

**INQUIRY INTO UNSOLVED MURDERS AND LONG-TERM
MISSING PERSONS CASES IN NEW SOUTH WALES
BETWEEN 1965 AND 2010**

Name: Ms Joni Condos

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To Portfolio Committee No 1,

Re: Enquiry into Unsolved murders and long-term missing persons cases in New South Wales between 1965 and 2010.

My name is Joni Condos. I am a registered Social Worker with over 20 years in the field, predominantly in crisis intervention and family violence. In May, 2019 I became involved in the case of a missing woman from Queensland, Marion Barter (aka Florabella Natalia Marion Remakel) as a private researcher.

Background

I write to you today with regards to Marion's case. I note here that Sally Leydon, Marion's daughter, and I have had access to all documents relating to this case as part of the Coronial Inquest commencing in 2021, so the below is based on documented fact and evidence, not opinion or assumptions. I am happy to provide all documents supporting the assertions below.

Sally has written a submission about the disappearance of her mother and the effects this has had on her life, so I don't intend to cover such ground here.

Marion Barter was born on 3rd of October 1945, she was a school teacher and mother of two children, Sally and Owen. Early in 1997, at age 51, Marion's life pivoted significantly, with very quick decisions made to resign from her job, sell her home, store her precious possessions and head off on a planned "trip of a lifetime" to the UK and Europe.

On Sunday 22nd June, 1997 her friend Lesley Loveday dropped Marion off at a bus station on Scarborough Street in Southport, Queensland where she traveled to Brisbane International airport to catch a plane. Marion had been living with Lesley since her house sale settled the previous month. She has not been seen since by family members or friends. Little did any of her family members know, but she returned to Australia a mere six weeks later.

The endless list of issues

Allegedly, Marion's last known activity was a transfer of a significant amount of money from her bank account on 15th October, 1997 at Byron Bay, NSW. The exact date of Marion's disappearance is not able to be determined because at the time she disappeared, Sally visited the local police at Byron Bay police station to report her missing and they did not investigate this case. The reason Sally went to Byron Bay police was because when Sally had not heard from her mother, she rang her bank, and was told that money was being withdrawn from her mother's bank account in Byron Bay, while Marion was meant to be holidaying in the UK and Europe. Sally was alarmed.

Marion was marked as an "occurrence only" by Byron Bay police, no further investigation, like a stolen bike or graffiti on a council bin. That is where it was left from a law enforcement point of view for 10 years all because local police accepted that "she was capable of this kind of behaviour".

Not satisfied with the police response to Sally, Marion's father, Jack Wilson, contacted the Salvation Army Family Tracing Service seeking help in locating Marion in late 1997. The Salvation Army told Jack that "bank security confirmed it was definitely your daughter, Marion, who walked into the bank and withdrew all her savings and spoke of starting a new life" and "bank security are like the police".

So, that was that.

In 2003, Sally reached out to the Salvation Army again to see if they could do a renewed search. They told her that there was nothing on file to suggest they had ever found her mother. By this time Jack, Marion's father, had passed away from cancer and her only brother, Owen, had taken his own life; it is thought that his mother's disappearance contributed to his decision. .

In addition, a retired investigator from Queensland Police Missing Persons Unit gave evidence at the inquest and proudly told the court "*yes, we liked to clean them up quick*" when asked about them locating Marion themselves in 1997. This investigator told the court she had never physically sighted Marion nor spoken to her, but she got this information from a staff member of the bank, so this was enough for a positive identification.

All unverified, false and misleading information as it turned out. Who was to say that it was Marion going into the bank at all.

The 1990s was a time when someone using their bank account was seen by police as a positive sign of life, that the person was alive, well and there were no fears for their safety. We now acknowledge that coercive control in these situations could mean that the person is not necessarily alive or well and there may be fears for their safety if a bulk of their money from the sale of their primary residence is withdrawn or transferred to another account. Hopefully times have changed for the better.

