody helping him.

It seems so convenient.

Especially considering like the letters that Denise wrote about him, especially considering the fact that he has a history of domestic violence after Denise.

But I really don't think his confession is a cut and dry situation.

Like there's to your point, there's stuff that doesn't add up.

So I guess that just leaves Benny Johnson and Mark Hughes?

Well, I mean, it doesn't seem like Mark Hughes is on anyone's radar after 1987 for some reason.

But yes, Benny Johnson is still definitely of interest to authorities.

And there's actually another person with a connection to Denise's case who I haven't mentioned until now just because it doesn't seem like he's ever been seriously part of the investigation.

But you know, what kind of crime junkie would I be if I didn't bring you down the rabbit hole a little bit?

So, Britt, you'll know this, but like Larry Hall, you've heard of him before, right?

Yeah, I live in Indiana.

Every Hoosier knows Larry Hall.

Yeah.

So he's considered for a second and for our non Hoosier listeners who might just be like dipping their toe into true crime, Larry Hall is an alleged serial killer.

He is currently serving a life sentence for the abduction of a young woman named Jessica Roach.

But over the years, Larry has confessed to at least 35 murders in the Midwest, including Denise's.

And the FBI actually thinks that he may have killed closer to 50.
The thing is, he goes back and forth on these confessions,
like he confesses, then he recants, and then confesses,
and then recants.
And he never provides any kind of concrete evidence.
And so even the murders they suspect he's connected to,
he's never actually been convicted of any of the ones,
again, that he's suspected of or even confessed to.
And someday, maybe I'll tackle Larry Hall,
because there's just so much there.
But the thing about him, it's more than just him saying,
I did it, saying I didn't.
So we, again, talked about him in passing in a fan club episode.
It was the one on Reina Reisen.
Oh, yeah.
And this was a while ago.
So if you don't remember, the thing that he did to connect him
in that case, which is so weird, is that he had this pill bottle
or something of birth control that had her name on it or something.
But what they found out that it wasn't actually hers,
and maybe he faked that bottle,
which means he wasn't actually connected to the case.
He just was following her case.
So that's what I'm saying.
It's more than just him talking about stuff.
This dude was very strange.
And it gets very complicated when you talk about Larry Hall.
Now, I know investigators on Denise's case have spoken to Larry.
They have even offered him immunity,
just like they did with Sean, if he can point them to Denise's body.
But they didn't get any useful information out of him.
He talks in circles.
There was actually, again, completely fiction.
Well, it's based on the true story, but totally fictionalized.
A show called Blackbird on Apple, which I actually really enjoyed.
It gives you a good sense of how he just goes in circles.
Like, you cannot get a straight answer from this guy.
So Larry Hall feels kind of like another dead end to me,
even if he was responsible.
Like, I don't think he's someone we're ever going to get answers out of.
But Judy has actually gone on the record with WTHR saying,
although she can't completely count him out, you know,
even to her, he's not really the person she's focused on.
I mean, statistically, it's almost got to be either Benny or Sean.

Does the family lean more towards one or the other?

I think Benny now.

I mean, obviously there was a time when they were suspicious of Sean.

That's why Judy wrote him that letter.

But I really think that when he couldn't lead them to her body,

that's when they saw like the gaping holes in his story.

So that leaves Benny.

And again, multiple people have come forward saying that he's confessed to being involved, though I should point out he's actually not the only one because over the years, his cousin, Randy Cates,

has apparently confessed to his friends that he was involved as well.

Now, police have actually been able to question Randy.

But, you know, of course, to police, he denies any involvement.

OK, but it's just bananas to me that there are two people

who are going around saying that they were involved,

you know, that they actually had something to do with Denise's disappearance and nothing can be done.

Oh, I agree.

And Stacy Rees actually points out in the Small Town Secrets documentary that even if Benny has a lawyer, which seems to be the issue, right?

Like why they haven't talked to him over all of these years,

you could still try to question him.

You might not get anywhere, but it's a start.

I mean, the fact that he has never been questioned, we even threw a lawyer.

Again, like it boggles my mind, but I can you can turn it down.

I don't know.

I guess I assumed he had been talked to when they took like a new look at the case back in what, like 2007 or 2017?

