



Welcome to the September 2009 edition of the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) e-news bulletin.

The last few months have seen the unit's referrals continue to increase with the complexity of the needs of families continuing to expand. We have been privileged to be able to help families from other countries that have found their adult children lost while away from home as well as initiating a new program of support to reach out to those families when a coronial inquest is approaching.

Our next bulletin will be disseminated prior to Christmas – this is always a challenging time for families. Please remember that support can take many guises and that we continue to work with, and on behalf of, all those families who have someone missing. We will include some tips about significant dates in our next edition.

2008 – A SNAPSHOT

The FFMPU has recently collated its statistics for the 2008 financial year.

During that time the unit received 354 enquiries, with the peak periods in August, October and May.

Almost 70 per cent of all enquiries were made by the family or friend of a missing person directly to the unit's counsellor or coordinator.

Almost one quarter of all enquiries led to an ongoing counselling relationship between the unit and the family, with half of all referrals requiring telephone support. Interestingly 10 per cent of ongoing clients, engaging with the unit, was through email support. Families identified that email engagement allowed them to control the ways in which they explored their loss as well as not taking them away from valuable search time. The benefits of email also allowed families to navigate the other priorities in their lives (work, relationships, children) and then engage with the counsellor during quieter evening times.

One-third of search enquiries (enquiries about ways in which a family might locate a missing person) were referred to the Salvation Army Family Tracing Service and an additional 25 per cent were referred to NSW Police Force for ongoing assistance.

The unit is currently reviewing the 252 closed files of those people who engaged with the service over the last five years to determine what the unit has achieved over that time. This analysis will also explore what outcomes for families have been achieved through our intervention.

NATIONAL MISSING PERSONS WEEK – A MESSAGE OF HOPE

National Missing Persons Week was held from 2-8 August 2009. The week's message was 'not knowing is like living in the darkness'. The National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (Australian Federal Police) public awareness campaign focused on the complex challenges families face when someone is missing. Many families commented on the radio, print and television images and spoke of the ways in which those families profiled mirrored their own experiences.

This year's *National Missing Persons Week* took on a new focus in NSW with a collaborative working agreement between NSW Police Force, Alzheimer's Australia NSW and the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit, NSW Attorney General's Department. The week re-launched the *Safely Home Program*, which aims to reduce the incidence of wandering amongst those people with dementia as well as providing an effective identification bracelet to return people to their usual residence. Publicity generated by the week and the re-launch has seen a spike in enquiries to the dementia helpline from people requesting information about the program. You can find more information about the *Safely Home Program* [here](#).

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On Sunday 2 August a service of hope was held at NSW Police Headquarters. The service was attended by the Police Minister, the Honourable Mr Tony Kelly MLC, NSW Police Force Commissioner Andrew Scipione, CEO of Alzheimer's Australia NSW Mr John Watkins, and representatives from NSW Police Force, NSW Attorney General's Department, Salvation Army Family Tracing Service and NSW Missing Persons Committee Inc. Just over 30 family members were in attendance, some who have been living with the loss of a missing person for a long time and others who may never have envisaged that missing persons week would effect them personally this year.

Families all joined together to send a message of hope on a puzzle designed by FFMPU. The unit often uses the word hope when engaging with families but hope can be challenging when there is limited news about a loved one. The hope in joining together to send a message may demonstrate to families that they are all joined together by a common experience and that in order to endure a loss, that is both ambiguous and unresolved, hope can be a tool of survival.

The puzzle is currently being framed and will be on display within the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit Counselling Service.



A family sign the puzzle at the service.

NSW POLICE FORCE UNSOLVED HOMICIDE TEAM

For some of the families that access FFMPU their contact with the police is not only with the Missing Persons Unit. A small percentage of missing persons investigations are the result of potential foul play and investigations may focus on the criminal aspects of a disappearance.

Over the years many stories have been told about those who go missing amidst circumstances of foul play. In June 2009 the book *Lady killer* was released by Allen and Unwin. The book told the story of the disappearances of Dorothy 'Dottie' Davis and Kerrie Whelan in Sydney in 1995 and 1997.

In reading the book I was struck by the dedication and persistent nature of the lead investigator on the case – Detective Chief Inspector Dennis Bray, 'widely regarded as one of the state's best homicide detectives'¹.

I happened to bump into Detective Bray at a meeting soon after reading the book and asked him if I could talk to him about his skill in managing the needs of families of missing homicide victims whilst juggling the investigation. Following are some of the thoughts he shared with me about the intersection between policing and supporting families of missing homicide victims through long and arduous investigations.

What do you think is important in supporting families of missing people?

It's important for families to have a contact point; a person that can answer their questions and can be honest in their appraisal of the outcomes of the investigation. It is also important to note that police can only be open to some extent depending on the complexity and status of the investigation.

The police need to be thorough in explaining processes to families whilst also balancing the operational imperatives of the case in line with the charter of victims rights.

Its important that through opening the lines of communication the police also focus on building rapport; which is inevitable if you work with families for long periods of time.

How have you seen families survive these traumas?

I see those families who are able to try and get on with their lives whilst they wait. The ones that focus on trying to have as normal a life as possible whilst the disappearance comes to a conclusion seem to be able to cope better with the challenges.