Since 1997, Sally felt something was just not right about the whole situation and over the years continued to advocate for her mother and interact with the media when the opportunity arose to try to get the story out with the conviction that "someone, somewhere, knows something". And indeed they did.

It has been a very long, arduous and traumatic journey, as I am sure you will read in detail in Sally's submission.

Silence. Constantly wondering what happened...

The case was re-opened in 2007 after Sally went to the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre, part of the Australian Federal Police. As an aside, do not be fooled by this name, they do not coordinate any aspect of missing persons in Australia, the states hold carriage of all the cases and they simply hold the public register of what information the states provide to be on the register. It is incomplete, inaccurate and does not reflect the whole scope of missing persons in Australia today.

The case sat back at the local Tweed-Byron Local Area Command (LAC) amongst their caseloads. The case was pushed from one officer to another over this time with little investigation and many attempts to close the case as seen in the documentation gained from NSW Police.

Mostly Marion's case did just sit, languishing in sporadic and pointless proof of life checks by the now disgraced NSW Missing Persons Unit, because her change of name had not been discovered by NSW Police until 2011, some 13 years too late.

So, all the proof of life checks up until that point were being checked in the wrong name, along with multiple errors where they have requests for incorrect names including a male “Warren Brown” (two of Marion’s previous surnames). They also listed Marion as arriving back into Australia via Sydney International Airport NSW but she arrived back into Brisbane Airport QLD, a totally different state.

After a few years of sporadic work between 2008 and 2011, the Officer in Charge (OIC) did “unofficial” checks with the Department of Immigration. The reason they had to be unofficial was that in a missing person’s case the NSW State police are limited in what Commonwealth agencies can provide them with due to privacy laws.

It was at this time the OIC was informed that Marion had travelled overseas in 1997 on a new passport in a new name, unknown to all of her family and friends.

Based on this information, it was the investigators firm view that Marion did disappear intentionally and that there were no fears for her safety or wellbeing. A view, an opinion, a hunch, which was baseless, as would become known in time.

So frustratingly, Marion’s case was closed again in November 2011, based on a set of assumptions made by the NSW Police Investigator at the time including the above. Marion had never been sighted or spoken to by anyone in authority.

The NSW State Coroner and the then head of NSW Missing Persons Registry both found this to have been incorrectly handled by NSW police at the time and that they should never have closed Marion’s case in 2011, nor listed her as ‘located’.

The discovery - the good, the bad and the ugly

Fast forward to 2019, Sally Leydon went public with the search for her mum, which resulted in Australia wide publicity. Sally had kept at it over the years prior, but finally someone sat and listened to Sally and heard that there was something seriously wrong that needed more investigation. As a result, a true crime podcast called *The Lady Vanishes* was launched by Channel 7 News.

This was how I heard about this case for the first time, as a listener, and late one night I located a “lonely hearts” advertisement in the French-Australian newspaper

called 'Le Courrier Australien' while searching for the surname Remakel, the same name Marion had changed her name to back in 1997.

"MONSIEUR, 47 years old, single, tall, dark , sober, non-smoker, academic, owns multiple properties, an intellectual, speaks multiple languages, warm, motivated and with high morals, searching for a free hearted lady, B.C.B.G, with a view to a permanent relationship and marriage: Mr. F. Remakel, Box L51, LENNOX-HEAD, NSW 2478. Tel. (066) 86 4788".

Marion had changed her name to Florabella Natalia Marion Remakel by deed poll just 5 weeks prior to leaving on her trip of a lifetime. Same name, and so unusual that no one else in Australia has this name, except one other person, the mysterious Mr. Remakel of Lennox Head, NSW.

I reflected, between March and June 1997, Marion had sold her home, left her car with Sally, resigned from her teaching job, gifted some precious pieces of antique furniture to her children and put all the rest of her belongings into storage at an unknown location telling Sally, *"if I decide to stay overseas and teach, I will just get you to ship them over to me"*.

All a bit rushed. All a bit odd. All very out of character.

