

Janine Vaughan's sister helping other families of missing persons

By Jacinta Carroll

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Kylie Spelde, third from left, with members of the group who worked on the cards with the Missing Persons Advocacy Network. Photo: SUPPLIED

Kylie Spelde, the sister of missing Bathurst woman Janine Vaughan, is helping other families dealing with ambiguous loss by sharing her personal insight of her life in the last 21 years.

Janine was last seen alive after getting into a small to medium sized car in Keppel Street in the early hours of 2001, after a night out with friends. Since then, Kylie's life, and that of her family, has been turned upside down, as they try to come to terms with the loss of a much loved sister, daughter, aunt and friend.

She knows all too well the pain of living with the loss of a missing person, and this year became part of a new program run through the Missing Persons Advocacy Network offering support to other families going through the same thing, through a set of cards offering messages of hope and advice.

Called The Hope Narratives, the project is a collection of over 500 years' worth of lived experience and expertise on living with ambiguous loss, from 44 loved ones of missing people, from eight countries, both suspicious and non-suspicious cases, ranging in length of time missing from two to over 40 years.

The cards offer a world-first therapeutic language project that it is hoped will help loved ones left behind navigate ambiguous loss and know they're not alone.



Kylie Spelde, with her younger brother Adam Vaughan, standing where their sister Janine Vaughan was last seen alive, in the early hours of December 7, 2001.

They also give comprehensive, powerful insights to anyone interested in gaining an understanding of what it's like to live without knowing the whereabouts of a loved one.

Ms Spelde said she got involved through her friendship with Loren O'Keeffe, whose brother was a missing person for just over five years.

Two years after Loren's brother Daniel vanished, Ms O'Keeffe started the Missing Persons Advocacy Network to offer support for families going through the same pain they experienced.

Sadly Ms O'Keeffe's brother was located deceased in 2016, but since then she has continued her work as an advocate for other missing persons.

Ms Spelde said she met Ms O'Keeffe after reaching out to her and talking with her.

"She knew exactly what I was going through," she said. Through that contact, Ms Spelde became involved in The Hope Narratives, spending two full days in Melbourne with other families who have walked the painful path of missing persons.

She said spending time with these families was "both raw and amazing."

"We all knew each other's stories, and it was an amazing feeling to be in the same room with each and everyone there knowing exactly what you're going through or have been through."

Ms Spelde said having put up a brave front for the past 20 years while trying to find the truth of what happened to Janine, it takes a lot for her to get emotional or cry in public. But after hearing these people's stories, she said "she could not stop bawling".

She said she also found the experience empowering.

Ms Spelde said the idea for The Hope Narratives was born during COVID-19 when a lot of families of missing persons were stuck at home, thinking.

For the families of missing persons, spending too much time thinking can be overwhelming.

"With work, you can keep your mind busy, but when COVID struck, it was easy to just start thinking too much about what has happened."

She said with the support group, the message was there from people who understood each other, saying "it's okay, we're all here for one another". "I was really able to open up to total strangers," she said.

She said one of the participants had only recently had her sister go missing in January.

She said hearing her story "was both amazing and devastating."

"Every emotion she has gone through, that's how I was [when Janine went missing]," she said Ms Spelde said even now, despite dedicating the last 20-plus years to finding her sister, she worries about not doing enough to try and find Janine, and also worries what will happen when she herself dies. "I'm so scared of dying, because who is going to look for her then," she said.

"It's an awful feeling.

"We are trapped trying to find her." She said the cards were created as a support mechanism for other families. She said they contain hard truths, emotional truths and life experiences. "My past 20 years have gone into those cards," she said.

"Everything from not wanting to move on, to not wanting to put my life on hold. "All these emotions people with ambiguous loss feel and go through.

"We're just hoping they can be used as tools to help other families or anyone suffering ambiguous loss."

To support the Missing Persons Advocacy Network, go to www.mpan.com.au.