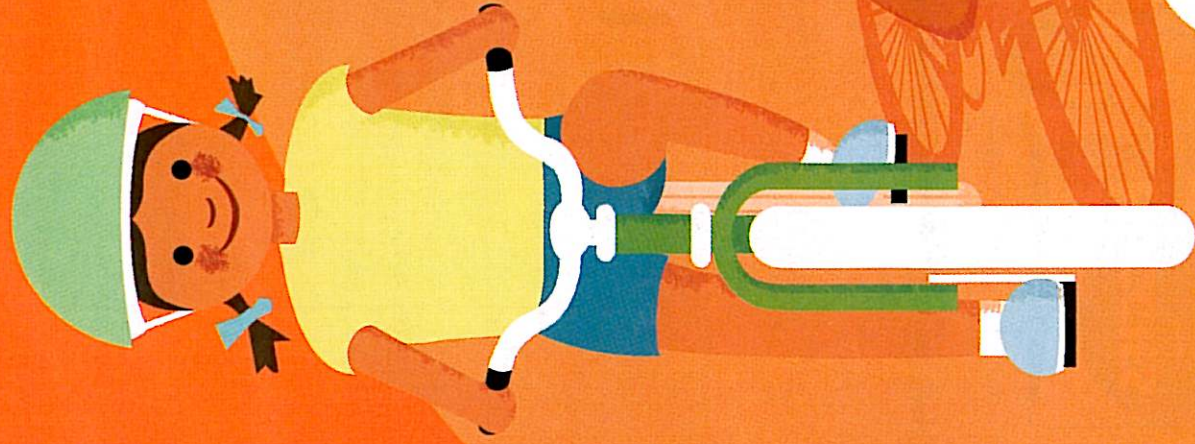


Sydney's

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Family

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Missing Links

Sarah Wayland writes about the trauma that flows from the disappearance of a loved one, and what is being done in our city to help families and friends cope.

The moment of 'not knowing' has happened to most people at some stage in their lives. You might be wandering through a supermarket deciding what to make for dinner; you glance down, expecting to see your three-year-old daughter trailing beside you. She's not there. You stop, you pivot around madly scanning the faces of the other children in the aisle, you call out her name. Silence. She's gone. You panic, you rationalise that she can't be far away, you momentarily imagine the description you will give to the security guard at the entrance, you get angry, you want to vomit and then you see her crouching down looking at the toys on the lower shelves. You grab her, you hug her, you cry and you laugh, all at the same time. The 'not knowing' is over. She is no longer missing.

State or Territory's police missing-persons unit. On any one day in Sydney, there are at least 20 people reported missing with a concern for their welfare. Both the local police and the Police Missing Persons Unit liaise with families about developments in their case. However, as time goes on, the capacity to provide good news or details about sightings can diminish. It is during these lulls that families are more likely to engage with support agencies to assist them through their journey. Many of these families, who may never have had contact with the police in the past, have to build long-term relationships with police as they await news of their investigation.

There is no rulebook when someone goes missing; there is no clear path for families to follow when this happens to them.

The FFMPU (Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit) in Sydney remains the only service of its kind in Australia that provides specialised emotional support.

This experience happens hundreds of times a day to all sorts of people, but for a small number of people within our community there is a lifetime of 'not knowing'. These people are the families left behind when someone goes missing.

The Australian Institute of Criminology Report *Missing Persons in Australia* (2008) indicates that every year 35,000 reports are made to the police about the safety and wellbeing of a missing person. Almost 8000 of these reports relate to people missing in metropolitan Sydney. The research tells us that about 95 per cent of these missing people are located within one month of going missing, but about 1600 cases remain listed as 'long term' missing in Australia.

For the majority of those living with the loss of a missing person, their primary contact will be through their local police station as well as consultation with their

As Detective Inspector Kelly Kortlepel, manager of the NSW Police Force Missing Persons Unit, explains, "The focus of the police is to locate the missing person; the location rate for missing people is quite high, therefore police do have the ability to reunite families. For those families who have someone missing long-term, the need to support the family, and recognising the family's need to know how the investigation is proceeding (where appropriate), is all part of the police role in terms of responding to missing-persons reports. Cases are only closed once the person has been found. That means that for many years the police have to facilitate a close working relationship with the people who are left behind."