However, at the time I located this lonely-hearts advertisement, NSW Police thought otherwise. When submitting a copy of the advertisement via Crimestoppers in June 2019, the investigator on the case quickly dismissed it. In his eyes, Marion was missing by choice and there were no fears held for her safety or wellbeing, not one positive sign of life and no digital footprint for Marion since October 15th, 1997, when her funds from the sale of her house were transferred out of her bank account. The case (still) inactive, closed, shelved, cold as ice. Nothing to see here, just like 24 years ago. The COPS event reads "they think this bloke Remakel had something to do with it". And that was where, at this stage, the investigation by NSW Police into the true identity of Mr. F. Remakel ended.

The investigator did contact me via phone later in the year, I had everything ready that I had discovered to discuss with him, but he explained that he was just calling to clarify how I had located this advertisement and told me 'oh okay, well this search capability wasn't around back then, so it wouldn't have made a difference to

the investigation anyway”. He appeared relieved. And that was the end of that. I never heard from him again.

The author of this advertisement was finally located by another private researcher in January 2021, almost 2 years later, based on the phone number noted in the lonely-hearts ad I had found. Police had told Sally the records didn’t exist anymore, so they were not able to locate or connect the number to anyone. However, The phone number in the local phonebook was attached to a business, “Ballina Coin Investments Pty Ltd” which essentially led us to Frederick de Hedervary as one of the directors, whose current legal name is Ric Blum. This is the last of his 51 known aliases.

At the same time, the Coronial investigator from the NSW Unsolved Homicide Unit had also located the identity of Ric Blum a few months earlier in October 2020. It took until June 2021, eight months later, for NSW Police to approach and interview him, at the time 82 years of age. Once again, no sense of urgency in a 24 year old case.

Ric Blum admitted to placing and responding to personal ads from women both here in Australia and overseas over many years. He initially denied knowing Marion, but then, likely after reading up about the case, which was being widely reported in the media and online, came back to the Ballina Police Station the next day telling police not only did he know her, but he in fact had also had a secret affair with her, in 1997, just before she disappeared.

Did he know Marion - yes.

Did he know her in 1997 – yes.

Did he spend time in secret with her at her home – yes.

Was he having an extramarital affair with her when she sold her home – yes.

Ric Blum admitted that he had stolen Fernand Remakel’s identity, a lawyer from Luxembourg, the ex-husband of a lover from the 1980s. Ric Blum then obtained a fraudulent Queensland Driver’s License from Queensland Roads in this name in 1984.

Ric Blum’s stolen identity: Fernand Nocholas Marie Remakel - F.N.M.R

Marion’s new name: Florabella Natalia Marion Remakel - F.N.M.R

Marion did not mention any of this to her family or friends. Not about him. Not about the name change. Not about the fact that she was leaving permanently to live in Luxembourg according to her outgoing and incoming passenger cards, which I obtained from the National Archives of Australia.

It is a complex web of deception, coercive control and manipulation.

About this man of many names

He is currently known as Ric Blum. Blum was born in Belgium in 1939. He entered Australia legally in 1969 on a tourist VISA, left again, was jailed in France for four years for a raft of convictions, returned to Australia illegally using his brother's passport in 1974. Ric Blum, then known as Willy Wouters, changed his name here in NSW via deed-poll, married a young 19 year old Australian girl who he met on a cruise ship, gained Australian citizenship illegally and then went on to claim an Australian invalid pension for the past 50+ years.

Big claims you say, however this is all spelt out in Blum's extensive immigration file, which I gained from the National Archives of Australia in 2021. An extensive criminal history in Europe, which is all detailed in his file from Belgian investigators, yet he is still here, living happily in Northern NSW, as an Australian citizen since 1976, 57 years.

The Department of Home Affairs doesn't appear to be interested in pursuing him after I reported Blum to them with the file in 2021, five years ago. I followed up repeatedly over the years with no result, just the usual letter thanking me for my correspondence. Again, privacy. Again, shut doors, no result.

