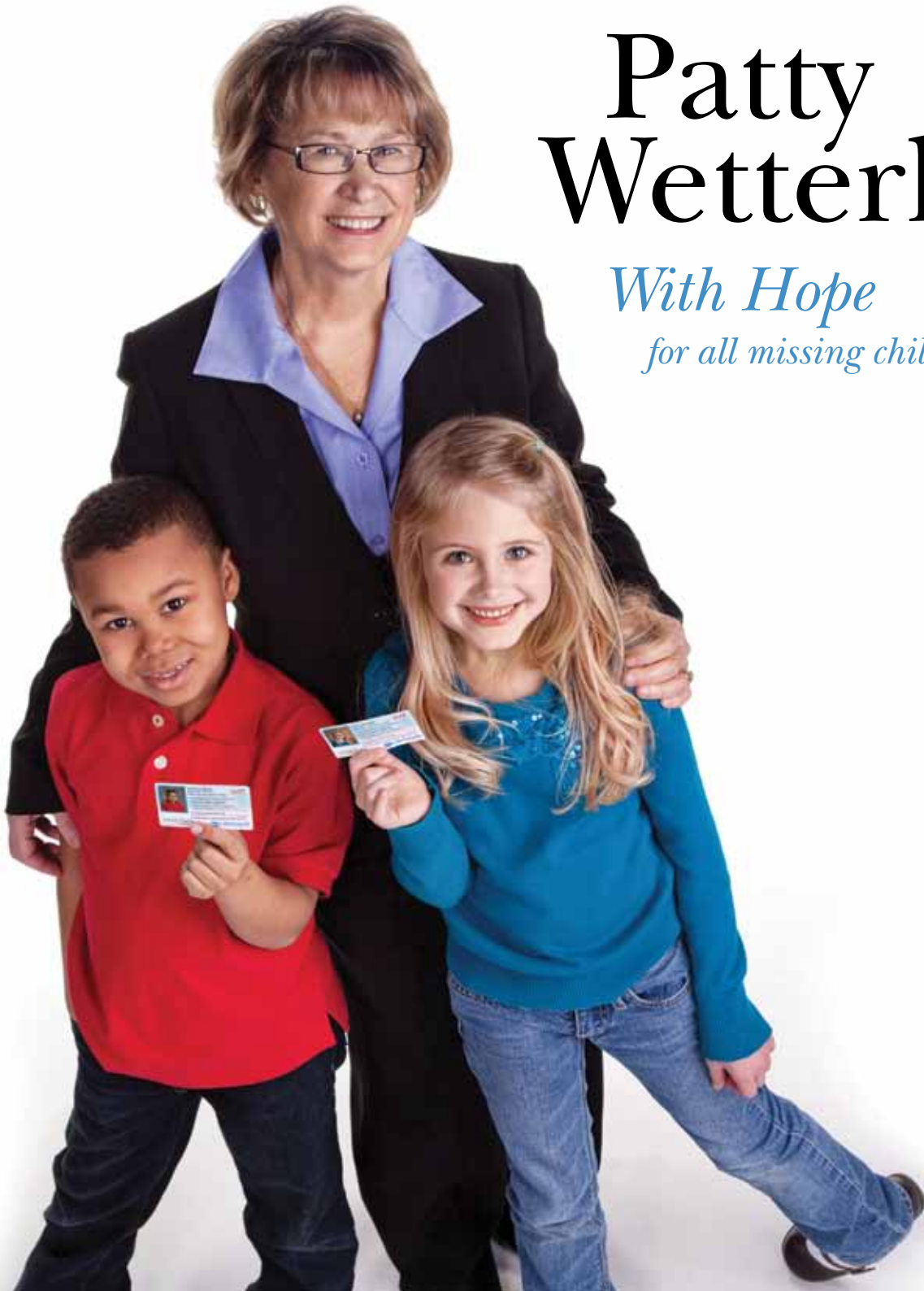


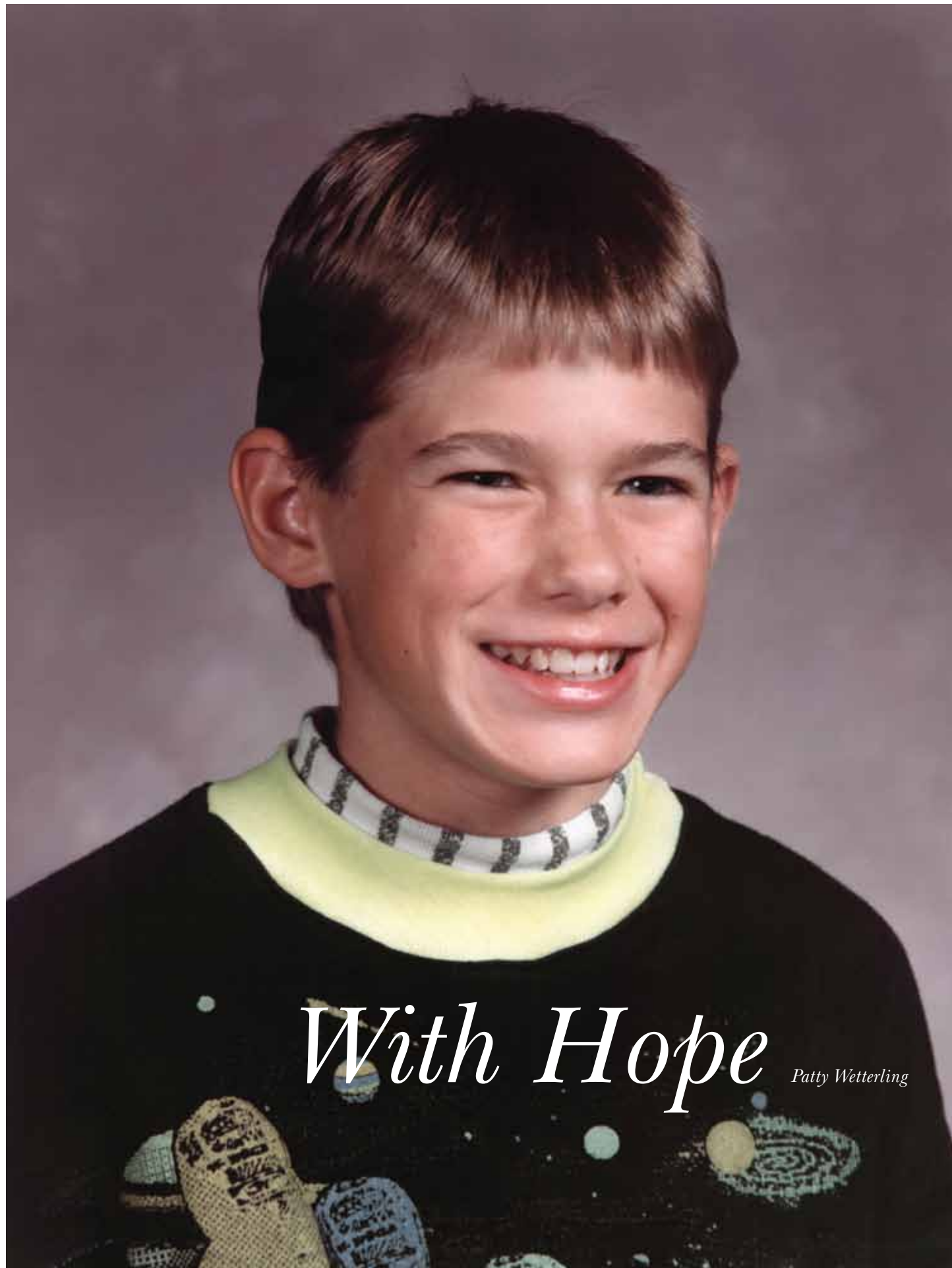
LifeTouch®

Photography for a Lifetime®

# Patty Wetterling

*With Hope*  
*for all missing children*





# With Hope

Patty Wetterling

Jacob Wetterling

I was one of those moms who took an annual snapshot of my kids standing outside the house on their way to the bus the first day of school. They were all cleanly scrubbed and excited about getting back to school after the summer break, hanging out with their friends and meeting new people.

