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Unsolved Cases: A New Weekend Patch Feature

Each weekend, beginning May 12-13, Patch will review a missing person, an unidentified body or a cold case homicide victim from Allegheny or Washington counties.

By [Zandy Dudiak](#) [Email the author](#) 5:58 am

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The [Pennsylvania Missing Persons website](#) features the somewhat-haunting sketch of "Beth Doe" on its homepage.

Nancy Monahan of Penn Hills, who started and runs the website, chose the sketch because, in nearly four decades, and despite social networking and modern forensics, no one has ever been able to determine where the woman came from or who she was. Monahan was intrigued in part because the woman would have been in her own age bracket.

[The details of the case are rather disturbing](#). The young woman had been dismembered and mutilated. She and her full-term, unborn child were stuffed in three suitcases and thrown from a bridge along Interstate 80 over the Lehigh River in Carbon County, PA.

Police think the killer meant for the suitcases to land in the Lehigh River below, but they hit land, breaking two of them open. A local boy made the grizzly discovery on Dec. 20, 1976. The sad part for Monahan is that no one recognized or missed the young mother-to-be.

"The story itself is so horrendous," Monahan said. "Sometime before I die, I'm going to know who she is."

Whether it's a missing person, a body with no established identity or a murder case that's never been solved, these cases all have one thing in common—that someone knows something, Monahan said.

"It's a silent epidemic," she said. "All it takes is one set of eyes."

While all these cases weigh on Monahan, she finds it particularly hard to grasp that some bodies are never claimed or identified.

"I find it offensive they've been thrown away," she said.

Monahan helped in the search for [Jason Foreman](#), who was kidnapped and later found dead in the mid-1970s in her home state of Rhode Island.

She was between jobs in 2003 when she stumbled upon a cold cases group on Yahoo. A year or so later, the [highly-publicized search for Leslie Rivera Hager](#) of Beaver County touched her—and sparked her interest in doing something more.

[Hager, 37, had called Beaver County 911 asking for help](#), telling them she was lost in a park that might have been in the Allegheny Forest, though that was improbable because emergency calls are routed to the closest 911 center. She told the operator her head was bleeding.

Police were unable to trace the cell phone and what disturbs Monahan is that, if they had been able to, Hager might have been found alive. Instead, she was found dead more than three months later—only about 1,000 feet from her home.

That's not unusual. Despite extensive searches, the skeletal remains of Wilbert Darr, 74, who went missing from his home in Murrysville—just over the [Plum Borough](#) border—on May 27, 2008 were finally found on July 12, 2010, in a densely wooded area near his home.

Aside from running the Pennsylvania Missing Persons site, Monahan is the area director for Pennsylvania for [The Doe Network](#), a volunteer organization devoted to assisting law enforcement in solving cold cases concerning unexplained disappearances and unidentified victims.

For the last year, she has also served as the Team Pennsylvania victims advocate for [NamUs](#), the U.S. Department of Justice's national centralized repository and resource center for missing persons and unidentified decedent records. Monahan says NamUs is "the Doe Network on steroids."

She said Facebook and other social media tools are extraordinary ways to get these open cases out there with the potential to reach millions online.

Monahan points to the efforts made by the family of Jimmy Slack, [the Bridgeville man who went missing after a concert at Stage AE on the North Shore](#) on Dec. 7, 2011. His family conducted their own searches, maintained a Facebook page for him and were able to get a billboard donated asking for information in his disappearance. Despite their efforts, he was found in the Ohio River on Jan. 23.

"His family kept him in the news. They really went out of their way to keep him in the public eye."

The family of [Murphy Jane Hickerson](#) of Canonsburg is doing the same type of broad outreach since she went missing last Saturday, using social media, posters, prayer vigils, friends, family—and the police.

Though she works as a retail merchandiser, Monahan's passion is devoting her life to finding the missing, and learning the real names of the Janes or Johns whose bodies have never been claimed. For her, they become acquaintances as she searches for them or their loved ones.

"There's never enough time," she said. "There's never an end to it. My dream is not to work—to do this full-time."

In the meantime, she'll continue her efforts to reunite the missing and unidentified with their loved ones.

"I sort of consider my website a temporary home until they come home," Monahan said.

Check back with Patch next weekend for the first profile featuring the area's missing, unclaimed and cold case homicide victims.

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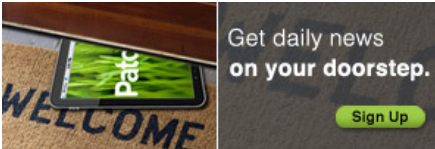
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