For an idealistic Chicago man, it was supposed to be one last adventure before returning to graduate school.

He entered the Costa Rican jungle here—and vanished.

The Last Hike of David Gimelfarb

BY DAVE SEMINARA // PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIEL SHEA
Some 300 visitors from all over the globe were there on August 11, 2009, the day a 28-year-old graduate student from Chicago arrived. He walked into the visitors’ information but just before 10 a.m. and scribbled his name—David Gimelfarb—into the guest book. He told the ranger in Spanish that he intended to take an easy three-kilometer loop called Las Pailas (the Cauldrons), after the steaming pots that pepper the path. He added a note: “I’m a Friend of the Park, I plan to hike near an active volcano, which is often obscured by cloud cover, and I plan to hike it quietly.”

Nearly four years later, I stumbled across a report about the disappearance while researching a travel story about the Rincón de la Vieja National Park. I arrived after dusk, after the streetlights were lit, and after听见 the silence that has happened to my dreams. I told the young hiker could easily have happened to me.

The young hiker had been traveling alone, a last hurrah before starting his fourth year of graduate school. A doctoral student at the Adler School of Professional Psychology in Chicago, he volunteered for the mentally ill at a community health center on the West Side, and he hoped to make that kind of work his career. Counseling was rewarding but stressful, and David’s parents worried that he was having a hard time coping with the recent loss of his beloved Russian grandmother, Valentina, who had cared for him from birth to kindergarten.

The trip had been hastily arranged only a few days before David was to leave. One of Luda’s coworkers at Kraft Foods, who worked in Costa Rica, had recommended the park. It seemed perfect for David, who was fluent in Spanish, liked to hike, and needed to unwind. He was introverted, even a little socially awkward at times, and he told his adviser at Adler that the trip would be a way to build his confidence. “I told him I worried about him,” recalls Janna Henning, a coordinator of the Art of Long-Term World Travel, which encourages the in-trepid to take root and dig deep into local cultures.

But David must have known the risks of adventuring alone. Just before his senior year at Beloit, one of his fraternity brothers, David Byrd-Felker, who was from Madison, disappeared in southern Ecuador, likely while hiking by himself in a national park. No one can recall specifically how the disappearance affected Gimelfarb emotionally, but his college roommate, Ian Thomson, who is now an attorney in Milwaukee, says he can’t help wondering if David considered his fraternity brother’s fate when he decided to visit the park that morning in Costa Rica.

The day I set out to retrace David Gimelfarb’s footsteps was warm and dry, and Rincón de la Vieja’s canopy of majestic, twisting trees provided relief from the morning sun. But following the same trail that he had supposedly hiked, I had an uneasy feeling. It had started the night I checked into the motel, and it persisted the next morning as I explored the park. I finished the hike in less than two hours and walked back toward the information but to talk to the park’s rangers.

The search for answers begins at the Hacienda Guachipelín, a rustic 54-room motel-style complex located on the lonely road that leads to Rincón de la Vieja. I arrived after dark this past February, making it through the motel’s security check point just before the guard went home for the night. I was assigned room 27, next door to the one where David Gimelfarb had stayed. He had been traveling alone, a last hurrah before starting his fourth year of graduate school. A doctoral student at the Adler School of Professional Psychology in Chicago, he volunteered for the mentally ill at a community health center on the West Side, and he hoped to make that kind of work his career. Counseling was rewarding but stressful, and David’s parents worried that he was having a hard time coping with the recent loss of his beloved Russian grandmother, Valentina, who had cared for him from birth to kindergarten.

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Rincón de la Vieja National Park is a vast wonderland filled with ancient trees, postcard-perfect waterfalls, and bubbling geothermal mud pits that can reach a skin-scorching 200 degrees. Visitors flock here for the opportunity to hike near an active volcano, which is often obscured by cloud cover, lending the park a mysterious aura. Legend has it the volcano’s peak is haunted by an old witch who, in a Romeo and Juliet–style legend, became a recluse after her disapproving father threw her lover into the crater.

Listed as a “not to miss” site in The Rough Guide to Costa Rica, Rincón is exactly the kind of lush, tropical destination that has helped establish the Central American country as the ecotourism capital of the world. But despite the park’s wide appeal, locals will tell you that it is unquestionably wild. Pumas, jaguars, and at least four varieties of poisonous snakes lurk deep in the jungle. Some of the labyrinthine trails aren’t particularly well marked, and drug traffickers have been known to use them to smuggle narcotics into Nicaragua, just 25 miles to the north. And a section of the park was quietly closed for several days in 2009 and again in 2012 after hikers were robbed at machete point.

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The next morning, his mother tried the motel again. When the front desk clerk said that David still wasn’t answering the phone, his mother insisted that someone go inside his room and check on him. “I told them, ‘If you don’t go in, I’m going to call the police, and if anything happens to my son, you are responsible,’” she says, still aggrieved by the memory.

Hours passed. That night, José Tómas Batalla, the owner of the motel, called the Gimelfarbs. David, he said, hadn’t slept in his bed the previous night. His suitcase was still in the room, and his rental car had been found on the national park.

