

The complicated grief when a family member goes missing

As National Missing Persons Week begins, the founder of an advocacy network for families reflects on the ambiguous loss experienced by those left behind.

By Martin McKenzie-Murray

AUGUST 1, 2022



Loren O'Keeffe, the founder of Missing Persons Advocacy Network. Image: Paul Jeffers

When a family member goes missing in a high-profile case, a surge of charlatans, cranks and hacks are stirred into action. Psychics will call you to pitch their gifts and share their hunches. Phone calls will come in the middle of the night, only to offer a sinister laugh or laboured breathing. Reporters will beg and badger you into yielding before their cameras. Well-meaning but thoughtless citizens will call in useless tips that will accumulate into a mountain of demoralising and contradictory intelligence.

It was July 2011 when 24-year-old Daniel O’Keeffe went missing from his family’s home in Geelong, Victoria. He was a martial arts instructor, and was due to begin a carpentry apprenticeship the following week. On the website his family made to help in his discovery, they described Dan as a “kind, gentle, friendly guy who’s respected by his students, admired by his friends and adored by his family”. He was also described as suffering anxiety and depression.

His older sister Loren O’Keeffe was 26 when he went missing. They were very close. She tells me: “On the very first day, when I was frantically running around Geelong, putting up posters on telegraph polls, I was thinking: Is this real?”

Dan’s disappearance surprised his whole family. It was out of character, they said. There were no outward signs. As such, the possibilities of what might have happened seemed almost infinite. Their imaginations produced painfully complex branches of outcomes – and they were lost in them for years.

“The not knowing is unbearable,” Loren says. “Families who don’t know where their loved one is, they’re dealing with a very unique type of trauma, which is called ambiguous loss. And psychologists around the world consider it to be the most traumatic type of loss and the most unmanageable form of stress, because you are constantly ruminating, which is exhausting. You can’t sleep. You’re not eating well. It’s near impossible to maintain any semblance of a healthy lifestyle when your loved one’s missing. And the longer that it goes on, your mental health is badly affected.”

In the months after the September 11 attacks when many people were still unaccounted for, Dr Pauline Boss, a pioneering family therapist who’d minted the phrase “ambiguous loss” decades before, described the condition in the medical journal *The Lancet*.

Ambiguous loss, she said, had two basic types. One where the beloved was physically absent, but psychologically present. The other type was a physically present person who was psychologically absent – a beloved made faint, distant or alien by severe depression, say, or dementia. In New York City, Boss wrote, both types could occur in the same home: “Families affected by the attack on the World Trade Center may have included a missing parent whose remaining partner is so depressed and preoccupied with the missing mate that children are ignored and feel as if they have lost both parents – one physically, the other psychologically,” she wrote.

Later in the piece, she described well the experience of the O’Keeffe family years later:

“Many family members experience feelings of helplessness, depression, and anxiety; relationship conflict; and somatisation. These negative effects occur for several reasons: ambiguity is confusing; people cannot make cognitive sense of the situation; and not knowing whether the family member will return prevents reconstruction of family and marital roles, rules, and rituals. Ambiguity destroys the customary markers of life

or death, so a person's distress is never validated. The community loses patience with the lack of closure, and families become isolated. [...]

Those who live reasonably well even when a loved one is missing do so by learning to hold two opposing ideas in their minds at the same time. They may believe that their loved one, though dead, is still with them in some sense; or they may move on with their lives while still holding out hope of finding the body. Such dialectical thinking is good because it begins the healing process even while confusion persists. The only way out of the despair is to hang on to two opposing ideas.”

But for many years, the O’Keeffe family were hideously suspended between two opposing ideas.

In 2011, Loren O’Keeffe established a public campaign, #DanComeHome, and its Facebook page would eventually acquire more than 70,000 followers – the largest campaign of its type in the world at the time. She also established a hotline, and kept the phone with her every hour of every day. She answered every call.

Late one night, about three years after Dan’s disappearance, that phone rang. When Loren answered, there was a man claiming to be her brother. “Suddenly, I was doubting my memory of Dan’s voice,” Loren remembers. “As he was speaking to me, I was thinking: Could this possibly be Dan? I mean, you’re that desperate and vulnerable, but I’m still angry at myself for even having that split second of doubt. Anyway, he went on to say, that, yeah, he was Dan. And I said, ‘Okay, well, what was the name of our first dog?’ And he couldn’t answer that correctly. So, I knew for sure that it wasn’t him. But it was heart-wrenching.”

