



Courtesy photo
Carolyn DeFord is still seeking answers as her mother, Leona Kinsey, pictured above, has been missing since 1999.

KINSEY

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was important to her mother.

DeFord said Kinsey spent time with a group of friends, some she'd known for more than 15 years, but most of the time she was working on her various projects and at her job. Her projects included refurbishing found furniture. Kinsey had worked as a housekeeper for most of DeFord's childhood, and she prided herself on her work. "What stability she did have, she worked hard for," DeFord said.

At the time of her disappearance, Kinsey was trying to start her own business, doing janitorial and landscaping odd jobs with companies she contracted with. According to DeFord, she wasn't the type of person to just walk away from her work.

Kinsey also had pets at home, a cat and a dog. DeFord said it was very out of character for her mother to leave the dog at home. According to the detective currently working Kinsey's case, LGPD Sgt. Jason Hays, an ex-boyfriend of Kinsey's who reported her missing also thought it was odd that she would leave her pets without making prior arrangements.

Kinsey's disappearance

Kinsey was reported missing by two of her friends and her daughter after a friend who Kinsey was supposed to meet called DeFord to say Kinsey never showed up, according to a previous Observer article. Her friend said Kinsey was supposed to stop by after a trip the Albertsons grocery store, but never showed up.

ANNEX

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gyms, I don't know what we would do," McKinney said.

The gym in the annex, which has batting cages, is also used by La Grande High School's baseball, softball and soccer teams and by outside organizations.

Others who depend on the annex include the La Grande School District's food service program, which has a walk-in freezer there and uses space for the storage of dry food and equipment. The school district's grounds and maintenance department also makes extensive use of the building for storage.

At the beginning of the work session, Waite presented the school board with three preliminary options to consider for the annex building:

Option 1: The annex building would be maintained on a status quo basis. This would involve replacing the roof for about \$240,000 and performing upgrade work estimated to cost \$150,000, assuming a structural analysis does not find any unforeseen

"I didn't believe it at first," DeFord said about her mother being declared missing. "We didn't have cellphones then, we didn't have 24-hour access to each other. I thought it was just a miscommunication, and there was something logical that would explain it."

Kinsey's car was found in the Albertsons parking lot, and according to Hays, the detectives at the time couldn't find anything that would tell them what had happened to her. This was just the start of what has now been a 20-year investigation.

At the beginning of their search for Kinsey, police interviewed more than 22 people, mostly family, friends and known associates of Kinsey's. Oregon State Police performed a polygraph on two people of interest and had planned to perform a third on a different ex-boyfriend of Kinsey's, than the one who reported her missing, but he failed to show up. This ex-boyfriend remains a person of interest in the case, but his deportation to Mexico in 2006 has made further investigating difficult, Hays said, although police did have a brief interview.

Many people have been involved in this case, Hays said. Eight detectives, including a cold case specialist, Union County Search and Rescue, the Union County District Attorney and the Oregon State Police have all at one time or another been a part of searching for the missing La Grande woman.

"I am grateful they are still looking and keeping the case open and active," DeFord said.

Kinsey left her home and everything behind. For DeFord, a difficult moment

problems.

Option 2: The entire annex building would be replaced for a cost of between \$4.5 million and \$9 million.

Option 3: The annex building would be replaced by two separate facilities — a field house for athletics and a warehouse. The total cost of doing this would be between \$3.75 million and \$8.25 million.



La Grande Police Department photo
La Grande Police Department searched a pond in Wallowa area in 2019, but found nothing.

was packing up her mother's things and taking them back to her house, which was eight hours away. DeFord now lives in Washington.

"I packed up as much of it as I could and brought it home," DeFord said. "What do you do with the rest, when it's all sacred? I can't get rid of her things. These are her things. (At the time) I still didn't believe she wasn't coming back, and (I thought) she was going to be pissed that I called the police let alone that I packed the stuff up."

DeFord has also struggled with the unanswered questions. She said she sometimes imagines what might have happened to her mother, and she can't watch any TV shows or movies with crimes because they trigger her grief.

"I've watched my mom die a thousand gruesome ways and

have to hold on to all those gruesome things that could have happened to her and not know what happened," DeFord said. "I'm sick of imagining it."

Updates in the case

Since the world learned of Kinsey's disappearance, people have come forward to offer tips and share what information they had. Although these leads have not revealed any useful evidence.

"We are leaving no stone unturned," Hays said.

The sergeant added that every tip the police has received has been looked into. If any new information has merit and some support it, LGPD will dig as deep as they possibly can.

Some people have said they heard Kinsey's ex-boyfriend, who was later deported to

Mexico, bragging about being involved in her disappearance, according to both Hays and DeFord.

Initially the police looked everywhere Kinsey might have gone, including places she frequently visited, but nothing was found.

In 2009, an ex-wife of the deported ex-boyfriend shared a possible location in Wallowa County where Kinsey could be found, but when searching the area the police found nothing. A year ago, the police returned to the area to search the previously unsearched pond, but once again the officers were unable to find anything. The pond had gone unsearched before because of a lack of proper resources and access, according to Hays.

LGPD has received three tips in Kinsey's case in 2019 so far. In 2018, only one tip was

received. However, DeFord is still hopeful and continues to fight for her mother to be found.

Kinsey is the only person in La Grande to have gone missing and not been found in the last 20 years, according to Sgt. Hays. He said something like this is very uncommon for this town.

"This one bothers me," Hays said.

As for DeFord, she continues to fight for her mother to be found.

DeFord has started a Facebook page for missing and murdered indigenous women and has taken the issue to the government, establishing House Bill 2625. HB 2625 directs state police departments to study how to improve and increase criminal justice resources relating to missing and murdered Native American women in Oregon. These efforts help DeFord keep her mother's memory alive and help in the continued search.

DeFord is hosting a 20-year memorial event Sept. 20 at 3 p.m. in La Grande's Max Square. DeFord hopes continued efforts toward finding her mother will not only keep Kinsey's memory alive, but will prompt someone to share what they know.

"I just don't want this little town that I've called home to forget her," DeFord said. "Maybe now, people who might have been afraid will feel safe enough to come forward."

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