

OBSERVATIONS

The Missing

Column By John Murray

After sharing a turkey dinner with his mother on June 10th, John Baserwski, 53, promised he would return in a few days to paint the deck at her home on Hill Road, in Thomaston. He said good night, walked out the door, and vanished.

Three days later the police were notified John was missing. They searched his apartment and found his wallet and keys. There was no sign of foul play and no note to indicate his whereabouts. The following day the state police brought in tracking dogs and a helicopter to search for Baserwski. They found nothing.

Thirty miles north in Salisbury a 91-year-old man, Thomas Drew, set out for a walk in the early evening of July 21 and never returned. Drew suffers from dementia and may have gotten confused and lost. Hundreds of volunteers assisted Connecticut and Massachusetts's police in an intensive nine-day search to find Drew. Bloodhounds followed his scent for 45 minutes until they lost his trail near a busy intersection. He is still missing.

In late July a 17-year-old girl described as bi-polar and schizophrenic disappeared from a group home in Manchester.

A Stratford man disappeared in early July and his body was found three weeks later stuffed in a metal drum floating in the Pequonnock River in Bridgeport.

On July 17th police pulled the body of Bonnie Thayer out of a car submerged in 25 feet of water in Oxford's Lake Zoar. Thayer, a 64-year-old Prospect woman, had been missing for two years.

Every day in America there are dozens of people who go missing. Many show up in a few days, or a week, but at this moment there are more than 110,000 people lost in the vast American landscape. Some national experts claim the actual number might be twice that amount.

Bill Hagmaier is the executive director of the International Homicide Association and has spent years studying the complex link between the missing, and the 40,000 unidentified dead Americans laying in morgues across the country. Hagmaier told the Observer in March that a great many of the missing are actually victims of homicide.

"Human beings are not like elephants" Hagmaier said. "They don't go wandering into the woods and swamps to find a place to die. Somebody brought them there."

That's not to say that any of the above individuals was a victim of violent crime, because at this time we just don't know what happened to them. What we do know is that the system we use to find them is a tangled bureaucratic nightmare.

Consider the following statistics:

- There are more than 700 Connecticut residents on the active missing person list compiled by the National Crime Information Center.

- When you go to the website of the National Center For Missing Adults there are only twelve profiles of Connecticut residents.

- When you search the Connecticut State Police website there is no central file of the missing Connecticut residents. You can find several profiles when you click on the Western District Major Crime Squad and the Eastern District Major Crime Squad, but the names don't match those from the National

Center For Missing Adults, or the FBI's missing person profiles. Out of the 700 residents listed as missing, the state police has posted profiles of only five missing Connecticut residents.

- Attempts to cross-reference names and profiles from a variety of law enforcement agencies shows a bizarre disconnect.

"It's a total mess," Janice Smolinski said. "There is no where to go to find a complete and accurate listing of the missing in Connecticut. This has to change. We need a centralized place where the police and the general public can go to find information."

Smolinski has spent the past three years looking for her 31-year-old son Billy who disappeared from his Waterbury home in August 2004. Readers of the Observer are well aware of the mysterious circumstances surrounding Billy Smolinski's disappearance, and the woeful efforts by the Waterbury Police Department to find him. Despite a flurry of activity in early May when the FBI excavated a driveway in Shelton, his whereabouts remain unknown.

Janice spends hours everyday researching websites on the missing and has become an expert on the topic. What began as a mother's instinctive need to find her missing child has evolved into a crusade to change the way Connecticut police handle investigations of a missing person. With the help of her state representative, Vickie Nardello, Janice Smolinski took her fight to the legislature. In January 2007 they introduced model legislation crafted by national experts on the missing and unidentified dead, a bill endorsed by the U.S. Department of Justice. The highly detailed legislation was 14 pages long and specified exact protocol for a police officer to follow when responding to a report of a missing person.

The bill detailed the information an officer must collect and process, and gave an exact time line for when reports needed to be filed with the Connecticut State Police and the FBI. The bill marched through the legislature with unanimous approval from the state's elected officials.

But somehow, just before it left the House of Representatives, the 14-page bill was reduced to one page, and all the details were replaced with vague generalities. Janice Smolinski was appalled.

The bill had suddenly taken a hard detour into the hands of the Police Officer Standards and Training Council (POST), located in Meriden. This is the group that creates the requirements for individuals seeking to become police officers in Connecticut, and it seemed they didn't want all these new requirements jammed down their throats. After some back room haggling the politicians in Hartford agreed to let POST study the proposals sought by Janice Smolinski. POST had until January 1, 2008 to come back to the table with their own proposal, or the model legislation introduced by Mrs. Smolinski would go into effect.

Without having all the details ironed out, the legislature then unanimously passed the watered down version of the Missing Person legislation, and Governor Jodi Rell quickly signed it into law.

Even though the bill had passed, Janice Smolinski felt like she had been punched in the stomach.

"I was very disappointed," she said. "I felt like we were up against a big power play from the system. I didn't have a lot of faith that the police were going to



do the right thing."

And then the phone rang last week and it was Thomas Flaherty, the executive director of POST. He wanted to personally meet with Janice to discuss the legislation, and he wanted to meet in the Smolinski home in Cheshire.

"I was delighted he made the move to meet with us," Smolinski said. "I didn't really expect anyone to call me until the end of December. But I've been told POST has researched how California and Washington State handle missing person cases, and if they have, that's excellent news. Those states are way ahead of Connecticut."

The meeting took place August 9th at 1:30 PM, just hours after the Observer went to press. The details of the meeting will be reported in next month's issue.

No matter what the outcome, Janice Smolinski's crusade isn't stopping in Connecticut.

"The real answer to this national crisis is federal legislation," Smolinski said. "I'm not stopping until we fix this problem." Janice mailed out information packets to Senator Joe Lieberman and Senator Chris Dodd, and to the state's five representatives in congress. The initial response was silence. She followed up with telephone calls and eventually spoke to Congressman Chris Murphy who promised to meet with her.

That was two months ago. Still no meeting and they both live in Cheshire.

Senator Lieberman's office set up a conference call with Mrs. Smolinski, a Lieberman staff member, and an FBI agent. But as yet, Joe Lieberman is too busy to meet with her.

What on earth does it take to get the attention of an elected official? This is no longer about Janice Smolinski looking for Billy, it's about a grieving mother who encountered a broken system and is trying to fix it. Her efforts give new meaning to the words Homeland Security. While much of Washington remains focused on fighting terrorism abroad, a more eminent threat lurks in our midst - apathy towards 200,000 missing and unidentified dead Americans.

POST is now offering training seminars for Connecticut police officers on handling "Sentinel Cyberterrorism" and "Terrorism and the Suicide Bomber", but nothing on collecting and processing DNA, and how to enter information into the national DNA data banks. There is also nothing listed in the training seminars about the missing and unidentified dead in America. We battle and claw to keep the terrorists at bay, but in reality the danger is right here at home - 110,000 brothers and sisters are missing, and 40,000 dead Americans languish unidentified in morgues.

Where is the outrage?

Shame on our elected officials in Washington D.C., and shame on all of us who remain silent in the face of this insidious plague.