

SOUTH METRO

# Police: Network of family court critics is hiding Rucki sisters

Investigators hit a wall in search for Lakeville sisters.

By Brandon Stahl

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Lakeville police Lt. Jason Polinski assumed that as his agency searched for missing teenagers Gianna and Samantha Rucki, the people who saw them last would be willing to help.

Instead, he said, those people have resisted in hopes that the girls stay missing.

"Every person we've talked to had the same anti-government, 'family court sucks' attitude," Polinski said.

Polinski was referring to a vocal, passionate group, both in Minnesota and nationwide, that is sometimes called the "Protective Parent" movement. Those in the movement believe that family courts are broken and judges in custody disputes are ordering children to live with abusive parents. Some in the group say the noncustodial parent in these cases has no choice but to hide kids in a loosely organized underground network.

"There are networks, little pockets throughout the country of abuse survivors ... who have dug in their heels and are forming ad hoc shelter, refuge for children," said Amy Neustein, a sociologist in New Jersey who has studied the underground and became a critic of family courts after losing custody of her daughter.

People in the underground naturally stay silent about their involvement. It's not known who operates the homes, how many children they take in or if they are as prominent as they were three decades ago, when its leader gained national notoriety. Still, Polinski suspects it's this network that is hiding the girls, who were 13 and 14 when they ran away from their Lakeville home on April 19, 2013. So far, Lakeville police have searched three homes of people believed to have helped the girls disappear.

"There's no way you hide two people that long by yourself," Polinski said. "The act of keeping actual human beings missing is too hard to do."

Before their disappearance, the sisters told the judge in their parents' divorce case that they were being abused by their father, David Rucki. After they ran away, they appeared on a local news station to repeat those claims, and said they wanted to live with their mother, Sandra Grazzini-Rucki.