Those snapshots are fun to have, of course, but they aren't the up-close-and-personal kind like those taken on school Picture Day. I was fortunate to be a volunteer at the elementary school my children attended to help line up the kids and make sure they all looked their best for their pictures. I also recall when my oldest child fell off the "Rainbow bars" on the playground the day before Picture Day, so her first-grade photo shows scrapes and a swollen lip, all part of her school memories, and mine.

We have four children and I always purchased some of each of their photos. And every year, I would take each child's frame off the wall, study the photos side by side and wonder where the time had gone. Then I'd stack the new photos on top of the old and remount the frames on the wall. This was my school photograph tradition.

Never in my wildest dreams would I ever have attached any major significance to school pictures until the fall of 1989 when my 11-year-old son, Jacob, was kidnapped. He was biking home from a convenience store with his brother and his best friend when they were approached by a masked gunman. He asked their ages, then released two of the boys but left with Jacob.

The boys ran home and screamed, "Call 911. Someone took Jacob." Within minutes, the sheriff's department arrived at our home and began the largest manhunt that Minnesota has ever known. The search continues to this day. We still do not know who took Jacob or where he is.

The first thing we were asked for was a description of Jacob, and then, did we have any current photos. Jacob's fifth-grade photo was in the frame on the wall. I gave it to the sheriff to make copies for fliers about Jacob's disappearance. We did not have the convenience and speed of the Internet in 1989. Many law enforcement agencies didn't even have fax machines. We mailed out hundreds of thousands

of photographs. Our goal was that every household in America would have an image of Jacob and be aware of our search.

Within a couple of weeks, we received a packet in the mail with Jacob's sixth-grade photo. It was taken five days before he was abducted. We hadn't yet seen it. The school photographer sent us an 8x10 and lots of 5x7s and wallet-size photos to help us distribute Jacob's most current image.

Every parent needs to have a good, current photograph of their child. Time is the enemy when a child is missing. Getting the story and the child's photograph out there are the most important pieces of the search. Most children are located because someone recognizes the image of a missing child or sees a situation that doesn't look right, and calls law enforcement.

Technology has dramatically changed how searches for missing kids are managed. The resources that Lifetouch offers through its SmileSafe Kids® program are invaluable. The identification cards they produce for every school student they photograph carry a current photo so, if Lifetouch is called for an image of a missing child they have on file, they can get that to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children within 15 minutes. Can you even imagine the hope that brings to searching families? Fifteen minutes! What

**Keep your SmileSafe card with you. When you need a happy smile, it can brighten your day. If you have a crisis, it can save a life.**

a gift to all children, to every family and to law enforcement everywhere. My gratitude to Lifetouch swells when I hear of its quick response. This is an amazing partnership Lifetouch has with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. The very people who send home the happy annual school photos, memories of our children, can and do indeed help to bring children themselves home.

My heart is with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children for its commitment to never give up on our children

and to continue to seek solutions to this devastating problem. But they can't do it alone. It will take all of us. My life commitment has been to fight for a world where every child can live up to their full potential. Each and every one of us needs to play a role in building a better, safer world so that those smiles we capture annually will continue to reflect a year of growth and happiness and caring.

I treasure school photos with a reverence that few people understand. I look at Jacob's photo daily. Jacob believed in a world full of love and caring and hope and possibilities. I encourage every parent to take time to be with their children. Enjoy their school years. They go so swiftly. Hang onto happy times. Never take them for granted. Talk to your children so they feel safe and comfortable speaking with you if there is something disturbing them.

I still believe that, with all the people who continue to search and care, we will one day find Jacob and bring him home. Until then, I am grateful to Lifetouch and our friends at the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children for their lifesaving work, not only on behalf of all missing children but on behalf of *all* children. Their collaboration and awareness efforts can prevent other children from ever becoming victims.

*Patty Wetterling is Jacob's mother who lives with hope. She is chair-elect of the board of directors for the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.*