

Don't look the other way when it comes to the fate of the missing

By **Gianna Young**

A number of years ago, April was declared as Missing Persons Awareness Month in Wisconsin, as some may have noticed by the green rope lights adorning light poles along Bridge Street in Cornell. To help get the word out about those still missing from the area, a Missing Persons Awareness Event took place April 15, at the Cornell High School.

There are 150 missing individuals from Wisconsin, some as far back as 1946, the details of which can be viewed at missingpersons.doj.wi.gov/missing.org.

"Some may disappear on purpose, some may have accidents, some may have a brain injury or dementia, or some are taken against their will," said event coordinator Kathy Swanson.

Fierce Freedom

Speaking for Fierce Freedom, was Cat Morgan, community program specialist, an organization that was started by founder Jenny Almquist, after she heard about the international sex trade, and how there are children and babies being sold. A lot of that trade, known as human trafficking, comes from American and European men and women, who have money.

"There's this demand that's being fed," said Morgan, adding that many think slavery is something that existed pre-Civil War era. "The methodology of slave ownership is really nothing new. Slavery is still alive and well, it's still happening."

Now, however, slavery is more innocuous and marketed in a way to minimize it. Morgan said the general public often doesn't know the coercion that's gone on to recruit young boys and girls. That's why it's Fierce Freedom's mission to educate communities, but many youth still fall through the gaps and no one is even looking for them.

"There are lies people believe about themselves, in order to continue being in this life," said Morgan. "We all have vulnerability. What are those gaps in each of our lives?"

Morgan's message was about showing everyone their worth, value and dignity. Last year, Fierce Freedom reached more than 11,000 people through outreach programs.

Human trafficking may seem like something that couldn't exist in a place like Cornell, but it can and does.

"It's been reported in every county in Wisconsin," said Morgan. "With the emergence of technology, it's never been easier to reach youth and any individual they want to groom sexually, online."

Despite an almost year-long shutdown, abusers and traffickers didn't take time off during the COVID-19 lockdown, and the sex trade skyrocketed.

"It doesn't have to be money that is exchanged," said Morgan, who says cigarettes, drugs and the use of cars is often a form of payment for "services."

There's also a growing trade of Native American women,



Photo by Gianna Young

Cat Morgan, community program specialist with Fierce Freedom, spoke about how many youth are trafficked, because they feel isolated from their family and friends.

many of whom go missing. In fact, there are 700 missing indigenous women in Wyoming, but no one talks about it, because of red tape with how tribal law works.

"Sometimes, it isn't the white van, but sometimes, it is," said Morgan.

Fierce Freedom is also finding that Airbnbs are becoming a place for trafficking to happen, since there are minimal or no security cameras.

"Meeting people online can really turn dangerous," said Morgan.

In this day of technology, youth are often encouraged to post provocative photos, which can lead to blackmail, whether by trading sexual favors or exchanging money, so the blackmailer doesn't blow the whistle on the victim or harm their family.

"This is really, really prevalent," said Morgan.

Online gaming apps are also something to be wary of, as they are targeting boys more and more. Parents should look for certain signs that could indicate they are being "groomed," such as agitation if a phone notification goes off. The youth may also seem hostile and stressed, their language may become more sexually inappropriate, or they suddenly sport an expensive gift or have a lot of unexplained currency.

Morgan stressed that parents need to monitor what is going on in their children's online life and to be present for their children.

To find out more about the Worth It school program and for parent resources, visit fiercefreedom.org.

"You can choose to look the other way, but you can never say again, that you did not know," said Morgan.

Bruce's Legacy

Keith Cornican took time out of his busy schedule to speak about the non-profit organization, that was started in 2013, in memory of his brother, Bruce Cornican, who was a firefighter in Black River Falls. Keith and Bruce, who did most everything together, became certified as scuba divers to help their county with body recovery.

At that time, recovery meant dragging bodies out of water with hooks. "So, that's how we started out," said Keith.

Then, in 1995, a drowning happened in their county, and the fire department Bruce was a member of responded, but knew they couldn't put

divers in, with extreme flooding occurring. The department did what they could with the equipment they had.

