

[Transcript] Crime Junkie / PRECEDENT: Adam Walsh

Hi, crime junkies. I'm your host, Ashley Flowers. And if you listened all the way to the end of last week's episode, you heard me say that Britt and I were going to be off this week. But, per the usual, I'm not just going to leave you hanging. I'm going to give you something on a Monday. And thankfully, we have more precedent-setting stories to share with you all.

When a child goes missing today, we know what to do. Call the police. Issue an Amber Alert. Hold together a search team and start looking. But back in 1981, when a six-year-old boy disappeared

from a department store, none of those things were in place. And no one, certainly not his frantic, terrified, overwhelmed parents, knew what to do, where to go, or how to find him. Today, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children supports families of missing kids and helps bring those kids home. But before there was a National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, there was Adam Walsh. This is his story.

It was shortly after noon, on July 27th, 1981, when Revay Walsh and her six-year-old son, Adam, headed to their local Sears department store in Hollywood, Florida. So, Revay could look at these lamps that they had on sale. Now, Adam is about as excited about lamp shopping as you can imagine. And he begged, literally begged his mother to let him stay with this group of boys playing video games at the display in the toy department. And since she was only going around the corner, Revay said yes. She was gone five, maybe ten minutes tops, because the store didn't even have the lamps in stock that she wanted. But when she came back to meet Adam at the video game display, he was gone. All the boys were gone, actually.

Now, if you're a parent listening to this who's lost sight of a kid for even a second in a mall or grocery store, then you can appreciate Revay's panic in this moment. She immediately started searching the store for Adam, up one aisle and down another. Over to the lamps, back to the video games, hoping she and Adam were just like missing one another.

Revay asked the clerk to page Adam and have him meet her in the toy section. But as the minutes ticked by, there was no sign of Adam. So, she called her husband, John, and then she called police. They asked everyone working in the store and somehow not a single person saw Adam. Not for a second, not at all. But the store manager told Revay that one of their security guards did boot a group of boys out of the store because they were fighting over a video game. But when they showed that guard a picture of Adam, she told them she didn't recognize him. He didn't look like any of the kids she'd kicked out, but she couldn't really say for sure.

In his book *Tears of Rage*, John Walsh describes his son Adam as a shy kid. Not one who would have piped up to tell the security guard that he wasn't actually with those other boys and that his mom was just around the corner buying a lamp. Which left Revay and John to worry that maybe, instead of Adam being lost and wandering around inside the store, he might have been wandering around outside the store, lost and alone.

In those first few hours, police searched all through the toy department, the Sears store, the entire Hollywood Mall and all around it. But they found no sign of Adam. According to a 1991 story by Kevin Davis for the *South Florida Sun Sentinel*, by the evening of Adam's disappearance, police had already pulled together a search team that included 50 volunteers and 22 off-duty cops who supported both ground and air searches for Adam. Everyone who knew the Walsh's, and even everyone that didn't, hoped and prayed that one of the helicopter's

floodlights would sweep over the right spot on the right street to find their missing boy. But soon, Revay and John started to worry that maybe Adam hadn't wandered off. Maybe he wasn't lost. Maybe Adam had encountered something much worse, someone much worse. And each hour, each day that passed was another day of Adam getting farther and farther from home.

But even back in 1981, despite what we might remember or have read about that time, stranger abductions were really rare. When abductions did happen, it was usually by another parent or caregiver.

Police ruled John and Revay out pretty early on in the game. There was no custody dispute or anything like that because they were still together, happily married. Or at least that's how it looked from the outside. Which is why police were surprised to learn Revay had actually been cheating on John. And not just with anyone, but with one of his closest friends, this guy named Jimmy. You see, John traveled all the time for work. This is long before his America's most wanted days, but it seemed like he was always gone. Which is how the relationship between Revay and Jimmy blossomed in the first place. And because Jimmy had been staying with the Walshes for a while, Jimmy had also grown close to Adam. And it was actually Jimmy's relationship with Adam that spurred John to ask Jimmy to move out. He didn't like that Jimmy was stepping into his shoes and becoming the sort of second father figure to Adam.

