

Attention as much a mystery as the missing person case

By Greg Bock
Staff Writer

Nancy Monahan says it's no surprise people like Laci Peterson, Jennifer Willbanks and Ray Gricar grab the attention of the national news media. What perplexes Monahan is why people like Danielle Imbo, Richard Petrone and Natalia Andreevna Miller don't get the same attention.

"If they knew half of the people who were missing, their heads would spin," Monahan said. "We're only showing a fraction of what's out there."

As the Doe Network's area director for Pennsylvania, Monahan compiles a database of unidentified and missing persons with her Web site, www.pennsylvaniamissing.com, Monahan's goal is to establish a clearinghouse for the hundreds of police departments statewide in hopes it leads to solving mysteries like the one she said haunts her the most.

"That would be the Carbon County Jane Doe," Monahan said. She said the 28th anniversary of the discovery of gruesome remains of a young woman and her unborn girl in Carbon County came and went in December, with no media attention.

The mutilated bodies were found along the banks of the Lehigh River Dec. 20, 1976. The killer cut off the woman's nose and ears to make identification difficult and stuffed the remains in three suitcases, then hurled them from a bridge on Interstate 80. The impact in the woods broke open two of the cases, leading to their discovery by a boy.

What has never been discovered are the identities of the pregnant woman, estimated in her late teens or early 20s, or the killer.

Monahan said keeping the case in the public's consciousness eventually could bear fruit.

"Maybe someone who didn't want to come forward years ago may still be out there and decide they can now talk about what they know," she said.

Too often, she said, missing person cases fade with time.

It's a common phenomena, said Russell Frank, associate professor of communication at Penn State University. "If there's no fresh scent; there's no where to go with the story," Frank said. No news is not always good news.

The case of Gricar, the missing Centre County district attorney, is an example of frenzied media interest, Frank said. Gricar is a public figure, but the case also is unusual. As the weeks and months pass with no new leads, Frank said the biggest hurdles reporters face is looking for ways to keep Gricar in the news with little information.

"The danger for the press is speculation," Frank said. "People speculate wildly in private, but that's not what reporters are supposed to do."

It works to the advantage of families and police to keep these cases alive, but it becomes increasingly difficult for news organizations. "There's no good mechanism in the news business to say nothing is new," Frank said.

Monahan recalls her encounters with media and their unwillingness to revisit cold cases.

"I have all but lost faith in the media in Pennsylvania," she said, adding that most of the time, it's an anniversary that usually prompts the press to revisit an old case -- but even then it's only on 10-, 15- or 20-year marks.

"When it's the 28th anniversary, like the one in December for the Carbon County Jane Doe, that isn't as appealing to reporters," she said.

The coverage of new cases also has her questioning why some become media sensations while others generate little more than a mention.

"I think people would be interested in any case you put out there," Monahan said. "As far as who gets the publicity and who doesn't, I hate to say it, but they're usually white, prominent and have money. I'm not saying these high-profile cases aren't important; I'm saying they're all important."

Compounding the problem is the fact that local police departments take missing person's reports regularly, many resolved before the report is filed.

Bellefonte Officer Darrel Zaccagni said the department gets at least two missing person's reports every month.

"Mom or dad calls saying, 'Johnny didn't come home last night,'" he said. "They usually resolve themselves."

Gricar is the first missing person's case of its kind in the borough, he said. The last case in the area, now a state police investigation, is of Brenda Louise Condon.

Barkeep's fate a mystery

Condon vanished in February 1991 from the former Carl's Bad Tavern in Spring Township, Centre County. Condon was working alone as a bartender at the Route 550 bar the morning of Feb. 27. She last was seen at 12:45 a.m.

The next day, employees discovered her car in the parking lot and her cowboy boots in the men's room of the unlocked bar. Police found no signs of a struggle. The investigation focused on three unidentified patrons in the bar that night, but they never were located.

Condon was reported missing Feb. 27, but the search for her didn't begin until March 2, when she failed to pick up her children as scheduled.

With adults, how quickly the search begins often depends on whether anyone knows they're missing and can convince the police it's out of the ordinary. Some people drop out of sight for a few days -- but they usually return.

If no one knows they're missing, time passes before police become involved. Even worse, people who are never reported missing end up on the other side of the equation -- as Jane and John Does in the local morgue.

Jane Doe 24-275

In December 1993, Cumberland County hunters discovered the partially nude body of Jane Doe 24-275 in the woods along Whiskey Springs Road.

For 11 years, the identities of the young woman, who was raped and strangled, and her killer eluded investigators. Witnesses reported seeing her earlier with two men in a two-tone Ford Bronco, but the case grew cold.

Even though she had undergone dental work, investigators weren't able to trace her to any reported missing person through dental records, which are more reliable than DNA in identifying bodies.

In this case, DNA proved more effective -- not in identifying the Cumberland County Jane Doe, but in fingering the man police suspected killed her.

DNA evidence found on her body turned up a match in National Crime Index System, leading police to convicted sex-offender Theodore John Solano.

As they began investigating the 46-year-old Solano, Jane Doe was identified in late 2004 as Natalia Andreevna Miller, an 18-year-old Russian immigrant who married Solano in 1993, when the two lived in Maryland-suburbs of Washington, D.C.

The Rochester, N.Y., man, already in a New York jail on child pornography charges, was charged with her murder and rape. Once New York finishes its prosecution, Solano is scheduled for extradition to Pennsylvania in Miller's death.

Monahan said the Miller case is an example of how databases and clearinghouse of information can help solve even the coldest of cases.

"I can't say enough good about law enforcement," Monahan said. "They want to get these cases solved as much, or even more, than anybody."

Inheriting a skull

When Cumberland County Coroner Michael Norris took office in 1982, he inherited a skull.

"I never looked at it as a missing person, but I do now," he said.

Norris agrees that a database would help and is taking part in a U.S. Justice Department task force to come up with national system. He estimates between 40,000 and 50,000 bodies remain unidentified in this country.

"New York City buries nearly 1,000 persons who are unidentified every year," Norris said.

Norris recalled the discovery of the partially decomposed woman's body in the county in June 2004 and the eight days it took to identify her.

"We got a lot of calls during this time," he said. "'Could this be my sister? Could this be my wife? Could this be my daughter?'"

Norris said when he asked if they had reported them missing, he estimates 65 percent told him they had not.

"As an ex-cop, I know missing persons cases are not a high priority," Norris said.

With your average healthy adult, lacking evidence of foul play or other suspicious circumstances, it's just as likely the person wanted to disappear.

States like California and Texas, Norris said, have systems in place to address the issue. In California, police departments are required to take a missing person's report, and after 30 days, family members are eligible to send in DNA and dental records so they can be placed in a statewide database. In the meantime, organizations like The Doe Network provide a way for police and coroner departments to connect the dots.

"The Doe Network has been very, very successful," he said.

The task force Norris joined met two weeks ago in Philadelphia and he indicated a federal commitment to provide funding for a centralized repository, one he said should be accessible, at least in part, by the public.

"After all, it's the public that is missing these people," Norris said.

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