



Don, Jesse and Donna Ross

WAITING STILL

By Lindsey V. Corey

Ralph Parker has done a lot of second guessing.

“Being the last person who knew him to see him, that’s hard,” the UMKC senior says. “What if I would’ve said something when he was walking out?”

There were 30 students in the midst of a meeting at the conference room of the Sheraton Chicago.

“But I’m the one,” Parker says. “I should’ve paid attention.”

UMKC student Jesse Ross was last seen at about 3 a.m. Nov. 21. He and Parker were taking part in a simulated emergency meeting during a model United Nations conference when Jesse left through a side door.

It wasn’t until almost 12 hours later, Parker and the other 11 UMKC students on the trip realized there was a real emergency.

Parker had assumed Jesse had left to go to the restroom or to their hotel, a 10-minute, well-lit walk away, to sleep. He walked back alone to their room at the Four Points Sheraton when the meeting concluded at

about 5:30 a.m. Parker turned on the hall light so he wouldn’t disturb his roommate.

“There was a big mess on the bed and he’s so skinny, I figured he was under the mess somewhere,” Parker says of Jesse.

But when he woke up at 10 a.m., he realized Jesse had never returned. No reason to panic, he probably just crashed in someone else’s room, Parker thought.

“So I just packed up his stuff thinking he should be thanking me,” he says.

Adviser Derek Moorehead and UMKC Model UN President Joe Goodding (M.S.W. ’07) picked him up and headed to the conference hotel, where they expected Ross would turn up.

“By mid-afternoon I was concerned,” Goodding says. “My attention gradually shifted from what was going on in the meeting to worrying about Jesse.”

He and Parker skipped the final session. Goodding alerted conference organizers and hotel security. Parker wandered around the high rise.

“I opened a few obscure doors, checked the parking garage, asked people if they’d seen my red-headed friend,” he says. “I probably wasn’t expecting to just come across him, but you never know.”

The UMKC contingency met in the lobby at the close of the conference as planned. Most of the 1,200 students who had participated were leaving.

“I thought he would’ve made an appearance by then,” Parker says. “By 4 o’clock it was pretty obvious Jesse was missing, something bad had happened.”

Moorehead went to the police station to make a report. A couple students were crying, but Goodding says most were in shock. They didn’t want to leave. They stuck around for a few more hours, kept calling Jesse’s cell phone, but together they decided there was nothing they could do so they loaded up the vans and headed for home with his suitcase.

For awhile, no one said anything. “We were afraid to,” Parker says. “We were

thinking the worst, but no one was saying it. There were a lot of what-ifs and speculation for most of the trip home. It was just so weird to be coming back without him.”

They were tired, but unlike the drive up, no one really slept. Because of the early morning meeting, Parker had gotten the least sleep the night before, but he volunteered to drive.

“Eventually, we were talking about anything just to avoid it,” he says.

It was dawn the day before Thanksgiving when they arrived in Kansas City. Goodding took Ross’ luggage. He doesn’t remember it being a discussion.

“I’m much older than the other students so I just decided it was my responsibility,” he says. “I wanted his parents to have everything that was his with them as soon as possible.”

He was so upset he called a friend and had to pull over on the drive to the Ross house in Belton, Mo.

“That was sort of a reality check,” says Don Ross, Jesse’s father, who wears one of Jesse’s cell phones, which Goodding returned, on his hip.

They used to hold their breath when it rang, when any phone did. Not anymore.

“Even now it’s unreal,” Donna Ross, his mother, says. “How can this have happened? How do you lose one kid? He sticks out like a sore thumb. If you panned a room of 1,000 kids, you’d spot Jesse.”

Chicago police interviewed hundreds of students. They searched the downtown area with dogs, looked in dumpsters, checked surveillance footage and found no sign of the then-19-year-old in the Chicago River or along the Lake Michigan shoreline. There’s been no activity on the cell phone Jesse probably had with him; his credit card hasn’t been used either.

“It’s been a great effort, but we’re no closer today,” Don says. “It’s a mystery, but we don’t want it to be a mystery 20 years from now.”