No, he's still, I mean, as far as I know, never been talked to, unless there's some behind the scenes stuff that I don't know.

OK, so did Stacy Rees talk to him?

A little like as part of the documentary,

she went to his house with a film crew,

but like she doesn't get much in terms of answers.

He just says that the case is haunted him.

He wants it to be over.

Like that's it.

So again, to be fair, like it's very possible and I'm sure they have.

Like I'm sure authorities have asked him for an interview, you know, but he's still lawyered up.

I'm not saying they haven't tried.

I'm not saying they haven't succeeded.

We just don't know about it.

But even if Benny isn't talking,

that doesn't mean the investigation has stopped.
In the summer and fall of 2022, Indiana canine search and recovery brought in several cadaver dogs to conduct searches. But I'm not sure what exact sites that they did this at. Doesn't seem like any significant evidence was recovered. Like they're doing something, but I don't know what or what it's leading to. Now, just in this past year, a new sheriff has been elected into the county, which could bring a fresh new perspective to the case. And the sheriff's department is also now being supported by Team Adam, which is part of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that provides assistance to law enforcement dealing with cases like Denise's. So did anything ever happen with those fingerprints? So about those. No, because somehow over the years, the fingerprints got lost. Former sheriff Joey Laughlin believes that they could have been the evidence they needed to help solve the case. I mean, he even tried to track down the fingerprints at various agencies, but he couldn't find them. Though if anyone listening has any pull or sway or power in like that area, the one encouragement I would give is like, don't take that as the end all be all. We've actually like seen cases where everyone thought evidence was lost. And this is where like, I'll tell you this quick story because it's amazing. We actually covered a case, a very old case where someone was wrong and fully convicted. They thought there was this evidence that could get them out. This was the father Patrick Ryan case and the evidence was lost. And we covered the case. Apparently like the chief of police or the sheriff or whatever, his daughter is a crime junkie. She heard it, brought it to dad, which encouraged dad to go look for it. And he actually found it. And so now like this guy is working on his wrongful conviction case. Like his lawyers reached out to us and is like, you know, we have a really good chance of getting him out of prison. It's amazing. So all I'm saying is like, again, I would have never thought that that's a connection that would be made because we're talking about this, but never stop looking like, and it doesn't have to be this case. Like, I know a ton of people who work in law enforcement, who work in the legal field, listen to our show. Don't take it's gone or we can't find that as the end all be all because all too often a little extra digging, looking in a weird place.

I mean, we've got cases where stuff's found in a desk drawer of a guy who were tired of them died, you know, like, remember the unsolved mysteries tape?

I will keep coming back to that until I have gone.

Like they just found the tape in the box.

That was all the evidence.

They called unsolved mysteries and they're like, oh yeah, you gave us all the evidence and we still have it.

What?

Yeah.

So back to Denise's case.

I mean, this one really echoes so much of what I learned covering Darlene Hulse's case for the deck investigates.

Like in small town Indiana, you'd think there would just be one bad guy.

Like you think it's going to be obvious,

but there are so many possibilities.

You've got the ex-boyfriend who, you know, she writes letters about having a bad relationship with.

He leaves town.

He confesses and then recants.

We've gotten escaped criminal who was in the area at the time of Denise's disappearance and later abducted a girl at knife point and drove her out of the city.

Then there's a man and his cousin who have confessed multiple times to being involved and refused to cooperate with investigators and even a potential serial killer who has claimed responsibility.

And those are just the ones on our radar.

I bet if we had a peek behind the curtain, there is even more rabbit holes that haven't been explored.

I think what ultimately sticks out for me about Denise's case is also the same thing that stuck out to me about Darlene's too.

It's her family's relentless hope for over 30 years now.

They have worked to keep Denise's case alive.

Never once giving up on the idea that they might find out what truly happened to their daughter.

That's the same thing that drives Darlene's daughters, not vengeance, not justice, just answers.

And I just hope that one day soon, their patience is rewarded.

If you have any information about the disappearance of Denise Flum, please contact the Fayette County Sheriff's Department at 765-222-1272.

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And you can follow us on Instagram at [crimejunkiepodcast](https://www.instagram.com/crimejunkiepodcast).

We'll be back next week with a brand new episode.

We'll see you then.

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