“My heart sank when he said that,” recalls Roma, who went online and booked herself and her wife flights to Costa Rica. By the time Luda and Roma arrived at the Liberia airport on Thursday, August 13, several Red Cross volunteers were already searching Rincón on foot. So they headed straight to the Hacienda Guachipelín, where the manager, Mateo Fournier Palma, unlocked room 16 and let them in. (They would later learn that Palma had already searched the room with two other witnesses who were never identified.)

The bed had been made, and David’s suitcase was still there. Two books of poetry—by Pablo Neruda and Federico García Lorca—were on a nightstand next to the bed. Palma opened the room safe. Inside, the concerned parents found their son’s passport, $600 of the $800 his father had given him in cash for the trip, and his cell phone, which contained a few photos of a beach he had visited the day before. “That didn’t make sense to us,” Roma says. “Who would bring so many things with you on a hike but not the cell phone? There was no reception in the area, but he always used it to tell time.”

Judging from the items that were missing, they determined that David had likely carried with him his North Face backpack, a few credit cards, and about $100. Missing, too, were his journal and an inexpensive point-and-shoot camera.

Fearing that David had gotten lost or injured in the park, they headed to Rincón to meet with rangers and Red Cross volunteers, whose numbers would swell into the hundreds that weekend. Luda’s boss at Kraft organized a committee to hire a professional search-and-rescue team, while David’s friends in Chicago started a Facebook group, Help Find David Gimelfarb, which attracted more than 1,000 members in the first days.

After Luda approached the U.S. Embassy in San José and received a noncommittal response—“They said, more or less, that he came here on his own,” she recalls, “so basically we are on our own”—David’s friends in Chicago mobilized and wrote letters to Mark Kirk, who was then an Illinois congressman, and other officials, urging them to pressure the embassy to help find the missing American hiker. (In a written statement, John Whiteley, a State Department spokesman based in Washington, D.C., said that the effort was “thorough and professional” and emphasized that the U.S. government does not have dedicated search-and-rescue personnel stationed at embassies overseas.)

Over the next few days, hundreds of friends and classmates staged demonstrations on the young man’s behalf at Daley Plaza and in the heart of Chicago news stations. On August 13, the military dispatched two helicopters with infrared sensors and more than a dozen uniformed soldiers from Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras to scour the park alongside a private helicopter pilot hired by the Gimelfarbs.

The effort lasted three days. Since Rincón de la Vieja opened in 1972, other hikers had gotten lost there, but all had eventually been found. A visitor had even fallen off one of the volcanos and spent two nights clinging to a ledge before being rescued by a helicopter.

The team considered that David had perhaps changed his mind and, instead of taking the three-kilometer trail, attempted the more arduous journey up to the crater. That risky hike, now off-limits because of recent seismic activity, takes eight hours roundtrip. In this region, the sun sets at around 6 p.m. in August, so it would have been inadvisable for the young American to start out on the trail as late as 10 a.m.

The helicopters searched the crater extensively, and Roma herself made the grueling ascent with a park ranger. The wind was so fierce at the summit that they had to tie a rope around each other’s waists to stay on their feet. Meanwhile, Luda visited every hospital and jail in the area but found no clues. She even consulted a series of psychics, one of whom shared a dark vision: “He’s in the volcano. Go and live your life.”

THE GIMELFARBS SPENT COUNTLESS SLEEPLESS nights pondering what other misfortunes could have possibly befallen their son. Had he been attacked by a jaguar or bitten by a snake? Investigators all but ruled out those theories after no trace of his remains was found.

His parents’ best hope was that David had experienced some sort of mental breakdown and was perhaps wandering in a fugue state, which can occur when a person cannot process a stressful situation and forgets his identity. This temporary amnesiac state could have been triggered by a physical injury, such as a fall or a concussion.

A local resident brought Luda a megaphone, and the 63-year-old woman spent several days hiking the serpentine trails calling her son’s name. “We thought that if he had gone through some sort of traumatic experience, like a breakdown, that hearing my voice would be soothing to him,” she recalls.

Larry Maucieri, a neuropsychologist who was one of Da- vid’s professors at Adler, says that the fugue state scenario is highly unlikely—that such events are so rare they usually become the subject of academic studies. “One-in-a-million-type cases,” he explains.

The Gimelfarbs established a $10,000 reward (later raised to $100,000) and distributed thousands of flyers bearing a photo of David, along with a computer simulation of what he looked like with long hair and a beard. With the money serving as an incentive, leads began to trickle in. One farmer said that he saw a disheveled hiker who, when confronted, had darted into the forest.
The family contacted Sarah Platts, a professional dog handler from Virginia, who in late September volunteered to fly to Costa Rica with her eight-year-old German shorthaired pointer, Jack, to join the search effort. Jack showed no interest in the trail to the volcano but seemed to pick up David’s scent near where the farmer had reported seeing the man flee. (The trail went cold when Jack fell into one of the volcanic mud pots and burned a paw.) Another dog team they hired to sniff for dead bodies found no evidence of a corpse in the park.