Loren remembers another malicious call. It came at 5am, and promised information. “The call came on a date that had personal meaning for our family,” Loren says. “I don’t know if it was a coincidence, or if he had looked stuff up on the internet. I don’t know. But being that vulnerable to the entire public is pretty crushing and exhausting.”

Police traced the call to a prisoner in a Victorian jail.

For years, the nervous systems of Loren and her family were not only profoundly raw but publicly exposed – their exposure being one of the costs of trying to find Dan. The hotline, website and Facebook page were all channels they had to establish with the public, because the definitive lead could come from anywhere. They were desperate. And when you’re desperate, you’re exposed. And when you’re exposed, it’s hard to filter out the ghouls.

The ghouls included the media. Early in Dan’s disappearance, Loren had a tawdry encounter with a broadcast journalist. “It was one of my first experiences with the media,” Loren says. “Dan must have been missing for just a few days at this point. And I got a call from this slimy, dinosaur [TV] reporter, and he said: ‘You need to give me the exclusive. And if you don’t give me the exclusive, no other outlet is going to cover this story anyway.’ And

I was, you know, I was not sleeping. I was not eating. I was not thinking clearly. And this old man was threatening me over the phone, and telling me that if I didn't go with him then we wouldn't be able to reach the public, essentially. And so, I was torn. I didn't get a wink of sleep that night. And then the next morning, I decided not to give him the exclusive."

He showed up at Loren's apartment anyway – with a large film crew. Competing networks had also arrived. "He had the gall to offer his hand for me to shake, which obviously I did not," Loren says. "After that, I swore I would never work with him or his colleagues ever again."

Loren and her family still needed the media though. But Loren got wise. She became more cautious, more alert to the media's games. "On the news one night, it was just me blubbing," Loren says. "I don't think I got even one word about Dan, or the context, or how we needed the help of the public. And then soon after that, I realised I had to deny them the money shot [her weeping face] because that was the only thing that was being used. And we had really important key messages that we wanted to get out there. And so, I stopped falling for the emotional triggers and just had to work really hard at being composed for the media because I wanted to make sure that the important stuff actually made it to the final cut."

In that first month, the family read a headline that deeply upset them. It declared a "hunt" for Dan, and Loren thought: Is he a fugitive? An animal? Meanwhile, she was still trying to protect her parents from the shameless encroachments of "psychics" promising to tell them where Dan was.

Loren O'Keeffe was suffering a very complicated loss, and she was gripped by relentless anxiety. And she had also established a wildly successful public campaign, if success is measured by media attention and public engagement. Between the two was an awful irony: she had engaged the public, but was socially isolated. The search for Dan was all-consuming. She had quit her job and dedicated herself to the search full-time. Outside of her family, her experience was incommunicable. Some friendships faltered. Others ended.

Loren had also assumed the role of desperate detective, and in successfully engaging the public, she had also opened a tap for overwhelming volumes of spurious tips. After a few months, Loren says, she got better at filtering them.

In late 2011, Loren thought she'd detected a signal among the noise: Dan might be in remote Queensland, possibly living off the grid. There were a few reports of sightings she thought credible, and one location had been mentioned by a member of the public that had personal significance – and how could they have known that? "Dan's girlfriend was from the area, they'd been to this specific establishment, a lot of things lined up," Loren says. "And I was convinced enough to get on a plane and go there. And I spent two months up there, trying to find him. I was that convinced. But now, with hindsight, I think that I needed to believe in that. I feel like my brain was protecting my heart; I had to do everything I could to follow that lead because I needed the hope. I was

starved. It had been six months, and I needed something to keep going. And that was it ... I don't think it was a waste. I think I needed that to carry on."

And then, in March 2016, almost five years after his disappearance, Daniel O'Keeffe's body was found by his father in a cavity beneath the foundations of the family's house. He had taken his life.

In 2020, more than 51,000 Australians were reported missing. It was an enormous jump from the 38,000 reported the previous year, a number that had remained relatively stable for years. The "long-term missing" are defined by a disappearance of three months, but about 98 per cent of missing persons are found within a week. Precious few disappearances are related to crime. Overwhelmingly, it's an issue of mental health.

