

## Families struggling to come to terms with grief caused by missing loved ones can use new resource

Countless Geelong families are left bearing an emotional cross that comes with having a relative go missing — with no explanation why. These cases continue to baffle authorities.

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**BENDIGO TEENAGERS: Allan Whyte and Maureen Braddy are still missing. Pictures: supplied**

A new lifeline has been thrown to families struggling with the hardship of having a loved one go missing. The Missing Persons Advocacy Network has said that more than 53,000 people were reported missing in Australia last year, which was a rise of more than 30 per cent in reports since 2020.

Network founder Loren O'Keeffe said that while most people were found within a week, more than 400 people annually became long-term missing persons. "When a loved one goes missing there is no right way to deal with it," she said. "You often feel that no one understands what you're going through."

The network launched a therapeutic tool on Sunday, which marked the first day of national missing persons week. It is a set of 145 tangible cards, each printed with a sentiment from someone who has experienced what it's like to live with and survive long-term searching and "the unending not-knowing".

"You don't get to have a funeral, there's no grave to visit. It's lonely and isolating. It's important to know that others have gone through it," Ms O'Keeffe said.

The cards are called "The Hope Narratives".

Police have a number of missing persons investigations open in the Bendigo region, some with rewards attached for new information. One of the longest standing cases is that of missing teenagers Maureen Braddy and Allan Whyte. They vanished in 1968. A \$1 million reward has remained on offer for information. "In 2018 detectives issued a renewed appeal for information as it marked the 50th anniversary of their disappearance," a police media spokeswoman said.

"We understand the disappearance of the pair has been devastating to their families and police remain in discussion with them in relation to this investigation. Police continue to appeal for anyone with information about their disappearance, no matter how small that detail might seem, to come hope that this matter could be solved and their pair's families given some much needed answers."

The spokeswoman said that any new information received by Victoria Police in relation to their location would be thoroughly investigated. The Australian Federal Police announced in April that it had begun DNA analysis of a large number of unidentified remains, to find answers. Bone and teeth fragments - held in police and forensic facilities around the nation - are being sent to the AFP's dedicated forensics laboratory in Canberra for the National DNA Program for Unidentified and Missing Persons.

A national audit revealed that there were 850 sets of unidentified human remains held by police, some of which had been stored in morgues for up to 70 years. The DNA program's lead, associate professor Jodie Ward said it was vital that families provided police and forensic investigators with records and samples for comparison. "Along with recovering DNA profiles from the bones, we need DNA profiles from relatives of every missing person," Prof Ward said.

"We are also seeking the missing person's personal effects, medical samples, dental records, physical information and photographs." Prof Ward said it was particularly important for the program to be informed of individuals who went missing decades ago, including disappearances that were never formally reported to police. Family of long-term missing persons can register their interest to participate in the program by emailing [DNAProgram@afp.gov.au](mailto:DNAProgram@afp.gov.au).

As well as searching dental records and DNA profiles looking for matches, forensic specialists will use new tools to estimate an unidentified individual's year of birth and death, ancestral origin, hair and eye colour, facial appearance and genetic relatives.

The program was launched in August 2020 but human remains are now being tested for the first time. It has been funded under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, which allows the Commonwealth to redirect ill-gotten gains back to the community.

Anyone with information about the disappearance of Maureen Braddy and Allan Whyte can contact Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000.