

Missing People - a history

Introduction

The National Missing Persons Helpline charity has established itself as central to the search for and support of missing people, and those left behind, for more than a decade. The history of the charity is as varied as its work and is a true testament to the energy and passion of all those that have worked and volunteered steering it from its humble origins to the much-respected organisation it is today.

Early years (1986-89)

Following the high profile disappearance of estate agent Suzy Lamplugh from Fulham in July 1986, two sisters, Janet Newman and Mary Asprey, were to become co-Founders of National Missing Persons Helpline, perhaps one of the most influential charities of recent times.

With no news of Suzy's whereabouts media attention moved to the apparent lack of support for missing persons' families, such as Paul and Diane Lamplugh. This became one of the objectives of a Trust they established in Suzy's name, a trust which two of the Lamplughs' friends and neighbours made important contributions. Mary Asprey's son had attended nursery school with Suzy and Mary was anxious to help a friend whose daughter had gone missing. Mary was to play a key part in fundraising for the Trust in the early years and also, with her sister, Janet Newman, established the Trust's initial work on missing people. Taking this lead, Superintendent Nick Carter, who had been closely involved in the hunt for Suzy while in the Metropolitan Police, retired to Bristol and ran a pilot helpline for families from January – September 1989.

The Helpline (1990-92)

Having recognised the need highlighted by Superintendent Carter and inspired by their friends the Lamplughs, Mary and Janet, as obvious champions of the cause, agreed to set up a permanent, national helpline. From a bedroom at the sisters' home in East Sheen, SW London, a start-up service was formed in early 1990. The Freephone number, 0500 700 700, remains the same number used by tens of thousands today.

Meanwhile the Suzy Lamplugh Trust moved towards issues surrounding safety in the work place.

Initially Mary and Janet and a small team of volunteers (many of whom would later hold key positions at the charity) simply comforted callers to the helpline. However they soon realised families wanted more than just telephone support. In 1992, having re-mortgaged their houses, Mary and Janet applied to register NMPH as a charity.

Expansion (1993)

By the time it became a registered charity in April 1993, NMPH needed new offices to provide a complete range of services for relatives, enabling the charity to both *find and support*. This expansion was greatly helped by founders of the Big Issue, who secured premises and ITN's Sir Trevor McDonald – later to become a Vice Patron – who instigated invaluable publicity.

Where minimal funding allowed, new staff and volunteers joined and the information taken from each caller regarding a disappearance became more detailed and more accurate. Departments offering identification and Publicity were born. The new

identification service provided database searches, forensic artwork in cases of unidentified persons and age progressions for use in publicity of long term missing persons.

The success of the charity was cemented in its first year by an office visit from Diana, Princess of Wales in October.

Getting the Message Home (1994)

In February 1994 the resources of NMPH were stretched to the limit by the horrific discoveries at 25 Cromwell Street, Gloucester. Calls to the Helpline from relatives of missing people trebled and extra volunteers had to be brought in to answer the phones.

New callers reported relatives missing for the first time, even though some had vanished ten years ago or even more. Distressed families already in touch with the Helpline called again, in case their missing relative might figure in the West investigation. The police directed anxious families to NMPH for comfort and support.

Gloucestershire Police called too, seeking help on identifying the bodies found at Cromwell Street and elsewhere. Their initial interest was in women reported missing from Worcestershire and Gloucestershire in the 1970s and 80s.

Some 390 names were supplied including Alison Chambers and Carol Cooper who were later identified as victims. At the same time, details mentioned by Frederick West were passed to NMPH for checking against our database. One result of this was the identification of Juanita Mott another of the victims discovered at Cromwell Street.

Another positive side effect of the charities role in the investigation was the reunification of 110 non-victim families in less than two months.

On the 27th June 1994 the charity took over the Message Home Helpline from the Mothers Union, allowing adult missing people to pass a message home.

In response to NMPH's growing achievements the charity was honored that HRH the Duchess of Gloucester GVCO accepted the role of Patron. HRH continues to attend performances on our behalf and raise morale of staff and volunteers with regular visits.

Recognition (1996-1998)

In 1996 Mary Asprey and Janet Newman were honoured for their services to charity with OBEs. In 1998 both were honoured with the 'UK Women of Europe Award' and in the same year given the European Women of Achievement Humanitarianism Award and The Rotary Foundations prestigious Paul Harris Fellowships.

Lost from View (2002)

Jointly with the University of York, NMPH produced 'Lost from View' in February 2002. Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, for the first time research used the charity's unique database of all types of missing people to provide information and trends about the missing phenomenon.

Pioneering work (2003-2004)

Further accolades followed in 2003 when Mary and Janet were invited by The Queen

and the Duke of Edinburgh to a reception at Buckingham Palace to mark the contribution of Pioneers to the life of the Nation.

2003 also saw the national roll out of the 'Missing from Care' project for local authorities 'looked after children' in September. This work for young people continued in May 2004 when NMPH launched the Runaway Helpline, as a direct response to a recommendation in the 2002 report by The Social Exclusion Unit. This dedicated service offers advice and support to young people away from home or care.

Financial problems (2005-2006)

March 2005 saw the first dent in the history of a charity that has benefited thousands of lives and supported thousands more. Faced with closure after years of inadequate funding and little input from the private sector, the media announced NMPH was to close. Under the direction of the co-Founders, and with the future of the charity hanging in the balance, Sir Norman Wakefield was appointed as advisor and formed a consortium of charitable organisations that offered financial support. After an outpouring of public support the Home Office too announced emergency funding for the charity. The wake-up call to the charity had not come a moment too late.

Realising the financial security of the charity was paramount the co-founders handed over the day to day running of NMPH. Mary and Janet no longer work for the charity but their passion for issue of missing people continues. In September 2005, Paul Tuohy joined the charity as Chief Executive. Bringing with him a new direction and professionalism, the charity also reformed its Board of Trustees and started a considerable process of strategic planning.

New Beginnings (Today)

In May 2007 the charity underwent a re-brand to reflect the considerable strategic and operational changes it has gone through in the past two years. Today, the charity continues to find all types of missing people and support those left behind. Missing People formally supports the work of every UK Police force via a National Police Agreement. Thanks to the work of the dedicated staff teams at Missing People funding has improved considerably, including every Local Authority in England and Scotland contributing to the charity's work with looked after children. Missing People continues to develop its services including working with Vodafone foundation UK to expand the Runaway Helpline service. However, Home Office core funding is only 30% of our required income, and therefore Missing People still relies on donations to carry out its vital work and to continue to bring families and loved ones back together.

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