However, two of the firefighters waded through the high water with attached lines, feeling around the flooded tree line. They lost their footing and the force of the water sucked them into the nearby dam hydraulics. One of those firefighters was Bruce, who later was taken off life support by his family, at only 40 years old.

After that, Keith decided on a career change, knowing that first responders have big hearts, but not necessarily the training, knowledge or equipment needed for an operation, such as what took the life of Bruce.

"That's what I've been doing for the last 23 years," said Keith.

In the last few years, Keith was able to finally start Bruce's Legacy, since there is lot of equipment out there to aid recovery efforts, including the sonar Keith uses.

"Unfortunately, it's extremely expensive," said Keith.

Bruce's Legacy conducted their first search at a North Dakota Native American reservation, where a tribal member was missing and had been looked for over a two-week period.

"Lo and behold, we found the guy within a half an hour," said Keith.

Since then, Bruce's Legacy has even gone international, including Nepal, near Mount Everest, which was a five-day trek just to get up to a glacial lake, where three teenagers drowned. The locals recovered one body on their own, while Bruce's Legacy recovered an additional body, but could not reach the other, as they didn't have enough cable.

Another time, the volunteer efforts went to Panama, where they found a missing plane and recovered two deceased people – one of whom was from Milwaukee. That was not without its hassles.

"Politics is everywhere I go," said Keith.

Bruce's Legacy then went to Romania, in December of 2022, to recover a fisherman who was missing. When asked how he is contacted from so many different places, Keith says social media is a huge tool for desperate family members or law enforcement to reach someone who can help give them closure.

To date, Bruce's Legacy has recovered 45 drowning victims.

"Most of those, are victims that most likely would still be there, because we get called in a lot times, after the fact," said Keith. "Deep water is very unforgiving...they'll stay down there forever, if they're below 100 feet."

Bruce's Legacy holds the current record recovery in the U.S. and Canada, at Lake Tahoe, when they found a drowning victim from New Jersey. The victim was located at 1,565 feet, simply because of cell phone data and because they had their Google location turned on.

"That's how I've been very successful in locating victims that others can't," said Keith. "I do my homework. Not to brag or anything, but we've been very fortunate."

Keith was even part of solving a 20-year-old cold case, which rocked the forensics world, and in one instance, they



Photo by Gianna Young

Local true crime author Robert Dudley encourages the public to come forward with any tips or details, no matter how small, to help authorities solve missing persons cases.

discovered a separate body than the one they were looking for. Thanks to a camera on the sonar, Bruce's Legacy avoids legal troubles and gives authorities evidence.

"All the stuff we do is recorded," said Keith.

While Keith doesn't ask anything for their services if the search is in Wisconsin, he does ask that families outside of the state (if they are able) pay for travel and lodging expenses. Bruce's legacy is currently fundraising for an addition to their equipment and accepts donations, at bruceslegacy.com.

"We will never not go," said Keith, adding that the most impactful search was for an immigrant family, who had been pushed aside for a higher profile case. "That's worth it, more than money to me."

Author Robert Dudley

Also speaking, was local true crime author Robert Dudley, who fell into the writing world.

"It's kind of always been a life-long interest for me," he said.

The majority of the cases he's written about were missing for quite some time – some of them have never been found. One case, in particular, remained unsolved for almost three decades, and that was the case of Jacob Wetterling, who was abducted at 11 years of age, from his hometown of St. Joseph, Minn.

"It took 27 years, to find his remains and solve his case," said Dudley.

The author said there is sometimes a stigma about the ones, the "throwaways" who disappear, as some think those who go missing are "no good" and are "asking for it."

"I try to look beyond that kind of stuff," said Dudley.

Dudley asked the public to remember that, regardless of circumstances, the missing are still people. He also asked people to look for small details when a person goes missing to report to authorities.

"Little bits of information make a difference," said Dudley.

Fear Not Program – R.A.D. (Rape Aggression Defense)

"There are things that will never make the news."

Those words came from Bill Popp, with Fear Not. As part of the R.A.D. (Rape Aggression Defense) program, the tactics learned are a last or worse case scenario defense, so the defender should always get out, if possible.

