

NATION

In search of lost and time

With funds short, the National Center for Missing Adults faces its own disappearance

By Jo Napolitano
Tribune staff reporter

FARMERS BRANCH, Texas — Kelli Ann Cox was a straight-A college student and young mother when she disappeared near a Denton police station on July 15, 1997.

Cox was shut out of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children because at 20 she was too old, and her mother, Jan Bynum, feared the case would be forgotten.

It wasn't until years later that Bynum discovered the National Center for Missing Adults, a Phoenix-based non-profit group dedicated to helping families like hers.

"They were wonderful," she said. "They went that extra mile. One of the biggest things they did for me was listen."

A caseworker even found a woman to make age-progression photos of Cox, a rare find.

But Bynum soon might have one fewer ally in the search.

The missing adults center, or NCMA, is in a financial crisis. Its unpaid CEO resorted to selling off her own property to keep it running.

A caseworker said it could close in weeks, a victim of Hurricane Katrina and of lawmakers' infighting.

The only national organization of its kind, NCMA has never been as well funded as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, in part because missing adults often are considered a lower priority by law enforcement, the media and the public.

For every Laci Peterson there are thousands of cases that get almost no coverage.

"When a child goes missing, it instantly pulls at America's heartstrings, but I think sadly, we assume there is less vulnerability when an adult goes missing," said Kym Pasqualini, NCMA's chief executive. "Regardless of age, whether they are 6, 36 or 66, it makes no difference to the family. Their lives are forever altered."

Bynum agrees. Her daughter disappeared after visiting a local police station for a criminal justice class.

Bynum and her husband, Nyles, have since adopted Cox's daughter, Alexis. The girl was 19 months old when her mother vanished.

Bynum said she is heartsick about NCMA's future.

"It would be a sad day if they go away," she said. "There is not a huge sensitivity toward missing adults."

NCMA received \$1.75 million in federal funding when it opened in 2002, but money de-



Photo for the Tribune by Brian Harkin

Jan Bynum (left) has been raising her granddaughter, Alexis, since Alexis' mother, Kelli Ann Cox, went missing in 1997. Because her daughter was 20, Bynum couldn't turn to agencies for missing children; instead, she found the National Center for Missing Adults.



The center found a specialist to progress photos of Kelli Ann Cox (left) to show how she might look at age 29 (right).

creased significantly over the years. It received \$148,048 in a federal appropriation for the current budget year. It receives \$21,000 annually from the Arizona Department of Public Safety, but that's just for Arizona victims. It receives donations, but not nearly enough to stay afloat, Pasqualini said.

Hurricane trouble

The organization's financial woes worsened after it was called upon to help find flood victims displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The endeavor, which included the creation of a call center, cost NCMA about \$200,000. The federal government reimbursed only \$50,000, the amount NCMA initially requested before realizing the scope of its effort.

"During that time, our complete focus was to provide assistance to those in need and [we] had faith the federal government would recognize the value of our services and fully reimburse the cost despite our initial estimate," Pasqualini

How the center helps families

What the National Center for Missing Adults does:

- Register the missing person on the group's Web site
- Create posters of the missing adult
- Notify relevant law-enforcement agencies, sending them data and photos
- Call law-enforcement officials for updates on individual cases
- Call families every three months to see if their loved one is still missing

said.

"That never happened. Pasqualini hopes the federal government will come through with additional funds, but there are no promises. A bill that would provide \$4 million has made little progress.

NCMA's staff was cut during the past year to two full-time workers from 13. Each is responsible for 12,000 cases, though they've been forced to drastically cut back services. In better times, that would have included sending out color posters, calling police for updates and drafting news releases when needed.

They still get about 300 calls per week.

Domingo Herraiz, director of the Bureau of Justice Assistance, a component of the U.S. Department of Justice, said NCMA is "very important,"

calling it "a key partner" in the search for missing persons.

Herraiz said NCMA has been responsible with its funding and that he hopes they get more. Money set aside by Congress for NCMA and other non-profits passes through his bureau.

"They have good initiatives in terms of their outreach and what they've done," he said, adding that there would be a void without them. "NCMA serves a good purpose and a need out there ... so those folks have a place to turn."

No regrets

Pasqualini doesn't regret her decision to help out after Katrina. She said the center processed more than 13,500 cases and helped resolve 99.8 percent in the following months.

A single mother living off her 401(k), she said she has refused pay since April 2006.

"Working in this field for nearly 15 years, I could never imagine the horror of not knowing the fate of my loved one," she said. "These families deserve to at least know what happened, and if necessary, give their loved one a proper burial."

NCMA maintains a national clearinghouse for missing adults, a repository available to families, police and the public.

Before the cuts, it provided training to law enforcement workers on the unique aspects of adult disappearances.

It assisted more than 24,000 families in 2005, often acting as a liaison between relatives and

law enforcement.

Its services vary. While all qualified cases are entered into the group's databases after the facts are checked, some might involve help in dealing with law enforcement or the media.

Joseph Paul said NCMA was the only group that listened when he sought help after the disappearance of his 22-year-old grandson, Steven Daniel Paul. He vanished during a trip to Chattanooga in December 1999.

A caseworker with NCMA drafted a letter to the police chief, various newspapers and radio stations, trying to spread the word.

Thomas Knowles' 43-year-old brother, David Clark Knowles, went missing last August during a camping trip with friends. NCMA got his brother's photo posted on the side of a race car and helped gain media attention, he said.

As for Cox's mother, she's hopeful but realistic.

Her granddaughter, Alexis, now 11 years old, has almost no memory of her mother. She recently started to call her grandmother "Mom."

"There's a place inside me that I really don't feel she's dead," Alexis said of her mom.

Bynum has heard at least a dozen times over the years that police have found bones in the area.

Though it saddens her, she hopes that they might be her daughter's.

Janapolis prays for the opposite. jnapolitano@tribune.com