What are the ways that police can provide families with some hope about the resolution of their missing persons homicide investigation

The police do want families to move on with their lives, we are all aware that in contacting them we take them back to the worst day of their lives.

How do you manage the workload and keep up your energy levels?

I love my work; it's rewarding to be able to bring a conclusion to a case. You have to remain independent but the human connection is also something that helps you.

It is testing to be involved in a long and complex investigation but you have to learn how to balance this with your own life.

THE FFMPU FAMILY REFERENCE GROUP (FRG)

As many families would be aware the ways in which they respond to a loss can be assisted by the capacity to change things for others who may have people missing in the future.

FFMPU has recently made contact with nine families who have, or have had, someone missing in their lives. The purpose of the FRG is to provide a forum for families to:

- have a voice over issues and events that have FFMPU involvement
- share their opinions about their experience and how the missing persons sector can be improved
- provide advice that may flow on to assist the journey of other families that are experiencing a loved one being missing.

The first task of the FFMPU reference group will be to review information that will disseminated to crisis telephone lines. Many families, particularly during the night, reach out for support and sometimes find that the response to their crisis is not reflective of their experiences. The publication will explore for counselors what are the helpful messages that both families of missing people and potentially missing people themselves may want to hear.

Details about the achievements and outcome of the group will become a regular function of the e-news bulletin.

A FAMILY'S PERSPECTIVE

The FFMPU website in late May publicised information about the NIDA dance performance *Trace* following contact by the choreographer with the unit. The piece was inspired by the 'sibling story' of Robyn Lindner whose brother David went missing in the Middle East 15 years ago.

FFMPU attended the opening night performance with Robyn and we asked her a few weeks later about the impact of seeing her 'story' being transformed into an artistic performance.

How did you react when you found out that NIDA had turned David's story into a dance piece?

I was initially shocked and actually burst into tears at first. I think I was moved by the fact that complete strangers would be interested enough in the story of David, myself and other families, to want to spend time understanding and interpreting it.

What would David have said about the performance?

Seriously he probably would have been highly amused at the attention. Flattered, but amused.

Did hearing pieces of your story on stage feel surreal did it make you feel more connected to your story?

It was a bit strange – I actually felt a bit disconnected – almost like an observer to my own life and how it has been interpreted by others. Some pieces I understood, other bits – I didn't. Which is a bit like life really, some people's responses to David going missing have been understandable to me, whereas other people have responded in a way that I do not understand at all.

What's it like 15 years on still revisiting your story? Do you feel like your capacity to survive strengthens over time; has it helped you deal with life's challenges?

I revisit it every day – even 15 years on – the fact that so much time has passed and it is still so clear is both comforting and astonishing. As time passes, my determination not to forget becomes more and more important. I think that out of the whole experience I have learned many things about myself and life (but mostly about myself). I don't know if I have increased resilience but I know that I can cope with a lot.

It also helps keep things in perspective. When you get worn down by something – putting the event in the context of a larger event like David going missing really helps you get perspective on your current situation.

Robyn was also the subject of the Sydney Morning Herald's *Two of us* segment in the Good Weekend as part of National Missing Persons Week publicity. The article, by Ms Charlie Stansfield, explored the impact of 'missing' on a relationship and the ways in which Robyn's partner has supported her along the way. If any families would like to read the article please contact FFMPU for a copy.

NEW SOCIAL WORK STUDENT

FFMPU welcomes Laura Angelone who is a 4th year Social Work Student from the University of New South Wales.

Laura will be with the unit for a 79-day placement and will be exploring the outcomes of the FFMPU group work research report, search options for families, as well as assisting the unit's counsellor in responding to the day-to-day enquiries to the service.

We welcome Laura and hope that her time in the unit raises her awareness about the challenges of missing in our community.

UPCOMING EVENTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS:

September edition of Sydney's Child

An article entitled 'Missing Links' will be included in the September 2009 edition of *Sydney's Child*, a free magazine, that is distributed wherever parents and children go – primarily through schools, education and health centres, play groups and business that cater to families. The article deals with the trauma that flows from the disappearance of a loved one, and what is being done in Sydney to help families and friends cope.

Find out where to pick up the [latest copy](#) here.

27 September 2009

Memory Walk – Alzheimer's Australia is hosting a fund raiser to raise awareness and funds to support people and their families living with dementia. Memory Walks will take place in Sydney as well as regional centres around NSW.

NSW Police Force and Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit will be in attendance on the day to draw attention to the increase in people experiencing dementia who may go missing.

We look forward to hearing from families about the next edition.

Contact the Unit on **1800 227 772** or via email: ffmpu@agd.nsw.gov.au

1 Sutton C & Connolly E (2009) *Lady Killer – How conman Bruce Burrell kidnapped and killed rich women for their money*, Allen and Unwin, Australia.

CONTACT DETAILS

For further information about this material or other topics, please call us on:

Phone: (02) 8688 5414 or 1800 227 772 **Fax:** (02) 8688 9631 **TTY:** 8688 5575 **Email:** ffmpu@agd.nsw.gov.au