"You have no idea what the other person is capable of doing," said Popp, who says self-defense is a basic right, that gives someone space and time to escape. "Set 'em up so they meet their ancestors. You want to be the tiger in that situation."



Photo by Gianna Young

Even a five year old child can use techniques to get away from an attacker, as demonstrated by volunteers with Fear Not.

Whatever you need to do, that's what you need to do."

Popp said when asking convicted criminals, they say any type of resistance is what stops them from making an abduction.

"If you walk like a victim, talk like a victim, act like a victim, you are a victim," said Popp.

Women, children, even men, need to be aware of surroundings, listen to their gut and read what their body is telling them, in order to keep out of dangerous situations. Popp said even a credit card can cause damage to an attacker, when held firmly and making slashing motions at the face.

The defender also needs to keep moving and keep talking to keep breathing. Popp also doesn't want to hear a scream, because kids scream on a playground and girls scream when their boyfriends are teasing them. However, a loud yell shocks the system of an attacker and draws attention.

To learn more about the programs, visit radkids.org and rad-systems.com, or contact Popp, at bpopp39@aol.com or 708-937-8672. In order to reach as many people as possible with the R.A.D. techniques, Popp is looking for more parents and kids to get involved.

"This is going to be the safest small town in America," he said.

Alzheimer's Association/ Chippewa Valley Dementia Coalition

A missing person isn't always a small child or teenager, it can also be a person with dementia. But, it's not just senior citizens who can have dementia, as the disease can be caused by brain injury, from abuse or malnutrition.

"We have to know, that it isn't necessarily that older person who is walking around drooling," said Shar Bellefeuille, community outreach for the Alzheimer's Association. "We all look like someone with Alzheimer's disease."

As part of the Alzheimer's Association mission, Bellefeuille looks to make towns dementia-friendly, so those with dementia can stay in their communities longer. Many caregivers are on their own when taking care of a loved one with dementia, and Bellefeuille wants them to realize there's more to it than just "watching Mom or Dad really close," or locking them in the house during errands.

Bellefeuille also knows that help and resources are not always available, which is where community awareness comes in.

"That's the challenge," she said.

In Wisconsin, there are 126,000 people living with a diagnosis of dementia, but there are also 50 percent more who have not been diagnosed. In Chippewa County alone, there are 1,500 people who have diagnosed dementia.

What can caretakers do? One way, is to take preventative



Photo by Gianna Young

Carla Berscheit, with the Chippewa Valley Dementia Coalition (left), and Shar Bellefeuille, Alzheimer's Association, want the community to be aware of what dementia really is and how to help those afflicted with it.

measures before someone goes missing, by taking a picture of the person with dementia every day with a phone, so they can immediately show authorities what the missing person is wearing.

For tips on how to make a community dementia-friendly, email shbellefeuille@alz.org or cberscheit@co.chippewa.wi.us.

"There are a lot of little pointers you can give people," said Carla Berscheit, dementia care specialist.

Sawyer County Search and Rescue

"Call out the dogs" is a familiar term, possibly associated with prison breaks, but it's a very real thing, carried out by the Sawyer County Search and Rescue. The volunteer organization was started after kids wanted to do something to help after 9/11.

There are now 32 members and nine certified canines, with more in training. A hound is given the scent of the missing person, then carefully tracks the child or adult until they are found. A dog will focus on a person's individual scent to track where they are, from clothing or even a cotton swab off of bedding.

At times, when a person has been missing too long, authorities know the person is likely deceased, so the rescue organization is working with dogs in training to identify and find the remains.

When in the woods, there are things everyone can follow to help rescuers find them: when lost, you should carry a whistle; stay in one place; try to keep warm; don't sit or lay on bare ground, as that makes the body even colder; be wary



Photo by Gianna Young

of eating berries or mushrooms that are unfamiliar; and stay away from large bodies of water when trying to find drinking water. Family members also should not put off calling 911, if they believe their loved ones are missing, since by the time the dogs are called in, scent and tracks might be marred by countless well-meaning volunteers. "Too many times, we're reacting," said coordinator Pat Sanchez. "We'd rather get turned around."