What is so significant about the series of blunders by the then Department of Citizenship and Immigration is that if Blum had been deported as they themselves suggested should be the case, from Australia in 1980, Marion would likely never have met him. Nor the other known and unknown victims both here and in Europe. Another bungle, another issue with state borders and minimal cross-border communication. It is there in black and white - they lost the file in transit between Queensland and Canberra. A lucky break for Ric Blum, even with ASIO and Interpol actively seeking him for outstanding warrants in Europe.

This issue above has been covered extensively by National Crime Correspondent of the Australian newspaper, David Murray, if you wish to know more about this set of circumstances. This was front page news at the time. David then wrote a series of articles about different aspects and other victims in this case over some months. It was a mammoth effort.

Recent efforts and disappointments

The inquest into Marion's disappearance commenced in June 2021. The NSW Unsolved Homicide Squad was engaged to investigate the case for the coroner, and we held high hopes of a resolution after reviewing the Brief of Evidence. Ric Blum was on the stand as a person with significant interest for a full nine days. Ric Blum admitted to knowing Marion and having a relationship with her just before she disappeared in June 1997 but denied anything to do with her disappearance.

After over one million tax payers dollars were spent on the inquest, Marion's disappearance was marked as an 'open but inactive' case with the NSW Unsolved Homicide Team (UHT).

So many legitimate leads left unexplored from the inquest , which were time limited based on the age of witnesses, many who have now died.

One such lead was that the car dealer who sold Blum a 'rust bucket' car in August 1997 who recalled a woman with black hair in the front seat of the car. This witness was noted in the Brief of Evidence but the investigators attempted to call the phone number that was disconnected, they failed to look further.

This witness was never contacted by NSW Police as part of their investigation, I located him through a basic web search and contacted him after the inquest. His information was vital. Sadly, he has now passed away having not been contacted by investigators to gain a formal statement.

In her findings Magistrate Teresa O'Sullivan State Coroner stated:

"I make the following further findings regarding Mr. Blum:

- 1) That he has further knowledge about the circumstances of Marion's travel overseas.
- 2) That he has further knowledge of his relationship with her in the months prior to her disappearance.
- 3) That he has further knowledge of her circumstances following her return from overseas.
- 4) That he has further knowledge of the withdrawals and transfer of her money; and
- 5) That there is a sufficient basis for a finding that he was and is deliberately unwilling to divulge this further knowledge to the Court."

This led to this recommendation to the New South Wales Commissioner of Police:

"I recommend that the NSW Commissioner of Police cause the investigation into the death of missing person Florabella Natalia Marion Remakel, formerly known as Marion Barter, to be referred to or remain within the State Crime Command Unsolved Homicide Team for ongoing investigation, review, and monitoring."

This was the NSW Commissioner of Police's response:

"In response to the State Coroner's recommendation, this matter has been referred to the NSW Police Force Unsolved Homicide Team for further review and evaluation'.

No "ongoing investigation". Removed. Just review and evaluation.

The NSW Police Unsolved Homicide Team Standard Operating Procedures state that:

"Review of all Unsolved Homicides in this category will be undertaken where possible 3 to 5 years after an inquest has been held, or at the direction of the Commander Homicide Squad."

Meanwhile, Blum is currently living a charming life on the coast in Northern NSW, despite four witnesses appearing at the inquest along with their contemporaneous police reports about alleged fraud and theft against them each individually after falling in love with Blum and engaging in a relationship with him.

These women came from different states of Australia, Belgium and Portugal. All with very similar stories to tell. No charges against Blum, no justice for any of these women now spanning 40 years. Tea chests full of expensive items are gone, personal identification documents such as passports, birth certificates and power of attorney documents gone. Naked illicit images taken to blackmail after consuming wine that made them feel “out of space”. Houses sold. Cars sold. Money taken out of their bank accounts – Ric Blum’s admitting to using a bank debit card, brazenly walking up to the counter to withdraw cash. Leaving one lady stranded in Bali. Insisting they dye their hair blonde. Leaving one lady stranded in the UK with no money. Life savings gone.

