



911 Call Lost During Mom's Kidnapping

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NORTH PORT - A motorist called 911 Thursday after hearing a woman screaming from the backseat of a car on U.S. 41, but the information apparently never got to officers searching for Denise Lee that night.

Motorist Janet Kowalski gave authorities an exact location for the car driven by Michael King, 36, who was charged Monday with first-degree murder in Lee's death. Kowalski made the call as King pulled up beside her at the intersection of U.S. 41 and Cranberry Boulevard at 6:30 p.m.

But because Kowalski called 911 from just inside the Charlotte County line on Cranberry Boulevard, her call was handled by the Charlotte County 911 center.

For some reason, the call was not patched through to the North Port police in Sarasota County, who were directing the search for Lee.

"They handled the call from beginning to end," said North Port Police Capt. Robert Estrada.

Kowalski told the 911 operator she saw the driver repeatedly push a woman down in the back seat of his car, and the woman slapped the passenger side window as if trying to get out.

Kowalski also said she heard the woman screaming "like she never heard before," according to documents released Tuesday.

Kowalski's 911 call may have given police their best chance to save Lee, 21, whose body was found Saturday. Yet none of them knew that Lee had been spotted, alive, by Kowalski.

Authorities had been looking for King and his green Chevrolet Camaro, which had a black grill protector on it, since shortly after Lee, a mother of two, was reported missing at 3:20 p.m. Thursday. An alert on the car went out at 5 p.m., and authorities stepped up their search after receiving two 911 calls reporting that King had abducted Lee. On one of those calls Lee could be heard begging her abductor for her life.

Lee's body was found buried in a shallow grave Saturday.

King was driving on U.S. 41, the main north-south road in the area; where he was spotted with Lee is only about three miles from the North Port police station.

What happened to Kowalski's call remains unclear. At least two other 911 calls - one by a relative of King's who said King had borrowed a gas can and shovel and was spotted pushing a tied-up Lee into his car, and a second in which Lee begged for her life - were handled by Sarasota County dispatchers and immediately passed on to searchers.

Charlotte County Sheriff John Davenport said Tuesday that dispatchers should have been aware of the alert on the Camaro and should have relayed any information they received to the North Port Police Department immediately.

He also acknowledged that a breakdown in communication would be a serious police failure, but would not say when information from the Kowalski call was relayed to North Port Police.

"There will be comments made," Davenport said. "We will be looking into all of this, and things will come out. But this is all speculation right now. I know some of the information is wrong."

The state attorney's office has refused to release copies of any 911 call connected to the Lee case.

Kowalski called 911 as King pulled up beside her as she stopped at the light at Cranberry Boulevard and U.S. 41. King then pulled in behind Kowalski as she drove south on U.S. 41, she told the dispatcher.

As Kowalski drove she reeled off the names of the streets she passed on the largely undeveloped stretch of U.S. 41 - Longley Drive, Chamberlain Boulevard, Strafford Drive, Moss Drive, and so on.

After about three miles the two cars got to Toledo Blade Boulevard, and King quickly made a left turn onto Toledo Blade, she told authorities.

King was arrested about three hours later on that same road, his pants by that time soaking wet and covered in mud.

Lee was nowhere to be found.

As Kowalski watched Lee fight for her life, searchers were looking for her near Tropicaire Boulevard and others were heading to Karluk Street, where King had stopped to borrow a shovel, gas can and flashlight from his cousin, Harold Muxlow.

North Port Police Chief Terry Lewis declined to answer questions regarding the handling of the Kowalski call.