

UNTHSC works to expand forensic tools for missing

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Missing. Just one word, but one with a long-lasting impact. Ask the families for whom the word has taken on a devastating meaning.

“My mother was 21 years of age when she became missing, disappearing from the face of the earth,” said Ariana Lee, 24, daughter of Felecia Johnson, 24, daughter of Felecia Johnson. “I was only 3 months old when my mom came up missing. Twenty-four years later ... and we’re still here today with no answers and no leads on my mother.”

Lee was speaking at the second “Missing in North Texas” event at the University of North Texas Health Science Center campus in Fort Worth on April 22.

At the inaugural event in 2017, more than a dozen families came to UNTHSC to provide more information and documentation about missing relatives, interacting with various law enforcement agencies to discuss their cases.

This year there were several events around the state, including in Houston.

The databases of the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) contain files on more than 1,000 active missing person cases in Texas and about 14,000 nationwide. NamUs, based at the UNT Health Science Center, is a national information clearinghouse and resource center for missing person cases, unidentified victims, unidentified living individuals and unclaimed bodies.

“I’m not sure we can help a family find closure,” said BJ Spamer, director of forensic and analytical services for NamUs. “But we can help them find answers, and families often take great comfort in that.”

With funding and oversight



Families of the missing meeting at University of North Texas Health Science Center on April 22. Right - Arianna Lee, daughter of Felicia Johnson, missing since 1994.



from the National Institute of Justice, a division of the Department of Justice, the UNT Center for Human Identification since 2011 has managed and expanded NamUs

Medical examiners, coroners, law enforcement officers, family members of missing persons and concerned citizens can access varying levels of information on secure online databases to assist in resolving unsolved cases. NamUs provides data management, analytical support and forensic resources for missing and unidentified cases at no cost to investigating agencies and family members.

At the April 22 event, the modern, cutting-edge science of DNA and computer technologies meshed together with the raw, unfettered emotions of missing persons cases.

Johnson’s name, description, photo, dental records and notice that the mother and daughter’s DNA samples are available for comparison are now on file with NamUs, and

Lee hopes it will help bring some sort of resolution.

Those technical, clinical components of the search were then bolstered by the stories of the missing and their families.

Johnson, a Dunbar High School honor student, became a dropout and was pregnant by age 16.

“She was part of a crack epidemic that happened back in the 1990s in Fort Worth, Texas. It just simply took her over,” said Lee.

Still, Johnson remained in touch with her family until early 1994, when the phone calls and visits stopped.

“Things weren’t good for me; without a mother it was very difficult, very hard, always questioning ‘Why didn’t she stay here with me? Is it because she was afraid

to be a young parent? What ever happened?’” she told the audience of family members, law enforcement and others at the event. “But as I grew in age and maturity, I started to ask my family members, ‘Well, what really happened?’”

Lee has been waiting for answers for more than 20 years.

For Bradley Lawson, of Crowley, the wounds are fresher, if no less raw. The father of Brandon Lawson, he has been waiting for answers for five years.

“In 2013, August the ninth, our family’s life changed forever,” he said. “Brandon was a big part of our family. Still to this day, we still haven’t given up hope that Brandon will be found.”

Brandon Lawson was working for an oil and gas company in San Angelo when he left his home, presumably headed back toward Fort Worth.

Nearing Bronte on Highway 277 in the early morning on Aug. 9, Lawson reportedly dialed 911 apparently because he had run out of gas.

“At that point Brandon abandoned his vehicle and, just like all missing persons have in common, it’s like they just vanish,” said Lawson.

“They cease to exist, like they walked to the edge of the earth and dropped off, and we never hear or see from them again.”

Like many families of missing persons, Lawson said not a day goes by that they don’t think about Brandon or stop working to bring him home.

“That is the most important thing that we have together as a family of missing persons. We just want to bring our member home,” he said.