But they are all still here to tell the tale you may think. Yes, that is correct, they are. The difference being that they all told someone about Blum, he met some family members and friends on the insistence of the women. Someone who cared about them knew. Unfortunately, Marion didn't tell anyone about Ric Blum.

To add, no victims have come forward prior to Marion, even after all the publicity. Has there been any efforts by NSW Police to see if there were more potential victims fitting a predictable pattern prior to Marion ? Have they looked at Blum’s travel movements, which also have a pattern and suggest further offending spanning over 30 years using multiple identities including the 10 legal passports in different names the Australian government allowed him to have.

A postcard to a family member of Ric Blum in the early 2000s where he is supposedly onshore in Australia but the postcard was postmarked from Bali in his distinctive handwriting ? So, how did he get to Bali without using his Australian passport ?

Result: monitoring and review only after 3-5 years.

That's it. Furthermore, no perjury charges for the lies, fantasies and fabrications told by Ric Blum on the stand on a daily basis. In three years time, Blum will likely be dead, if he isn't already.

The crux of the issue

It should not take a random person in another state sitting on their couch one night surfing around publicly available and searchable databases to identify a person of interest in a long-term missing person's case from 1997.

It should not take another random person to hand scan local phonebooks to locate this man's phone number and following this, their identity.

I shudder to think about how many other cases there are where the answer, or a large piece of the puzzle, is just sitting there in plain sight waiting to be discovered by a dedicated investigator.

Sally had to really fight tooth and nail to even gain basic information on her mother's disappearance, pages and pages of black with all the endless redactions, even emails she had sent NSW Police herself were redacted.

Over the years, Blum used every available loophole, confidence trick, state border and the loneliness of others to get away with multiple crimes in both NSW and Queensland. Blum denied dabbling in a business selling coins and although he had a business name and later sold, he claimed he never worked, so he had 24/7 to perfect his fantastical strategies and manipulations of others. He traveled extensively all over the world over 50 years even though he was on a full disability support pension plus a Belgian invalid pension and his wife, Diane has also been receiving a carers benefit, never working herself, since 1986.

Embarrassingly for NSW Police, he was findable in 1997 had they just made enquiries about Marion's travel movements, unearthed the change of name and searched Queensland records, the state where she changed her name. He had a "genuine" Queensland Driver's License in the name Remakel, obtained fraudulently in 1983. This suggests that back in 2011 once Marion's change of name was discovered, the police did not search for the name Remakel to look for Marion or else this record would have been located. I find this astounding. To me this is a huge

error of judgement and a failure of basic process of both NSW and Queensland Police between 1997 and 2011.

Where is the urgency ?

Back to the present day. Ric Blum knows more about Marion's disappearance as asserted by the Coroner based on the facts of this case that he has not adequately explained :

1. Marion changed her name to match the initials and surname of an alias he admitted to using a few years prior and one which he still held a fraudulent driver's license in 1997.
2. Marion's money was withdrawn close to his home in Northern NSW, not in Brisbane, not in the UK, not in Europe - 20 minutes from his family home at the time.
3. Marion's Medicare card was used in Grafton, NSW, again close to his home.
4. Ric Blum's connection and familiarity with south-east England where he also took another woman, Janet Oldenburg, where Marion spent at least a month of her short trip overseas of a year-long holiday and close proximity to where he once lived in the 1980s in Burwash.
5. Ric Blum was Marion's last known sexual/romantic partner, with this relationship supposedly ending in May 1997, and she came back into Australia "married" , as noted on her incoming passenger card, a mere five weeks later. If not Ric Blum, who else would she have claimed to have married using the same name ?
6. Like another woman, Ghislaine Danlois from Belgium, Marion packed her precious belongings in tea chests and Blum himself places these tea chests at his home in Wollongbar where he stated she asked him to house them for her for a few weeks. Neither Ghislaine's or Marion's belongings have resurfaced.
7. Throughout Ric Blum's statements and evidence at the coronial inquest, he placed multiple alternative partners in Marion's life at the time of her disappearance, some bordering on the ridiculous - a Pilot/Naval officer who she was

travelling on the Orient Express with and buying a school with who visited Blum's home in his full pilots uniform complete with a white hat, the tall Muslim Moroccan or Algerian man in her car, the motorbike at her home who he assumed was from an outlaw motorbike gang, having an affair with multiple students fathers at the school she taught at, multiple male attendees at the Korean "bacchanalia" banquet on the Gold Coast, where Mr. Blum suggested she could have gone to Europe via South Korea because of these men's connections.