Despite this, Loren says the "the voice", or the popular framing of missing persons, is almost always provided by police. "Only a fraction of cases – like one to two per cent – pertain to crime," Loren says. "And yet this topic is categorised a lot as a police issue, when it's not. And there are lots of detrimental effects, I think, for families and missing persons themselves as individuals, because of that association.

"It's a health issue most of the time. So, we're trying to reframe that, which is no mean feat, because all through popular culture, missing persons are so closely associated with crime. But that doesn't add up here. That's not our situation. It's a public health issue."

There's something else you should know about Loren O'Keeffe. In 2013, while Dan was still gone, she established the Missing Persons Advocacy Network (MPAN), a charity to support people experiencing her own family's peculiar hell.

Almost 10 years later, it's still going – and is the only group like it in the country. And almost 10 years later, MPAN is still just Loren, plus a couple of generous volunteers. She now works closely with 75 families and, she says, police and mental health professionals are now referring others to her.

MPAN's support is both emotional and practical. While Dan was missing, Loren craved connection with families who were experiencing something similar. So, Loren spends time with these families, but also connects them with specialist therapists, and she will often function as an intermediary between families and the media. She has a network of legal and investigative experts who offer their talents pro bono to families. And she has a graphic designer who helps design social media assets, posters and billboards.

When Dan was found, Loren said her identity shifted from the grieving sister of a missing brother to the grieving sister of a suicide victim. She wondered briefly if she had any right to continue MPAN. "I had wondered if I'd lost my hat, or my licence for 'family of missing person', because that was no longer our current state," Loren says. "But it stays with you. And there was something interesting that I realised a few months ago. I attended a Missing People UK event online, and we all introduced ourselves and were talking in a group of

maybe 40 participants. And I remember writing down the names and making a note of those whose loved ones were no longer missing. And it was about 18 or 20 per cent of the people in attendance of this charity event who were no longer seeking services for their missing loved one, but were still very much connected to the cause. And that just reaffirmed that idea that missingness stays with you beyond found.”

MPAN is principally sustained by the fumes of Loren’s commitment. Occasionally there’s a modest grant, or some gratefully accepted donations. But there’s very little money. It’s very different to the United Kingdom, Loren says, where the equivalent charity receives millions in government funding and has a royal ambassador. Or Sweden, say, where the national missing persons charity is sponsored by Volkswagen. Loren rarely thinks about doing anything else, but nor is she certain about MPAN’s sustainability.

While talking to Loren, I thought about a clinical psychologist I’d spent hours interviewing earlier this year. He’d specialised in trauma, and had recently retired. He was also a Vietnam war vet with his own PTSD – his mates were killed and his body shredded in a mortar attack.

His later career, as a psych who worked with traumatised vets and first responders, provided a very substantial purpose – and his own experience allowed a rare rapport with his clients – but it also meant holding his hand very close to the flame. “I guess I knew it was getting unhealthy in a way,” he told me. “It was put to me a few times by therapists that I’ve seen myself, that I’ve worked my butt off basically, so that I might end up seeing eight or nine people a day, and spend weekends writing reports. And I think trying to help people sort out their own stuff is one of the things we use to try and stop looking at our own stuff.”

Loren also holds her hand close to the flame. Her work is soulful and it maintains, in its way, her closeness with Dan. But when I ask if her hand gets burnt, she says she doesn’t know what else she’d do instead. “I mean, I’ve thought about just moving to Mexico with my wife,” she says. “Just for six months. She’s Mexican. And I could potter around our house, renovate the kitchen. I fantasise about that sometimes. But I know there’s no one else to refer people to. And that’s the thing. Maybe if there was an alternative, I could step back for a day, or a week, or a month, or a year. But it’s just not feasible. Because I know that feeling of panic. And if I was told, ‘No, I can’t help you,’ and there was nowhere else that I could go, it would destroy me.”

So, Loren’s hand is held close to the flame. But she’s re-made a coherent view of the world and her place in it. And the pain has become bearable. “Even now, like almost 11 years on, sometimes I step back and see this and go: What, this actually happened? Like, the shock still hasn’t fully dissipated.

“But I think time is actually healing this, even though I never thought it would. And I’m so lucky to have had our resolution, because I’m reminded every day of what it’s like to have to continue with not knowing.”