In the past five years alone there have been approximately 10 TV shows dedicated to the phenomenon of missing

persons. There is a prevailing sense of intrigue in the community about missing-persons investigations. Over the past 20 years, Sydneysiders would have heard of hundreds of stories about people and children who vanish without a trace. When the issue of 'missing' is introduced in conversation, people can quickly recall stories that have typified the captivation that surrounds a missing person's case – Samantha Knight, Renee Aitken, the Beaumont children, Gordana Kotevski and, in more recent years, Daniel Morcombe, and little Rahma El Dennaoui who went missing in south-western Sydney in 2005. But when we recall these stories, we can

of doing so. They might be escaping abuse or neglect, or trying to assert their independence, or perhaps they don't even realise that someone is looking for them. Another prominent 'at risk' group are parents who may be experiencing poor mental health and feel they have no choice but to disconnect from their lives. Finally, a small number of missing people are victims of a crime or an abduction, whose whereabouts are known only to the perpetrators of the crime.

In 2000, the NSW State Government established the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) within the NSW Attorney General's Department. The unit was established for those people who did not know where to turn after making a missing-persons report. Many families are referred to the service by the NSW Police Missing Persons Unit, which provides the capacity to co-support families from a law enforcement and therapeutic perspective. Families also get a sense that they have a support network available to them to meet both their practical and emotional needs.

There is no rulebook when someone goes missing; there is no clear path for families to follow when this happens to them. The FFMPU in Sydney remains the only service of its kind in Australia that provides specialised emotional support. The information gathered by the unit over the past 10 years has created a clearer understanding of what happens for families in this situation – which in turn has informed the practice of national and international missing-persons agencies.

'Missing' can have a multitude of definitions, depending on the circumstances in which people find themselves. For some, police intervention is required when family and friends do not know a person's whereabouts. Other people become disconnected from their family through conflict, divorce, government intervention or geographic isolation.

The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service offers assistance to families in



Illustrations by Amanda Upfen

Sydney who need to search for someone with whom they have lost contact. Chris Cole, manager of the service, says, "To live with those imagined outcomes on a daily basis of what might have happened to a missing person can be disabling and traumatic for families. They need to know that services are there to help them, to walk alongside them in that journey of not knowing." The FFMPU also works with these families.

Over the past six years, I have sat with more than 200 families who have sought support about how to live with the loss of a missing person. Through listening to them, I have learnt that ambiguity does not sit well with the community. We like answers and outcomes; we rely on authorities such as the police and those who work in the criminal justice system to provide guidance when we do not have answers. For the estimated 600 long-term missing-persons cases in NSW at any one time, there are thousands of family members who have had to navigate their own survival through unresolved loss and who have had to learn to live without the most simple of answers to their questions.

In the first few weeks of a disappearance, families want to focus on the practicalities of searching. They liaise with the police, circulate images to the media and assist in ground searches for the missing person. Support from family and friends is useful

hope without clear and distinct evidence that a person is not returning. This is also the stage when some parents with children missing (both young and adult children) find that they might react differently to their partners in response to their loss. Fathers may be heavily focused on the logistics of searching; mothers might need to reach out for support to talk about the silence of not knowing where their child is. One father of a 25-year-old man now missing for six years told me, "You've got to give people an opportunity to deal with it however they are going to deal with it..." Some families begin to fracture at this stage, when they cannot accept that other members of the family might be on 'different pages' in the way they are coping with their loss.

The next challenging phase for those left behind is the transition to being the family member of a long-term missing person – once the first anniversary comes, the first Christmas of 'not knowing', the first time a birthday has been celebrated without a loved one, or when there is an addition to the family. These occurrences remind people about the missing person and bring about the most painful times for families.

Hope is one of the key factors that help people survive the loss of a missing person. Families have explained that the word 'closure' gets used as a way of suggesting that people need to 'accept' the eventualities of what may have happened. But I am yet to meet one family willing to concede that they have given up hope without clear and distinct evidence that a person is not returning.

in terms of the energy required to search for someone.

Many families struggle with what to tell small children at this stage. Families have shared with me their fear that telling a child too soon that their parent is missing will bring about unnecessary anxiety in the child. Using the word 'missing' can also raise questions that adults might feel ill-equipped to answer. In my experience, most children cope well with simple, honest responses, such as 'Mum is missing, but we love her and we are doing everything we can to find her'. It involves an hour-by-hour approach and, given the unknown nature of the situation, you cannot provide any more assurance than this for either children or other family members.

