

New Web site giving hope to families of missing persons

by By Jeff Cronin
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August 4, 2004

It's been 23 years since Michele Reidenbach's family has seen her. The 16-year-old Evans City girl went to work Oct. 6, 1981, at Mel Den, an appliance store along South Main Street in Zelienople for which she wrote advertisements and addressed envelopes.

At about 4 p.m. that day, Reidenbach, the youngest of seven children, walked down the street to a pharmacy to purchase cold medicine and had said she would return soon. A police investigation revealed Reidenbach had bought the medicine.

That was the last time anyone in the area saw her.

But a Penn Hills woman still has hope that she and many other missing Pennsylvanians will return home one day.

Nancy Monahan, Area Director for the Pennsylvania Doe Network, a non-profit organization dedicated to finding missing people and identifying unknown bodies, launched a Web site this month devoted to tracking down people such as Reidenbach.

The site, <http://www.pennsylvaniamissing.com/>, currently lists 150 cases of unexplained disappearances and unidentified bodies.

Reidenbach's sister, Darla Reidenbach of Zelienople, still has trouble discussing her case.

"It's just hard," she says.

"You wonder what she'd be like now."

Darla says there was never a time when her family lost hope, especially her mother, who passed away in 1999.

She is sure Michele did not run away. Michele left her purse and school books at Mel Den and more than \$100 in her drawer at home, money which she had been saving for a class ring, the Web site says.

Darla has her theories about what may have happened, but wanted to keep them private.

When the missing person report was first filed, Darla says many community members volunteered to help search the area, including Moraine State Park.

Over the years, Zelienople and state police in Butler, who are now heading the investigation, have followed some leads, but still have no answers.

"It's pretty hard not knowing anything. That's probably the toughest," Darla says.

Monahan says current notification methods only send out the message in a 100 mile radius, which means most of the state would be left out.

"What Pennsylvania needed was a central location to list all of the cases," she says.

Most of the cases were taken from the Doe Network's files and she obtained others through newspaper clippings.

Monahan will continually update the site with new information as she confirms the details of each case. She's already working on a half-dozen more cases from the Reading area.

Originally from New England, Monahan first became interested in missing person cases when she got involved with a ground search for a missing boy from Rhode Island.

Seven years later, she says his remains were found in a shoebox in a neighbor's home.

"He was just a little doll. That's something that stays with you forever," she says.

The Pennsylvania site joins similar sites in Maryland and New York.

"I really would like to see more states do the same thing. The more of us that do it, I think somebody else would be inspired to do it for their area," she says.