None of the above facts have been explained by Ric Blum to any degree. He denies it all. These are compelling facts that he indeed does know more about the disappearance and suspected death of Marion and they do merit further investigation by law enforcement after the inquest.

A few more selective issues to raise

I wish to also raise a few other issues outside of Marion's specific case that I think need further acknowledgement, probing and airing in the public space.

Management of unidentified human remains in Australia

Another alarming issue I wish to raise is about how unidentified remains are managed in New South Wales. As part of this case, the possibility that Marion was amongst the large numbers of unidentified remains being held by forensic services across Australia was of course considered including being buried in an unmarked grave. We set about trying to clarify this issue and ensure that if Marion was amongst their holdings that she could be identified.

This is a long and arduous account, but worth reading carefully.

In early 2021, Sally was advised that her DNA sample given in 2010 was not actually ever tested against any unidentified remains at that point as it cannot be used as it was taken as a "voluntary sample". This was all over the media when the then Manager of the NSW Missing Persons Registry, was urging families of missing people to come into a "pop-up" where they organised to get samples taken. Then, she was advised that in fact her sample could be run against all known unidentified human remains (UHR) in the system, so she did not need to drive to NSW from

Queensland to attend one of these “pop-ups” at all. There was no offer to give her sample in Queensland where she resided.

Around this time, the findings in the Ursula Barwick inquest were delivered. Essentially, it took a visual match from a NSW police officer, Adam Marsh, to resolve this five years later, not DNA as her remains were buried without having had samples taken. I find this fact astounding and shocking. Think about that for a minute. Your loved one goes missing. You report to them, but it is deemed no further investigation and therefore not listed as a missing person. Their body is found. Their body is then buried in a destitute grave with four to five others stacked on top with no DNA taken. The files are scant and not electronically available even in 2026.

From ABC News 26th April 2021:

“In 2010 Senior Constable Adam Marsh found a file from the coroner’s court that was not on file with NSW Police. It was about a teenage girl who’d died in a car crash in 1987, and had been listed as unidentified, but was known as “Jessica Pearce”.

When he looked at the crash scene photographs, he soon recognized a resemblance to the photos on file of missing teenager Ursula Barwick. The dates and locations also matched up.

He raised his suspicions with his superiors at the time, but he couldn’t establish proof and did not feel supported to pursue his hunch.

Counsel assisting the coroner: “Why not ask the officer in charge of Ursula’s case, Detective Noble?”

Senior Constable Marsh: “I’d already been ridiculed by the people I was working with about what I thought. Detective Noble, who is busy working on other cases, is going to say, ‘Why are you wasting my time?’”

Five years later in 2015, when he saw a photo of Ursula he’d never seen before, Senior Constable Marsh raised his suspicions again with his superiors, even though he had moved on from the Missing Persons Unit”.

This rang alarm bells in relation to Marion's case. From Marion's NSW Police file:

"Monday August 17th 2009: Adam Marsh to Duncan King requesting photo, dental, description, DNA for possible ID. Requested to see if a maternal female relative was willing to provide DNA".

This was the last of any correspondence about this issue. Did the same thing happen in Marion's case? What was the result of this inquiry? To this day, Sally does not know what the result was or and this was never clarified as part of the inquest proceedings.

In 2021, I found a story about a sample that was sent to Orchid Cellmark in 2009:

The Sun Herald dated 19th July, 2009 mentions, *"remains located near Ballina on the north coast"* and that *"the Unsolved homicide squad police believe the north coast bones, found at an undisclosed site, may be those of missing 31-year-old Lennox Head mother-of-two Bronwyn Joy Winfield, last seen at her home in 1993."*

The newspaper also states that the human remains were sent to the Orchid Cellmark Laboratory in Dallas, Texas, in 2009 by now retired NSW Detective Damien Loone.