Things between Revay and Jimmy had ended by the time he moved out. Which, according to the Justice for Adam Walsh website, was just a week or so before Adam went missing. And that paints a pretty compelling picture for investigators of a man with a broken heart who didn't just lose the woman he loved, but also the son he'd grown to love too.

Except, the Walshes hadn't like excommunicated Jimmy or anything. In fact, he'd still been seeing Adam, even in the days leading up to his disappearance.

Police quickly found that Jimmy didn't have Adam. And despite John and Revay taking every media call, doing every television interview possible, offering what would grow to be a \$100,000 reward, nothing got them any closer to their son.

A week went by. Two weeks. Nothing. No suspects. No leads. Until, on August 10th, more than two weeks after Adam went missing, when police finally started to get some answers.

That night, two fishermen made a horrifying discovery when they found the severed head of a small child floating in a canal about two hours from Hollywood. It was too badly decomposed and bloated to identify it based on sight alone. But from the moment police heard about it, they knew it could only have been one boy. But they had to be sure.

Now if you remember that iconic image of Adam Walsh, the one of him holding his baseball bat and smiling at the camera, then you'll know Adam had this big toothy smile at the time he went missing.

Police also know that Adam had one filling along with the missing teeth. And so one of the investigators brought a friend of the Walsh family with him to Vero Beach to see if they could identify the remains. The two were shown the child's head wrapped in a towel and they knew right away. They were looking at Adam.

The medical examiner who looked at Adam's remains was able to say that he had died ten or more days prior. And though police searched extensively in the area around where Adam's head was found, they found no other remains and no other physical evidence of any kind.

John and Reve found out about the discovery just after an appearance on Good Morning America where they had been pleading for Adam's safe return. And obviously they were devastated. They knew where he was now, but this was absolutely not closure for them. Now they had to wonder who had taken Adam and why, how had his head ended up hours away in a canal and where was the rest of him? Despite tips coming into police from all sides, answers were elusive in those first few months. Nothing much progressed in the case until November 1981, when police arrested a man named Edward James for abducting another young boy. While he was in lockup, he told his cellmate about not only the abduction he was being held for, but another one that happened in the summer, when he lured a five or six-year-old boy from a department store in Hollywood. The cellmate told police that Edward's story was that he enticed the boy away from the store and took him to an ice cream parlor nearby before driving along Florida's Turnpike. For whatever reason, Edward got angry, stopped the car, took the boy out, severed his head, and tossed it in the canal. Now, police are always a little wary of jailhouse snitches, but in this case, the suspect fit their likely profile. And when they looked at him, his neighbors told them Edward had actually been MIA from his apartment for about two weeks in late July and early August, right when Adam went missing. Even more suspicious was the brand new seat cover he had put in his car at the end of August that year, something you'd likely have to invest in if you'd been, say, carrying around body parts. But when confronted by police, Edward said he didn't have anything to do with Adam's death. And not only did he have an alibi, he'd actually been at work the day Adam was taken. But when crime scene techs processed his car, they found no evidence to connect him to the crime. So, they were back at square one. Police continued to work the case, but nothing panned out. For years. Two to be exact. Until October 1983, when investigators got a call from an officer with the Brevard County Sheriff's Department homicide unit, the officer said he had a guy in custody who wanted to talk to Hollywood PD about an unsolved murder. The man who wanted to speak to investigators was Audis Tool, who was in jail on other murder charges when he began confessing to more crimes. And of everything terrible he'd done in his life, all of the people he'd hurt, he said there was just one that he felt bad about, mostly because of the age of the victim. It was a young boy he had taken from a Sears department store. Audis said that shortly before Adam's murder, he had taken a bus down to Florida. He was kind of a drifter, and he had some family in Jacksonville, but he would roam around the state in a car that he rented from a family member. On the day in question, he said he was window shopping at a wig store near the Sears in Hollywood when he saw a young boy just standing outside of the store. He said there was something about the boy that he liked. He wanted to keep him and raise him as his own, so he asked the boy to follow him to his car where he had candy and toys. He took the boy's arm and the boy went willingly. Of course, there was nothing in the car, but Audis kept the kid calm by telling him that all of that stuff was just at his house, and he was going to take him there. As they drove further and further away, the longer the boy was in the car, the more upset he became. He wanted to go back. He wanted his mom. Eventually, Audis knew his plan wasn't going to work. He wasn't going to be able to keep this kid without this kid freaking out. The more the boy cried, the more upset Audis got, and he hit him across the face. According to an article by Charles Montaldo for Thought Co., Audis said that he pulled