THE GIMELFARBS COULDN'T ignore a darker possibility that their son had been the victim of a robbery—or worse. While the vast majority of the two million tourists who visit Costa Rica annually return home safely, crime is a serious concern. (The country of 4.7 million tourists who visit Costa Rica annually has a per capita murder rate lower than that of the United States.) Given that information, Askerli supposed that the perpetrator drove the car back to the park to make it look like David went missing while hiking. “It would be easy to cover up a crime like this in that area,” contends the investigator. “The rivers are filled with crocodiles. No one would ever find the body.”

Rob Thomas, a 50-something Vermont native who moved to San Juan del Sur in 2006 to open a café, smiled when I asked him if David looked familiar. “I can’t say I remember the face,” he said, studying the flier. “But a lot of people come down here to get lost.”

Intrigued by a lead from a local man who told OIJ investigators that he had smuggled someone who matched David’s description across the border, I showed the missing-person flyer to dozens of people at hostels and expat hangouts in San Juan del Sur and Granada. I encountered nothing but curiosity and indifference. Rob Thomas, a 50-something Vermont native who moved to San Juan del Sur in 2006 to open a café, smiled when I asked him if David looked familiar. “I can’t say I remember the face,” he said, studying the flier. “But a lot of people come down here to get lost.”

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THE LAST HIKE

Ben Clore, the fraternity brother, says that, early on, he thought it possible that David had decided to live in the forest for a while. But he now fears the worst. “He was a free spirit,” says Clore. “I could see him disappearing for a year, maybe. But four? No. As time goes on, that theory becomes less realistic.”

Then there’s Sean Curran, a detective with the Highland Park Police Department, who was brought on to the case when the Gimelfarbs reported their son missing to U.S. authorities. (The FBI typically takes on overseas missing-person cases only if the host country requests agency assistance.) After combing through David’s belongings, reading his journals, talking to his friends and teachers, and examining his financial situation, Curran says there is little evidence that would point to a conscious decision to disappear.

Only two clues give him pause: the copy of Vagabonding, which is the book about long-term travel that he found in David’s apartment, and a series of maps he discovered during a search of the graduate student’s laptop. On the night before David was to leave for Costa Rica, he had examined maps of Nicaragua, Honduras, Colombia, Peru, and Chile—a curious detail, since his trip was to last only six days.

But David’s bank account was not touched after he left the United States, and he never applied for any additional credit cards. And his adviser at Adler provided a psychological profile attesting to the fact that the young man seemed mentally strong and highly unlikely to abandon his family and clients.

Sitting in a conference room at the police department on a gloomy day in late April, Curran, a father himself, said the case remains troubling. “I don’t think he intentionally did this to his parents.”

I SPENT THE BETTER PART OF six months trying to untangle the mystery of what happened to David Gimelfarb. I interviewed dozens of friends and people familiar with the case, sifted through reports from investigators, and spent hours with his parents. In the end, I don’t believe that this young man chose to disappear.

But he may have been more emotionally fragile than anyone realized. In the confession he penned on Facebook two weeks before his trip, David said that he sometimes loved the “adventure of being single” but also suffered through “excruciating loneliness.” And that the experience of losing his grandmother brought the idea of his own mortality closer. “I will die someday,” he wrote. “There is no way to know what the future holds, and it really never comes exactly as we envision it.”

The odds are that David Gimelfarb is dead. But we may never know for sure. Mike Byrd and Maggie Felker, the parents of David Byrd-Felker, the other missing Phi Kappa Psi, ultimately came to peace with the idea that they’ll likely never find out what happened to their son. “Western society is enamored with the concept of closure,” says Byrd, who founded David’s Educational Opportunity Fund to help young Ecuadorians go to school. “But there is ambiguous loss all around us. I’m probably better off not knowing what happened.”

For the Gimelfarbs, the search goes on. Roma says he was too consumed by the search to be useful to his company, so he retired. Luda also left her job; she says she has tried therapy but found it too painful.

Each August, Roma and Luda return to Costa Rica on the anniversary of their son’s disappearance to chase leads and to press for a renewed investigation. Every time there is another sighting, they pursue it.

Earlier this year, a family friend, Nicolas Bridon, volunteered to travel to Costa Rica to investigate the tip from the minimart in Limón. Bridon met with the family who had taken the dirty, disoriented mute to the police, and he interviewed the officer who had been at the station. The family seemed sincere, and the police officer insisted that the young Caucasian he encountered was indeed the same man as on the flier.

While these people could be mistaken, it’s clear that David Gimelfarb, with his pale skin, red hair, and freckles, would stand out in a crowd in Costa Rica. “We look at every face that could be David and wonder, Could that be our son?” says Luda, measuring her words, trying not to break down.

Every day, rain, snow, or sleet, she leaves her home on a quiet street near Ravinia and walks to Rosewood Park, where she always sits on the same wooden bench facing Lake Michigan. There she talks to her son.

“She tell me what’s going on,” she says. “I tell him I love him. And I ask him questions. But he never answers.”