There’s no evidence of foul play, but his family and friends don’t believe Jesse vanished on his own. Parker, who has known Jesse since high school, says he was his typical joking self on the trip, that he left no clues.

When he called his mother the day before he went missing, Jesse was “on-top-of-the-world excited,” she says. He was a popular radio personality on a Kansas City morning show about to graduate from intern to paid employee.

“Anything is possible,” Don says. “Your

mind goes to terrible places. It’s so frustrating. We don’t want to imagine all these horrible things. We feel helpless.”

It’s hard being so far from where their son was last known to be. They’ve made several trips to Chicago, met with police and thanked the stranger who passed out his picture to homeless people. Goodding gave them a map of the area. They know it by heart now.

On one visit a detective called while Don, Jesse’s older brother Andy and a friend were leaving their room in that same Sheraton. A body had been found. They needed to go back and wait. It was someone else’s relative.

“We know God’s with Jesse, wherever he is,” his mother says calmly. “If he has a new home in heaven, we’d like a sign. Being in limbo is hard. People who lose a loved one have closure, they grieve and move on. We’re left with an open wound. It festers. There’s no moving forward, just in circles really.”

They believe their son is alive.

“We believe in miracles,” Donna says. “We choose to believe he’s out there. We have to.” Sometimes she senses it.

“You walk the streets there and you have to wonder,” Donna says. “It’s eerie and at the same time somehow comfortable to be where he was last seen. You can’t help but know he’s been there. You can kind of feel it.”



The first time, I thought I’d see him right there.”

They didn’t worry about him going to Chicago; he’d been there for the same four-day conference the year before.

“As a parent, it’s a balance between protecting and preparing,” Don says. “You want them to feel secure in this world even if there are no guarantees. We have friends whose kids went to Iraq and, thank God, came home safe. Jesse goes up the road to Chicago and doesn’t come home. It doesn’t make sense.”

So he tries to make sense of it, to find the problem and fix it like dads do. Spare moments are spent searching the Internet in Jesse’s room, the one they’d just framed for him in the basement so his music didn’t keep Don and Donna up at night. Now, it’s the constant quiet that’s disturbing, his mother says.

“There are days you’re paralyzed, but I know I have to pull it together,” Don says. “We’re not going to give up on Jesse and let him down. As far as we know Jesse can’t save himself so we need to be diligent.”

They have their faith, and they have each other. When Donna has a bad day, Don is there to lift her up whether it’s looking at family photos, watching an old movie that somehow transports them back in time or sharing the story of someone he met online whose child did make it home again.

When he cries, she’s ready with a story about their “little firecracker.” “When you’re raising a boy like Jesse, it’s half panic, half joy,” she says. “But the creativity is wonderful.”

Andy moved home shortly after the disappearance. He doesn’t fight the extra hugs, and that helps.

UMKC counselors met with the Model UN team several times. Goodding continues the therapy.

“What’s so difficult is that it still sounds like he just walked through some doors and disappeared,” he says. “It’s mostly grief that he’s missing and it’s unexplained.”

Parker says coming back to finals just around the corner was especially hard.

“I just wanted a distraction, but it was hard to focus on anything else,” he says. “I didn’t want it in my mind all the time.”

Sometimes Jesse shows up in Parker’s dreams like nothing ever happened, like all this was the dream.

Sure he thinks about him everyday, but the guilt, he’s let that go.

“I have to tell myself I had no idea what would happen,” Parker says. “If I knew, I would’ve tied him to that chair.”

At press time, Jesse Ross was still missing. ■

Jesse Ross was last seen leaving a downtown Chicago hotel Nov. 21. He is 5 feet 10 inches tall and weighs 140 pounds. Jesse has red hair, blue eyes, freckles and wears glasses. He was thought to be wearing a green warm-up jacket, white T-shirt, blue jeans and black gym shoes.

His family is offering a \$10,000 reward for information leading to his return.

Contact the Chicago police at 312-744-8266.