The next phase for families occurs about six months after the disappearance of a loved one. This is the time when families have to start reflecting on how they will survive if the person does not return. Hope is one of the key factors that help people survive the loss of a missing person. Families have explained that the word 'closure' gets used as a way of suggesting that people need to 'accept' the eventualities of what may have happened. But I am yet to meet one family willing to concede that they have given up

When someone goes missing, it differs from bereavement; with death, there is finality and certainty about what has happened. Families of missing people do not refer to their experience as grieving; 'missing' is the trauma, it is the challenge of living with both the possibilities that the person is still here or gone.

of missing people might disconnect from their families – some have shared with our service that they felt the strain of being the sibling left behind and the need to make meaning of their life, not only for themselves, but on behalf of the absent sibling. During a round-table session held for siblings by the FFMPU, participants shared that they had never had the opportunity to tell their story about the impact of losing their brother or sister. They also felt guilt and sadness that they had been unable to predict that their brother or sister would leave. Some spouses of missing people struggle with starting new relationships when so much is still unresolved. Likewise, other families are unsure what to do with possessions, bank accounts, cars, or even mobile-phone accounts. But one of the biggest hurdles for families is being part of a community

not know where their loved ones are is a step towards understanding the impact of ambiguous and unresolved losses. Not all of life's traumas can be defined or explained.

National Missing Persons Week was held last month. Every year during this week, the community is bombarded with images of missing people. Sightings reported to Crime Stoppers spike during and after the week. During a previous Missing Persons Week, the publicity surrounding a young woman missing from Sydney increased by more than 200 per cent. August is also the busiest month for the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit. Families have told me that the increased awareness of their situation, coupled with their anticipation that perhaps a sighting will lead to a location, can exacerbate the roller-coaster of emotions that they contend with on a daily basis. The FFMPU's role is to manage



these fluctuations and to help families tolerate the ambiguity they face, even over short periods of time.

In 2006, I travelled to the USA to conduct research into support needs for families of missing people. I remember speaking to one mother whose six-year-old daughter vanished from a sporting field one summer evening 11 years earlier. I met her during the week that her daughter's friends were graduating from high school, and a university scholarship had been named in her daughter's honour. I asked her how she developed her resilience and how she managed to keep moving forward, and she said quite simply, "Each day when I wake up I don't think it's another day that I haven't seen my daughter; I think that it's another day closer to her coming home".

Hope is whatever we hold on to to allow us to survive. We should never extinguish even a glimmer of hope – not for the missing person and not for those left behind. ■

Sarah Wayland is the coordinator of the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit in the NSW Attorney General's Department. She has worked nationally and internationally to raise the profile of those left behind when someone goes missing.

For Further Information:

Visit www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/missingpersons or phone, toll-free, 1800 227 772

that does not understand what 'missing' might mean for them.

So what can the community do to support those people left behind when their teenager, child, parent or spouse is missing? Families have shared that there is a pervading silence from their social networks and a sense of discomfort from old friends or colleagues who don't know what to say. This can create a greater sense of isolation for those left behind. Families have to struggle with how they answer simple questions, such as, 'How many children do you have?' or 'Where do you think they are?' or challenge assumptions like, 'I guess it's time to accept that they won't be coming back'.

The community needs to be encouraged to talk openly about people who are missing – not just about their 'missingness', but also about who they are. A woman whose mother disappeared when the woman was three explained that she had no memories of the mother who she still searched for 30 years after her disappearance. She recognised that "experiencing my mum being missing is only part of me, it's not the whole of me". Recognising that people go missing for myriad reasons and that sometimes those left behind really do

As the sister of a young man who has been missing since 1993 says, "I guess we use Dad's grave for that purpose; we go and we remember and my brother is included in that. If we did anything, I'd like to put a chair on a cliff-top or something, so we could just go there and remember, but that would be it because there is no closure. Perhaps that's why it is not right for me, for us. Even though there's a part of me that says he's dead, there's always a part of you that thinks 'I'm going to look like a real goose if he turns up' and we say 'Oh, we did this for you'. Hope never goes away."

When someone goes missing, it differs from bereavement; with death, there is finality and certainty about what has happened. Families of missing people do not refer to their experience as grieving; 'missing' is the trauma, it is the challenge of living with both the possibilities that the person is still here or gone.

When families live for years without knowing, they face the daily battle of having someone missing. Families have to manage the triggers that remind them of the missing person. Families talk about being tricked by faces in the crowd that they think are their loved one. Siblings