the car over, sexually assaulted the boy before strangling him to death with a seatbelt. Then he used a weapon from his trunk to cut the boy's head off. He said he wanted to keep the head with him and had initially thrown it on the floorboard of his car, but later decided that would be a really bad idea, so instead he threw the head into a body of water, and the place he described was a perfect match to where Adam's head was eventually found. So this is looking pretty good, except there are two big problems. First, his description of the victim doesn't quite match Adam's. What Audis remembered was a boy between seven and ten years old with curly blonde hair, wearing jeans, a blue shirt, and sneakers. But Adam was only six, and he had brown hair, and was wearing green shorts, a red and white striped shirt, and yellow sandals. The second issue was that Audis's story kept changing. Like at first, Audis said he did it. Then he said his friend and lover Henry Lee Lucas did it, and he was just there. First, he said he used a bayonet to sever the boy's head. Then a machete. When they asked him what he did with the body, first he said he buried it near the canal, but then later said he took it to his mother's house in Jacksonville. But we know memories are strange, and while police can overlook the inconsistencies on what color his hair was, what kind of shoes he was wearing, it was harder to overlook the big stuff. And even though his story kept changing, the details anyway, I mean the core of the story, that remained the same. Audis looked good for it. What they needed was physical evidence, proof that he did it. But they couldn't find any. For years, literally years, they went back and forth, taking confession after confession, trying to connect him physically to the crime. DNA wasn't much to talk about in the early 80s, so unsurprisingly, nothing Audis owned could be genetically linked to Adam. Everything was inconclusive. And according to reporting done by Yolane Almanzar in the New York Times, by the time the mid-90s rolled around and real DNA testing started to become a thing, all the testable items, including Audis' entire car, were missing. During his many, many conversations with investigators, Audis gave them enough information to make them believe he was either responsible for the murder or knew who was. But there was another suspect police investigated in connection with Adam's murder, serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, who they learned was actually living in South Florida in July 1981. Not only that, but two eyewitnesses put him in the area of the Hollywood Mall on the day Adam was abducted, one of which said they saw a man who looked like Jeffrey Dahmer forcing a child who looked like Adam Walsh into a white cargo van. Dahmer was also an interesting suspect because his whole MO was decapitation, which he did all the time. So investigators went to Milwaukee to talk to him. And he basically just says, I didn't do that. I'm not a pedophile. Which, I mean, at least two of Dahmer's known victims were just 14 years old, so let's call a spade a spade, shall we? But here's the thing. Reporting in both the Sun Sentinel and the Miami Herald said that the investigators legit did that one sit down chat with Dahmer and then called it a day. No polygraph, nothing. They just took him at his word that he wasn't involved. Now, even though I think Dahmer's angle warranted a little more investigation at the time, hindsight tells us that would have been a waste. Because while it took 27 years for the truth about Adam to come to light, it did eventually come out. In February 2006, John and Ravet reached out to a retired Hollywood PD homicide investigator named Joe Matthews and asked him to take a fresh look at Adam's case. Really, they were asking him to close it once and for all. According to Dan Harris and Claire Peterson

