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Centre County's missing persons cases capture interest

By Lori Falce lfalce@centredaily.com

One minute a person you love is there. You might not be with them, but wherever they are, you know they are just a phone call away. At work, at a party, out for a drive.

Except when they aren't.

Three of Centre County's best-known mysteries involve people who seemingly disappeared without a trace, leaving frustrated investigators and families who need answers to two questions: Where did this person go and what happened?

It was a Tuesday night in February 1991 when Brenda Condon, 28, was tending bar at Carl's Bad Tavern in Spring Township. She was a Clearfield High School graduate and the mother of two — Shawna, 10, and Todd, 12 — and it was her third night on the job. She had recently moved to State College from Williamsport because it was easier to be close to her kids after her divorce.

No one saw Condon, a petite woman with auburn hair that brushed her shoulders and blue eyes that she sometimes turned green with contact lenses, after the bar closed in those early-morning hours. Employees arriving to open up the next day found it empty, but Condon's 1986 Mercury Capri was still in the parking lot. Her cowboy boots sat alone in the men's room.

For 23 years, that is all anyone has known. The information is out there. A website, www.brendacondon.com, keeps the case out there, as does a Facebook page that tries to elicit information about the case while publicizing other missing persons' cases.

Condon's case is just one of the unsolved investigations that remain open for state police Trooper David Clemens at Troop G.

Some of those cases are homicides. Some are unexplained deaths or unidentified bodies. Others, like Condon's, are cases with no bodies to autopsy, and no explanation, just an unexplained absence of someone people miss. The longer the cases go without answers, the harder it is for families and investigators, but Clemens said they are still priorities for him.

“Especially the missing persons,” he said. “They don’t have any answers. With a homicide, (the families) at least know what happened. Missing persons cases don’t even have that.”

One local case attracted national attention immediately.

When Centre County District Attorney Ray Gricar went missing in April 2005, the unexplained disappearance of an elected official drew immediate and sensational promotion on Nancy Grace and Greta Van Susteren’s cable shows. News conferences were packed with reporters from newspapers, television and radio far and near.

They spread the word of Gricar’s day off from the courthouse and the unexpected jaunt to Lewisburg in his cherry-red Mini Cooper. He was going antiquing, he told girlfriend Patty Fornicola. His car was found. Eventually, his computer was, too, pulled from the Susquehanna River.

Gricar never turned up; he was declared dead in 2011.

[In February, Bellefonte police, who had been the primary agency on the case since the outset, turned it over to state police](#) after almost nine years of chasing down leads, including possible sightings of the former prosecutor. For a small police department, the case stretched them thin.

“It’s a case with very little evidence,” Bellefonte Police Chief Shawn Weaver said at the time. “What leads we do get take us out of the county. It just makes sense. They have greater resources.”

Ferguson Township has kept its investigation of the 2001 disappearance of Penn State student Cindy Song in-house for almost 13 years. Song was last seen leaving a Halloween party, bunny ears on her head.

Real leads in the case have been slim, though police have pressed charges against pranksters who took time away from the investigation with faked instant messages in Song’s name and pretend phone calls from the young woman, asking for help.

Ferguson Township Detective Jonathan Mayer, the lead investigator in the Song disappearance, said the transient nature of the student population can be a complication. Witnesses who are here one year might transfer, graduate or drop out the next. And Penn State’s status as a major university means “going home” might mean moving to the other side of the country, if not farther. In Song’s case, her mother lives in South Korea.

Possible links to the Luzerne County murder case against convicted bank robber and Mahanoy state prison inmate Hugo Selenski have been put forth, but Mayer said a judge’s gag order in that case makes it impossible to discuss.

The destroyed remains of a dozen people were found on Selenski’s property, “burned and buried in a pit in his backyard,” according to an indictment in January. Selenski’s pending murder trial has been dragging on since 2006.

That isn't the only hope police have of solving the case, however.

Chief Diane Conrad said DNA samples from both of Song's parents have been collected and submitted to national databases to increase the likelihood of identifying remains.

So does that mean they think Song is dead?

"We have ruled nothing out," Sgt. Robert Glenny said.

Then does that mean they hope to find something someday?

"Yes, we are hopeful," Conrad said.

They also are holding out hope for another missing person. The [disappearance of Jennifer Shadle-Cahill, 48](#), is still fresh. She was last seen in the North Atherton Street Wal-Mart on May 15, but after that she vanished. No calls to her children or her mother; no movement on her bank accounts or credit cards; no hits on her health insurance.

Ferguson police called a news conference Aug. 1, announcing a lead — evidence that she had spoken with four Hispanic men at Champs days before her last sighting. Police are seeking those men, not as suspects, but as people who might have some information about the missing woman's plans or whereabouts from that conversation.

The family of a Julian woman is also hoping someone will be able to help them.

[Susan Bachman, 37, jumped from a moving car on Interstate 80](#) between DuBois and Clarion on July 4, when her parents were driving her to Clarion Psychiatric Center. A month — and several searches with tracking and trailing dogs — has not uncovered her whereabouts.

Both women have family that want them to come home. Shadle-Cahill's mother, Johanna Zmuida, of Orwigsburg, knew something was wrong within days and desperately wants to find out what happened.

Bachman's brother, Will, has built a website, www.findsusambachman.com, and a Facebook page and stays in close contact with police and media to keep her story in the forefront of everyone's minds.

At local stores, like the Sheetz on Shiloh Road, posters with both women's pictures plead for the cases not to turn cold.

Read more here: <http://www.centredaily.com/2014/08/12/4301119/centre-countys-missing-persons.html?sp=99/116/118/#storylink=cpy>