

chance

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She's On A Mission For The Missing

Rick Green

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You know those sad stories about missing persons and mothers and fathers who can't stop talking about sons or daughters who have vanished?

I listen, change the channel, and move on. Don't you?

And that, said Janice Smolinski - the mother of a missing Waterbury man - is the problem. People, police included, don't take these cases seriously enough.

It's too easy to think of them in Hawaii or just hiding out, fleeing a life gone sour. As a result precious time is wasted, evidence is lost and connections are missed.

Janice's son Billy disappeared on Aug. 24, 2004. It took weeks before police treated Billy Smolinski as anything more than a routine case of young-guy-feeling-his-oats. Fingerprints weren't taken, DNA samples were lost or misplaced.

Janice Smolinski believes Billy, 31 when he vanished, is almost certainly dead. There have been no arrests. Critical information about him still has not been entered into nationwide law enforcement computer databases.

"I've learned that our system is much less organized," said Smolinski, whose burning intensity is there in her small dark eyes that keep staring back at me, unblinking. She is a mother who won't forget, who has taken on a cause larger than her own loss.

"You have to question everything," Smolinski told me.

Would you believe that the real world isn't like an episode of "CSI?" You can't punch up a computer file and find the answer.

There are more than 100,000 missing persons cases across the country and about 40,000 unidentified bodies out there. A federally funded national database that matches DNA of the missing and the found bodies has but a few thousand participants.

The truth is that investigators often never collect DNA of relatives of the missing and from the thousands of bodies that turn up.

Fingerprints, dental records and other important "markers" also could be entered into another national database.

"Most of it is not getting entered. It's just a matter of participation and understanding," said William Hagmaier, executive director of the International Homicide Investigators Association. "Those databases can solve a whole lot of problems."

Responding - a little - to Smolinski, state legislators passed a lukewarm law this year that sets guidelines for police investigators to follow when a missing person report comes in.

"It won't be mandated. It will be recommended," said state Rep. Vickie Nardello, whose district includes Janice Smolinski's hometown of Cheshire. "There is agreement that clearly we need change."

Smolinski and others such as George Adams, who runs the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification, say police must be required to take part.

Adams' program collects the DNA data and enters it into the national database. It is woefully underutilized, even though the federal government pays for everything down to the swab kits used to collect DNA samples.

"This is simple and practical and it doesn't cost anything," Adams said.

Smolinski, meanwhile, keeps up her campaign, meeting with politicians and activists and connecting to a national network of families of missing persons.

It won't bring Billy back, but it could bring changes that lead to the arrest of violent criminals.

"Good has to come out of bad here," Smolinski vowed. "I can't sit back and watch this happen. I'm just going to keep on pushing until something happens."

Rick Green's column appears on Tuesdays and Fridays. He can be reached at rgreen@courant.com.

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