who reported for ABC News, during his investigation, Matthews reviewed the thousands and thousands of documents that formed the case file on Adam Walsh. And what he found was that Hollywood PD had literally everything they needed to close the case right there in front of them all along. It was just so sloppy, so poorly handled that no one could see it right in front of them. Especially not the lead investigator who, despite all the evidence to the contrary, always thought John's friend Jimmy was responsible and spent more time trying to rule out other suspects like Audis Tool than trying to connect them to the crime. Blinders aside, there were some concerning things in the case file. For example, at one point when Audis was telling his version of the stories, he talked about taking Adam up to his mother's home in Jacksonville. Well, there was actually a search done of the place and during that search, investigators found a pair of green, child-sized shorts, just like the ones Adam was wearing when he went missing. And they found a yellow child's flip-flop, just like Adam's. The evidence was collected, but was then put directly into storage, never shown to the family for identification and from what I gathered, never even forensically tested. Though it wasn't conclusive proof, Joe Matthews was more sure than ever that he was on the right track and that he needed to go back and find everything like this, every little piece of evidence that might have been overlooked before, every corner cut, every stone that was left unturned. What he really wanted was Audis's car. If there was truth to be found, it had to be in that car. He knew the car itself and any samples from inside it were long gone. But amid all the reports in the police file, he noted that there were five rolls of film with pictures taken up the car. He requested them over and over and kept being told that they couldn't be located. There were no pictures. And it turns out, that's accurate, kind of, there were no pictures because not one of those five rolls of film had ever even been developed. Eventually, Joe was able to get his hands on the film and had all five rolls developed and even after two and a half decades, what he saw sent chills down his spine. While the original investigators were searching the car, it had been sprayed with luminol and treated with light. There, on the driver's side floorboard, were two bloody footprints and in the back where Audis said he tossed Adam's head with the distinct image of a face in blood. According to *Bringing Adam Home* by Les Stanaford, Ravet said that when she saw that picture, she knew because a mother knows. And that photo answered everything for her. Now, there are conspiracy theorists online who will tell you the photo has been doctored, but the evidence against Audis' tool was overwhelming. There was more than enough to take him to trial, which is what Hollywood police told the world when they announced that they were closing the case in 2008. And while knowing is certainly better than not knowing, there was no justice for Adam Walsh, not in the way that we like to see justice served, because Audis died in prison in 1996 of cirrhosis of the liver. Justice or not, Adam's case changed the way America viewed child abduction and stranger danger. And his family turned their tragedy into a force that has gone on to help so many other families and kids in particular. John and Ravet became victims' advocates almost immediately after Adam's death, because they saw firsthand all the ways their son's case fell through law enforcement's cracks. According to an article by Olivia Waxman for Time magazine, John and Ravet founded the Adam Walsh Outreach Center for Missing Children just four days after laying their son to rest. They lobbied hard for the Missing Children's Act, which required law enforcement to enter

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missing children data into the FBI's national database. In 1984, John co-founded the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which is a national information clearing house and a resource for parents, communities, and law enforcement in locating missing children. According to their website, NICMEG has circulated billions of photos of missing children and assisted law enforcement in the recovery of more than 348,000 missing children. I don't know if that would have happened without Adam and without his dedicated parents. Of course, nearest and dearest to my heart, in 1988, John Walsh started hosting America's Most Wanted, which helped capture more than a thousand fugitives during the time it was on air, and which recently was just revived with a new host. In the 80s, a movie was made about Adam's case, and at the end of each airing, they would always list around 50 kids who were missing. Some were presumed runaways and some were kidnapped by a parent, and others were victims of stranger abduction. And each time, there were a handful of those kids returned home because of the airing. The Walsh's are also responsible for the creation of Code Adam, which was adopted by major retailers in the mid to late 90s. When a child is reported missing in a store or if an employee or customer finds a missing child, a Code Adam is announced. When the child is lost or missing, all doors in the store are locked. An employee is posted at every exit, and a description is shared over the broadcast system. Code Adam is considered a predecessor to the Amber Alert, which I will tell you about in a future Crime Junkie Precedent episode. So make sure to follow the show so you don't miss a single bonus episode. To find all the source material for this episode, you can go to our website, crimejunkiepodcast.com. Be sure to follow us on Instagram at [crimejunkiepodcast](https://www.instagram.com/crimejunkiepodcast), and we'll be back on Monday with a regularly scheduled episode. Crimejunkie is an audio chuck production. So, what do you think Chuck? Do you approve?