

Hope For The Missing

New National Program Launched To Help Solve Missing Person Cases

By John Murray

Last year the Observer published an in-depth report called "The Silent Scream" in which we reported a national crisis involving missing persons and the unidentified dead across America. The numbers were shocking - 110,000 missing, and more than 40,000 unidentified human remains being stored by coroners and medical examiners. The executive director of the International Homicide Association, William Hagmaier, told the Observer that he believed many of the unidentified dead were murdered, thousands of the missing were no longer alive, and in many cases, the missing were the unidentified dead.

DNA is the way to cross reference the two categories and match a missing person to a unidentified human remain, but gapping holes in state and national data banks have created a woefully inefficient system. In addition, law enforcement officers across the country have not been properly trained to respond to a report of a missing person, and many don't have basic knowledge how to collect and process DNA samples. Medical examiners and coroners were no better. In many parts of the country the unidentified dead were being buried or cremated without DNA samples being uploaded into national data banks.

Each cremation ensured that a mystery would remain unsolved, and that grieving families would never find the answer they so desperately sought.

But things are changing.

The U.S. Department of Justice has launched NamUs, a National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, that has the potential to close the gaps. In early April the new program was unveiled in public for the first time by George Adams, the missing persons coordinator at The Center for Human Identification at North Texas State University. Adams is involved in the formation of NamUs, and used the opportunity as keynote speaker at the 7th Annual New York State Missing Persons Day, in Albany, NY, to help expose NamUs to law enforcement, politicians and families of the missing.

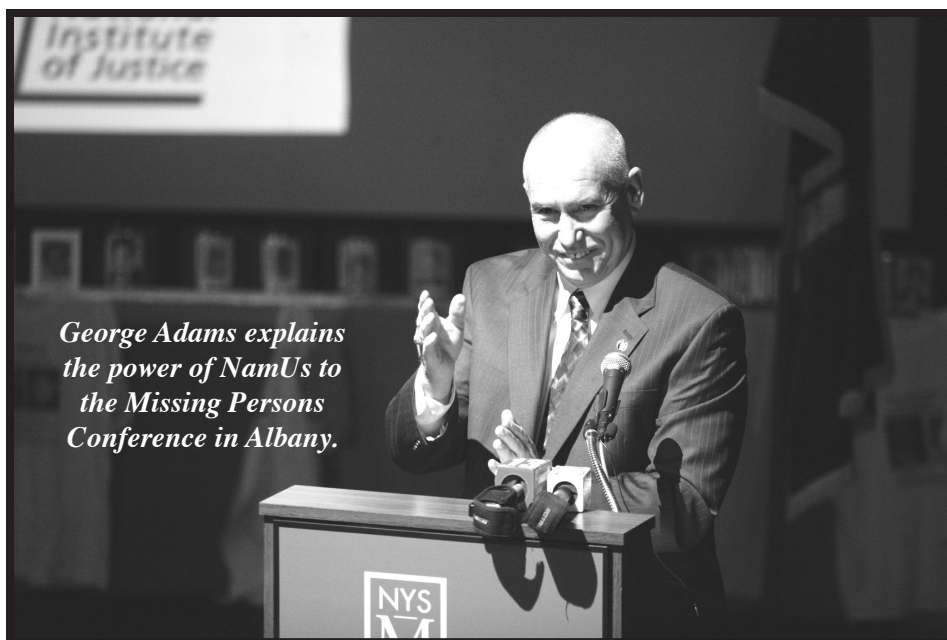
"This will revolutionize how a law enforcement officer conducts a case," Adams said. "It brings all law enforcement into one place."

NamUs was created to address the challenges involved in investigating and solving missing person and unidentified decedent cases. It creates a uniform clearing house for DNA data, and other key information, which until NamUs was formed, often languished in systems that could not communicate with one another.

NamUs is creating two national databases, one for missing persons and one for unidentified dead. The key is that the two databases can be cross referenced for matches because they



Missing Person Monument in Albany, N.Y.



George Adams explains the power of NamUs to the Missing Persons Conference in Albany.

will be able to communicate with each other. The unidentified dead database is already up and running. It allows searches based on dental information, demographics, distinct body features and anthropological analysis. The missing persons database is scheduled to go online in the autumn.

"The best thing is that there is no cost to NamUs," Adams said. "It will not cost law enforcement officers anything to use it. From now on it is no longer

valid anywhere in the United States when an officer says "Sorry, there is nothing we can do."

The key to NamUs is getting DNA reference samples uploaded into the system. Police need to learn how to collect and process DNA samples from family members of a missing individual, and medical examiners and coroners need to upload DNA samples from the unidentified dead. Adams stressed repeatedly that there is no cost

to law enforcement or medical examiners to collect and process the DNA. The University of North Texas Center For Human Identification is funded by the National Institute of Justice.

"How are we going to find out who those 40,000 unidentified dead are? By uploading DNA samples," Adams said. "No case is too old. Law enforcement may not solve their investigation, but they might solve someone else's. A partnership between all law enforcement makes us all safer."

Smolinski Family

The Observer travelled to Albany with Bill and Janice Smolinski, whose son, Billy, went missing from Waterbury nearly four years ago. The Missing Person Day in New York was triggered by the efforts of Doug and Mary Lyall, the co-founders of the Center For HOPE. Their daughter Suzanne Lyall vanished ten years ago, and the family established the center to "provide resources to educate, assist and support families and friends coping with the ambiguous disappearance of a loved one."

The Smolinskis have become friends with the Lyalls, a relationship forged by shared grief. Throughout the day the Smolinskis talked with other families struggling for answers. They shared stories, tears and laughter.

"It's not a happy thing coming to these conferences and listening to these sad stories," Bill Smolinski said. "But that's life."

Janice Smolinski said they are drawn to a community of people they can identify with. "People come for a reason," she said. "They want to talk about their loved one."

The conference in Albany was held on April 6th at the New York State Museum. Through the Lyall's dogged effort they have managed to bring politicians and law enforcement together to help acknowledge the local, state and national crisis of missing persons. In October 2006 New York state dedicated a "Remembrance" monument in Albany to all those missing in New York.

Efforts in Connecticut to create a Missing Persons Day have been led by State Representative Selim Noujaim, and he informed the Observer on April 30th that he believed the law might be passed this legislative session.

Jan and Bill Smolinski believe they are getting closer to finding out what happened to their son back in August 2004. They believe he was murdered and they believe they have a rough idea where he is buried. While the FBI continues to investigate, the Smolinskis have focused their energy on trying to change the way this country responds to the report of a missing person.

"Instead of coiling back we are trying to make things better," Janice Smolinski said. "And when NamUs gets up and running we will all be safer." •