

# Lost and FOUND

Every year in Britain thousands of people go missing. One famous Richmond charity has the daunting task of finding them. George Cooper hears tales of discovery

Caroline Monk froze when she read the email. For a few minutes she sat, shaking. Then she composed herself and rang her mother. "Mum," she announced, "they've found him." The date was Monday, May 9th 2022, and it is one that Caroline will never



Caroline Monk

forget: the day that her missing brother, Gary, was found safe and well after 17 years.

Behind this human restoration drama was Missing People, the much lauded Richmond charity which Caroline had contacted back in December while trying desperately to track down her sibling. Together with her sister, Tania, and their 77-year-old mum, Carol, she had already spent the best part of two decades in search of him. Missing People was her last hope.

In some ways – to coin a tautological aphorism – it was *deja vu* all over again. For this was not Gary's first stint in the wilderness. Once before he had emerged from a lost world, to the family's unbridled delight.

"Growing up, I never knew I had a brother," explains Caroline, who works for a children's charity. "Mum fell pregnant in 1964 and was sent to a home in London for unmarried mothers. She was just 19 when she had her baby boy, and after six weeks he was taken away for adoption. She then married my father and had me and my sister.

"One day, when I was 19, the phone rang at home in Wakefield, here in West Yorkshire. My mother was almost frantic. The man on the other end of the line had asked her: 'Would you like to speak to your son...?'"

"She came upstairs and told me everything. I was in floods of tears, realising I had a brother. We waited for the phone to ring. When Gary called, it was just wonderful."

"I told my mum: 'Whatever happens, I promise I'll find Gary'"



Caroline with mum Carol (left)

For a few blissful years, Caroline and Gary were back in each other's lives. She took him to meet her friends at the pub and they wrote to each other regularly.

Then, in 2005, life took a traumatic turn when both Caroline and her mother were diagnosed with breast cancer. In the event, they both survived, but the strain on the family was enormous.

Caroline broke the news to Gary, but shortly afterwards he vanished.

"We had no idea what to think," says Caroline. "We didn't know if he was dead or alive. It was a terrible time, but I was determined. I told my mum: 'Whatever else happens, I promise I'll find Gary.'"

So for years they explored every possible avenue, but to no avail. Until they found Missing People.

Formerly the National Missing Persons Helpline, the charity is the only organisation in the country dedicated to helping missing people and their families. Its roots are well documented, planted by sisters Mary Asprey OBE and Janet Newman OBE in the soil of the Suzy Lamplugh affair: the high-profile disappearance of a 25-year-old local estate agent, who went missing after attending a viewing in Fulham, back in 1986.

In the wake of her vanishing, realising that there was no organisation through which one could trace a missing person, the sisters set up a helpline and ran it from their Richmond flat. In 1993 – the year that Suzy Lamplugh was officially declared dead, presumed murdered – it was formally registered as a charity.

Sadly, both Mary and Janet have now died, but their brainchild – renamed Missing People in 2007 – is alive and in vigorous health, providing free and confidential support to anyone affected by the pain of disappearance into silent thin air. Good job too: in the UK someone is reported missing every 90 seconds, which checks out at a total of 170,000 per year. Of those, around 70,000 are children.

Kirsty Hillman runs the charity's Lost Contact tracing service. Working alongside third parties, she helps families in whose case the police are not involved, or whose file they have closed. When Caroline came to her in December, hopes of finding Gary were slim. All Kirsty had to go on was his name, date of birth and last known address from 2005.

Exacerbating the problem was the fact that so much of the work is confidential. Strictly bound by data protection laws,

Missing People is barred from trying to find anyone through phone calls, emails or in-person visits to addresses. Nor can it pass details between family members. Instead, staff and volunteers are confined to combing through the available data – a significant handicap indeed.

For Kirsty, it boils down to detective work.

"It's surprisingly easy to disappear, if you think about it," she muses. "There aren't many ways of tracing someone if they are not particularly visible – on social media, for example. For me, that means hours of just sifting through the data."

"Typically, once we have an address, one of our partners will forward a letter from us. Even then, we have to be careful that we aren't tracing people who are choosing not to be in touch. So we are totally reliant on their replying to that letter."

Five months passed while Kirsty went in search of Gary. She kept in regular contact with Caroline and her family via telephone and email. For Caroline, however, these were dark, depressing times, plagued with uncertainty and grief.

"We had given up," she admits. "There were a lot of tears. We thought Gary had died and we were checking obituaries. But Kirsty kept reassuring us that she wouldn't stop looking."

Finally, in May, came the news of which Caroline had scarcely dared to dream: Kirsty had found her brother. And while the family remains in the dark as to

why Gary chose to disappear, the relief and joy of having him back is more than enough for now.

"We tried for years to find him, but we would never have known if he was even alive without Kirsty and Missing People – we can never thank them enough."

"We are having lovely email chats, keeping it light and letting Gary tell us gradually about the years we have been apart. We know from conversations that he has been through some very dark days, so finding each other could not have come at a better time. We lost him twice. Now we have found him twice as well."

A unique tale. And yet, says Kirsty, each case brings not only its own challenges, but its own rewards.

"I've been doing this for three years now and cases still surprise me. It can be really emotional."

"It's tough when you really want an outcome for a family and you've come to the end of the tracing without one. I've had to be the messenger of both loss and rejection, and that's hard. But I also get to pass on wonderful news, as in cases like Caroline's. To feel a part of that is fantastic."

"My message to families would be to try not to leave it too late. Life is short. If there is a possibility of positive reconnection, I would go for it."

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■ For help, advice or support, or to pass on info about a missing person, call or text Missing People confidentially on 116 000 or email: 116000@missingpeople.org.uk. Calls/texts are free. For further info or to donate: missingpeople.org.uk