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# Michele Mandel

## 'Once your child is gone, you can't get them back,' warns a father whose daughter chose the Internet over family

He bought her a laptop for Christmas, and for that act of fatherly love he will never forgive himself.

Wayne Banks believed he was doing a good thing for the daughter he'd raised since his wife left them when she was 3 — the little girl who was becoming a young woman of 12 and had decided to move back with her mom.

Now Banks, a 53-year-old accountant, sits in his comfortable Mississauga home, leafing through photos of happier times, of his only child on vacation with him in Disneyland and the Dominican Republic, posing with Goofy in one shot, with a toucan on her shoulder in another.

He doesn't have a single photo of Katie from these last, lost three years.

"When my daughter was born, it's funny how instantly you fall in love," he says wistfully. "She was my whole life. I raised her. I did the best I could. I thought it was the right thing."

He looks up with anguish in his eyes. "What went wrong? She had everything. I don't know what the magic formula is."

His tale sounds like the plot of an unbelievable TV movie, but the frightening part for any parent is that it's all true.

During Grade 8 and through her first year of high school, he says Katie stopped showing up for classes, her marks began to plummet, and he and his ex-wife couldn't figure out why. It was only when she asked him to fix a problem on her laptop that her father inadvertently discovered the reason.

She was up all night chatting online.

His ex took away Katie's modem, so that she wouldn't have Internet access and could only use her computer for school work. Their enterprising daughter soon found a way around that obstacle.

On his way home from work in the wee hours of the morning Banks spotted a child in his neighbourhood sitting on the curb, her face lit up by the glow of a laptop screen. It was Katie, who'd hunted through the area looking to piggyback onto someone's home wireless Internet connection.

All the professionals they consulted in desperation advised them to take away her privileges — including her computer — and make her earn them back.

Her response was equally dramatic. One day the 14-year-old simply disappeared.

For eight months, her frantic parents had no idea where she was. Every once in a while she would call her mom from a payphone to tell her she was okay but nothing more.

They were desperate with worry but the Peel police, he says, were no help at all. As long as their daughter maintained some form of contact, they were told she wasn't considered missing and they couldn't file a report.

Katie slipped one day and called from the phone where she was staying. They traced the number to a house in Orillia and soon learned their daughter had moved in with the family of a 17-year-old high school dropout she'd been corresponding with online.

Banks had his lawyer write the family to insist they return Katie. They responded by threatening to sue. He then went to the Orillia OPP detachment for help.

By sheer coincidence, his daughter was there with her boyfriend. After learning the trouble Banks was making, she was there to make a false allegation of assault against her dad so that he would leave them alone.

Banks was investigated and never charged, but the police warned him there was nothing he could do about Katie.

"They told me if I came to Orillia to get my daughter I could be arrested for kidnapping," he says in exasperation. "That's our system."

The Children's Aid in Midland were equally unhelpful. Finally the Peel CAS helped by having Katie charged with delinquency — she hadn't been to school for more than a year — and a bench warrant was issued.

In March, she showed up at her mother's door. Her 19-year-old unemployed boyfriend had kicked her out of his family's house.

Katie, at 15, is pregnant.



ERNEST DOROSZUK/TORONTO SUN

Wayne Banks holds a snapshot of his daughter, Katie, who ran away at 14 to be with a dropout she met on an Internet chat room. At 15 she was pregnant and back, but then took off again.

For a few short months, she was back with them. They had her enrolled in a modified school program, her mom had painted a spare room as a nursery and promised to help her raise the baby. For a brief moment, they had hope.

But a month ago Katie went back to her online Romeo.

"I'm afraid to go to sleep at night because I have dreams of what might happen to her," her father says with such anguish. "I lost my daughter. For all intents and purposes, I've lost the person I knew and I believe it's because of the

Internet and I caused it. It's my fault. I gave her the computer."

His daughter was lured away by another teen. He's read too many stories of other kids who have fallen prey to pedophiles lurking in chat rooms: "You'd never let your child talk to a stranger and then you hand them a computer and you have no control."

He's turned his frustration into a passion to develop software to help parents with what he believes is an addiction. With his partner, he's created \$30 programs that can

automatically shut off a child's computer after a certain time (yoursafetyguide.com).

"I don't care if I make a dime in this business. My deal is to save even just one parent from going through what I went through."

Banks gazes once more at the photo of the daughter he no longer knows. "Once your child is gone," he warns, "you can't get them back."

Read Mandel every Monday, Thursday and Sunday.  
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