

Madeleine McCann's aunt explains why she has joined charity for missing people... and how search for little girl goes on

IN the window of Patricia Cameron's porch is a photo of her niece Madeleine McCann with the caption, "Still missing, still missed, still looking."

Another Christmas is about to pass, the fourth since Madeleine disappeared in May 2007, leaving only pain and longing behind.

Patricia said: "Christmas is one of the toughest times. But every family occasion is marred because there is a little person who is not there.

"It doesn't get any easier. If anything, it gets harder."

This week, Patricia became a family representative for the charity Missing People, who help with searches and support those left behind.

She wanted to take on the role to highlight the plight of the many left with a void in their life - the parents, the children, the sisters, the brothers, the uncles and the aunts of the missing.

The organisation are asking the Government to give families of missing people the same rights as victims of crime, access to legal and financial assistance and emotional support.

It hurts Patricia deeply to watch her little brother Gerry and his wife Kate grow emotionally and physically weaker because of the loss and endless searching for Madeleine.

Patricia said: "Gerry is the baby of the family. I feel very protective and it hurts me to see him looking so tired. They are both just exhausted. They have so much on their plate.

"They are overwhelmed by trying to be breadwinners, investigators and parents. That's why I support the Missing Rights campaign. People need all the help they can get."

Madeleine was snatched from the Portuguese holiday resort of Praia da Luz in the Algarve on May 3, 2007, as Gerry and Kate dined nearby.

For the McCanns, there was a desperate need for funds to pay for legal advice and a worldwide search.

Patricia said: "It is so hard to watch Kate and Gerry push themselves constantly. When Madeleine first went missing, family and friends had to step in to help them pay the mortgage.

"Money is constantly tight but they have to keep going. They will never give up looking and that costs money. Families of the missing still need to pay bills while they search but there is no right to any financial help."

After Madeleine disappeared, Patricia took on the role of babysitter for Kate and Gerry's twins, Sean and Amelie, now five, while their parents searched.

As a result, there is a close bond between Patricia and the children.

She bathes the twins when she visits the McCanns and chats to them about Madeleine and her memories of her.

Patricia said: "Kate listens sometimes. It is always nice for her to hear someone else's memories of Madeleine, something more of her little girl."

There are treasured photos of Madeleine as a toddler, with her aunt holding her in her arms. Patricia was Madeleine's godmother and there was a special bond between them.

When Patricia and her mum, Eileen, visited her son, Paul, who was studying medicine at Cambridge, she would pick Madeleine up from the nearby McCann family home and take her on a special day out.

Patricia said: "She would say to the twins they were too little to come and so it was just her. That made her feel grown-up. We would have lunch and feed ducks in the park. Not expensive things, just precious memories.

"There were times she had my mum and I in stitches. She was so sharp and funny."

And Patricia remembers vividly a holiday in Ireland with 46 extended family and friends, and playing rounders on the beach.

Patricia said: "Madeleine was a little daredevil. She was the only one who would go in the water. It was the Atlantic and it was freezing. She was a determined little thing."

Madeleine's grandparents suffer terribly. Eileen and Kate's parents, Susan and Brian Healy, fear they'll never see her again.

Patricia said: "My mum and Kate's parents have become very close. They understand each other and what they are going through.

"It is hard for them. They think about Madeleine all the time and have some terrible days. A friend of my mum's died recently. When she was sick, she told my mum she would send her a sign from heaven to let her know if Madeleine was there."

Eileen calls the twins her bonny lassie and bonny laddie, and carries one under each arm.

Patricia added: "They are crazy about their granny."

Christmas cards from the McCanns are still signed with the names of all three children.

And there are still Christmas presents in Madeleine's room ready for her to come home.

In the meantime, Kate is exhausted juggling family life with writing a book she hopes will help finance the continued search for her daughter.

It is expected to be in shops next April, to coincide with the fourth anniversary of her disappearance.

Patricia is a nurse and the hands-on carer in the family.

Perhaps that's why it is unusual for her to take on a task like this for Missing People. The lobbying and the campaigning have always been roles for Gerry and Kate.

But they are just too busy. Patricia spent a few days with them last week to give them a break before Christmas.

She said: "Gerry has changed. He is more serious and is always exhausted. It breaks my heart to see him like that.

"Kate has always been thin but they have just had the cold and she looks even thinner now.

"They are both drained emotionally, psychologically and physically.

"They are on a treadmill. They are trying to do their best for their wee daughter who is missing and they are trying to do their best for the wee twins in front of them.

"That's why organisations like Missing People are vital. I wish at the beginning we had used the kind of support they offer."

Patricia will never give up hope that Madeleine will be found.

She said: "There are cases of people being hidden and kept for years and those cases give you hope. You have to think like that.

"She could be alive. We just haven't found her."

There were over 40,000 incidents of people going missing in Scotland last year.

Missing People have caring, highly skilled staff and volunteers working around the clock all over the UK.

The role of Family Representative is the first of several planned new volunteer opportunities available in Scotland, and involves acting as a spokesperson to the media and local community.

See www.missingpeople.org.uk

Source: dailyrecord.co.uk/news/uk-world-news/madeleine-mccanns-aunt-explains-why-she-has-joined-1079005