

Another Missing Pageant Queen: The Up and Vanished Podcast

written by Guest Contributor | July 26, 2017



While podcasts have been a popular form of expression for over a decade, many people first became fans of the ever-popular first season of *Serial*, with its inimitable investigation into the story of Adnan Syed and his conviction and imprisonment. This was how I first got sucked into the form, then I was hooked, particularly on the true crime genre. I've given most of the major true crime podcasts a listen (*My Favorite Murder*, *Case Files*, *The Last House on the Left*), but longed for a show that truly resonated with my sense of wonder and my desire to feel like a detective myself. I found this to be rare. *Up and Vanished* is one of such shows.



Payne Lindsey

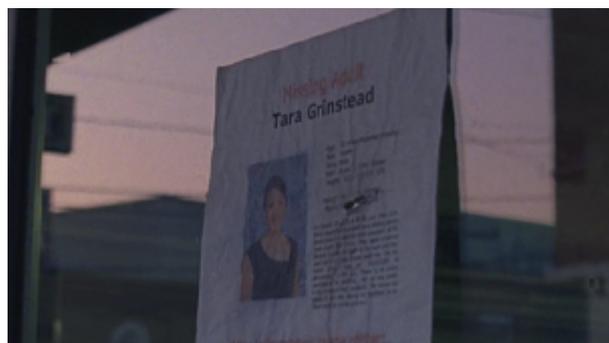
Payne Lindsey, host and producer of *Up and Vanished*, is a filmmaker from Georgia who, like many who end up in the field of podcasts, had never created one before he got caught up in the fever caused by *Serial* and television shows like *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer*. At first, he started investigating cases in Georgia in hopes of forming his own docu-series in the style of the above. Eventually, he turned to podcasting, wondering if the medium might better suit his project. With his twenty-two episodes (and counting) of *Up and Vanished*, an investigation into the disappearance of Tara Grinstead of Ocilla, Georgia, in 2005, it's clear that he made the right decision.

The Tara Grinstead missing person's case is the epitome of what captures American attention: she was beautiful, talented, young, and well-regarded by those who worked and lived with her in the town of Ocilla. She was a pageant

queen, known for sharing her guidance with teens and younger girls. She was thirty years old at the time of her disappearance from the small town of Ocilla, where she worked as a high school teacher and pageant coach. The town became fixated on the loss; ten years later, when Lindsey started to investigate where Grinstead had gone, he found dozens of people who could still share exactly where they had been and what they had seen.

I understand that desire to ruminate on those long lost. In mid-2004, in my hometown of Corvallis, Oregon, when I was only fourteen myself, a young woman named Brooke Wilberger went missing while cleaning lampposts at an apartment complex her sister managed. I remember the purple pins emblazoned with Brooke's face worn by those who had known her at the local Mormon church. Her body was found more than five years later, after her murderer brokered a deal to avoid the death penalty. As I listened to Grinstead's story, I couldn't help but see Brooke's face, and imagined myself in Lindsey's shoes, returning to a small-town that couldn't let go. I admired him for that.

In the first episode, "Cold as Alaska," as investigators called the case, Lindsey sets up the premise for what soon became his fixation. In late October of 2005, Tara failed to show up to school on a Monday. She was last seen at a barbecue held by the superintendent of her school, heading home to watch a recording of the pageant she had attended earlier that day. She was never heard from again.



Tara Grinstead

Over the next twelve episodes, Lindsey investigates details about the case, including those outside of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's case file, the largest in the state's history. He interviews family members, shares news clips from the time, recreates interviews and conversations from the time of her disappearance, all efforts to unravel the mystery of Tara Grinstead. How remarkable that no one, over the course of twelve years, had come forward.

While investigating Grinstead's life, Lindsey encounters two different scenarios that raise red flags. Without ruining the surprise, one is in the form of social media messages sent to a variety of persons involved with the case, and the second involves a break that shifts the entire outcome of Grinstead's investigation. This turn comes after what was originally set to be the final episode of the season, extending the run for several more episodes (ten by the time of writing).

This podcast is arresting, partially because of the tone Lindsey sets, with his dramatic music and rare laughs, and partially because of the sense that this investigation is occurring at the same time as production. When I reached episode thirteen and learned what changes had occurred in Lindsey's investigation, I was overwhelmed by a tide of emotions: sadness at the loss of someone loved; excitement on behalf of those involved with the podcast; and satisfaction that someone, somewhere, could find help from the justice system. I felt vindicated, not just for Grinstead, but for myself. While I had done nothing to cause this case to move forward in any way, I had invested my mind and time into the story of this missing woman who I may not have known, but could have been any number of women who had *up and vanished*, whether they were sex workers, friends, or distant relatives. There's a disparity on who is deemed worthy of our collective fascination and the story of Tara Grinstead, while it had been national news at the time, had faded from our collective conscience. Until Payne Lindsey started to investigate again.

The only criticism I have of the show is a small one, but affects how I enjoy each episode, leaving me swearing under my breath while I'm driving, a not at all unusual scenario. Lindsey is fortunate to have had significant audience growth. However, this has led to the incorporation of advertising into the broadcast. The use of ads is understandable, but his method of transition leaves *much* to be desired. While in the throes of a conversation between Lindsey and the private investigator hired by Grinstead's family, with no signal of a shift, you'll be implored to purchase flowers for your significant other or told of how great some socks Lindsey wears are. I understand that these ads are necessary for the podcast to be created, funding trips to Ocilla and Lindsey's production costs, but when they happen seemingly out of the blue, it's hard to not feel frustrated that you haven't been warned.

The satisfaction of this podcast, though, far outweighs the minor frustration that comes with the ads. Start from the beginning, don't look at the website or at any episode titles. Let yourself be taken along with the investigation with its discoveries as it happens. Feel the redemptive power of what Lindsey creates and consider the value of what podcasts like this can do when they turn their gaze toward the loss of people who have faded from our interest. Now with more than twenty episodes to enjoy, Payne Lindsey has created a program that forces his audience to question how and why we hold on to those who have long gone missing. My only hope is that with his next season, he strays from the expected story of the missing white woman and brings his expertise in investigation to those who weren't fodder for Nancy Grace.

Tune in on www.upandvanished.com, [Stitcher](#), or [iTunes](#), including bonus episodes, "[Case Evidence](#)."



Delaney McLemore graduated from Marshall University with a BA in English and is currently working on her MFA from West Virginia Wesleyan College. Originally from Oregon, McLemore lives in Rochester, NY, while calling West Virginia her true home. Her work has been featured on gurl.com, The Public Magazine, Et Cetera, and others. Find her at www.delaneymclmore.com.