Among those attending the event was Rusty Arnold, who knew Lawson growing up. Arnold is the younger brother of 17-year-old Rachel Trlica, who, just two days before Christmas in 1974, disappeared from the then-Seminary South shopping center – now La Gran Plaza – in south Fort Worth, along with 14-year-old Renee Wilson and 9-year-old Julie Ann Moseley.

“I’ve known Rusty Arnold for years and had heard his sister had been missing, but until the night my son came up missing, I didn’t understand where Rusty had been. Now since that day I’ve known. It’s a bad feeling, it’s

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a horrible feeling. It's a feeling that you can't replace in yourself because something's been taken away from you that you so badly wanna get back."

The case involving Arnold's sister stretches back to the days before DNA became a practical law enforcement tool. In 1974, police initially thought the young women had run away, an assumption that angers Arnold and other family members because it led to a delay in any investigation. Their car, an Oldsmobile was located around 6 p.m. on Dec. 23, 1974, empty, with Christmas presents locked inside.

"They didn't even fingerprint the vehicle," he said.

The morning after the disappearance, a letter, allegedly from Rachel Trlica, said that the girls had gone to Houston and would return in a week. Rusty Arnold believes the letter was mailed in or near Throckmorton, Texas, because of the postmark. Some family members don't believe any of the missing girls wrote the letter.

Now, nearly 44 years later, Arnold continues to seek answers. He maintains a website, missingtrio.com, and a Facebook page seeking information on the case.

He maintains hope for some answers. He believes new information might soon come to light on one of the more baffling missing persons cases in the state, if not the nation.

And, cases as old as the Missing Trio's have been solved with DNA. On April 25, a former police officer in California was arrested at his home after DNA linked him to crimes attributed to the so-called Golden State Killer, whose crimes date back to 1976.

Arnold, as well as the other families, are hoping that new legislation passed in other states might be passed in Texas to help identify more missing persons.

The legislation would expand the process for comparing missing person's reports with unidentified remains kept

by a variety of state and local agencies around the country. Those agencies are not required to input data into NamUs. The legislation would require state and local authorities to report unidentified remains to NamUs.

When efforts to pass federal legislation failed, five states passed laws requiring law enforcement officials to share missing person information on the NamUs database.

Tennessee, New Jersey and Connecticut were the first to pass the laws, followed by New York late last year and Michigan earlier this year.

Arnold sees the legislation as a way to clear many cases like those of his sister.

"I think that would go a long way toward clearing some of these cases," he said. "Some of these answers may be out there in some coro-

ner's office."

Lawson, too, believes the law could help link up some of the missing persons with the John and Jane Does that are put in unmarked graves.

"That is a law we definitely need to strive to get passed," he said.

The UNT Health Science Center plans to hold these events annually, inviting families of the missing to submit DNA, fingerprints and any other items that might be used for identification.

For Lawson, he wants to get the word out, not just about his son, Brandon, but about the pain families feel when someone is inexplicably gone.

"I still strive to hope that more can be done down in the area where Brandon is missing, but as for now, I just thank everybody for being here, taking your time to come here today," he said. "I wish there was five or 10,000 people here I could talk to, just to let them know that they don't understand the hurt that goes into the missing's families.

"Until you're there, you don't feel what we feel. There's a part of us missing. In our hearts, there's a lower part of it that's just gone. It's not there, it won't be replaced until they come back home," Lawson said.

"It's a bad feeling, it's a horrible feeling. It's a feeling that you can't replace in yourself, because something's been taken away from you that you so badly wanna get back."

Bradley Lawson, father of missing Brandon Lawson

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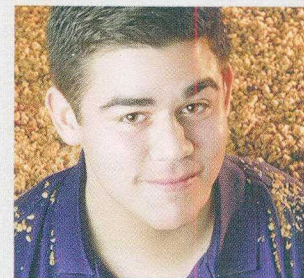
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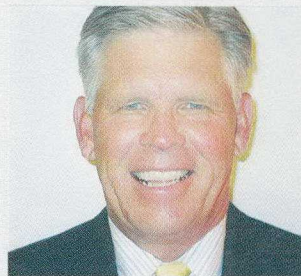
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