After reading this, Sally sought clarification from NSW Police. There have been so many changing stories about this sample from both NSW Police and NSW Health which are illustrated in the documents gained for the inquest proceeding.

We simply do not accept that a forensic sample could be sent out of the country to Texas, USA only 14 years ago and no chain of evidence/custody can be located, no documentary evidence in the NSW Police system, no results noted from this sample anywhere in the NSW police or NSW Health system?

A new COPS event needed to be created in 2023 by the current NSW Police Investigator about this bone mentioned in the media. According to NSW Police this issue has been concluded. A sample was located, apparently, firstly as a teaching specimen, a skull left over from an autopsy, no providence available, re-numbered to being located in 2005 and all documentation lost/missing/unavailable? Why

would a university specimen or a teaching sample or a skull “leftover” from an autopsy be sent to Orchid Cellmark for testing?

Vanessa Rolfe, Sergeant, Disaster Victim Identification Ante Mortem Coordinator stated that *“back in 2005 an unknown person in Forensic Medicine decided to introduce a new numbering system and re-numbered many outstanding remains and did not keep the original number. This has caused the project major issues with tracking down original documentation and reports as the ‘05’ depicts the remains were admitted to the mortuary in 2005, however as you have stated this skull was located in 1997”*. I find it astounding that a pathologist can simply re-number samples.

So, how we see it, is that there is no conclusive proof that the above skull was the sample sent to Orchid Cellmark, Texas in 2009.

In addition to this, on 1st February 2021 State Crime Commander Acting Assistant Commissioner Darren Bennett said the collection of DNA samples was a fundamental function of missing persons, unidentified bodies and human remains investigations.

“Currently in NSW, we have 769 long-term missing people and approximately 330 unidentified bodies or human remains cases, with just over 100 unidentified bodies or partial human remains physically on hand with NSW Health,” he said.

“In a joint-agency project between the NSW Police Force and forensic and scientific experts from NSW Health Pathology on the Human Skeletal Remains Initiative (HSRI) - direct DNA profiles for all unidentified bodies and human remains on hand have been developed”.

So, does this mean that only those “on hand” have been developed? This needs further clarification and exploration by this enquiry. Where exactly are all the unidentified human remains in this state and have they all been run against DNA of family members of missing persons in NSW ?

In addition, Tony Ryan, the brother of missing person Marica Ann Ryan, stated that he was told by NSW Police that there were thousands of remains buried in *unmarked graves all around Australia that had no biological samples taken prior to*

burial and that his sister may be one of them. To seek to clarify this, I wrote to the National Missing Person's Coordination Centre in August last year.

I asked this question:

"Is it accurate that there are multiple deceased people, who are unidentified, buried in unmarked graves in all states of Australia? At what year did it commence that people located deceased had samples for DNA collected from them?"

The response I received was:

"The national case audit coordinated by the National DNA Program for Unidentified and Missing Persons (Program) has recorded some unidentified human remains (UHR) that have been previously interred without having been identified first and/or biological samples having been collected and stored for future forensic testing. However, the Program does not collect any specific case or burial details for these individuals. As practices related to the handling of UHR, biological sample collection, exhumations etc. differ between jurisdictions, and have likely changed over the years, any specific questions would need to be directed to the relevant jurisdiction".

Surely, we, as a civilized society, can do better than that.

Essentially, the now defunded and defunct National DNA Program for Unidentified and Missing Persons was not across the location and identification status of unidentified human remains in Australia, it was left to the States to decide what they do, how and when they do it. And now the national program has closed. We are left with each state doing their own thing with no national oversight. It failed.

In addition, unlike in the US and the UK there is no national register of unidentified human remains, this has never existed in Australia, so no ability of the general public to assist in solving cases as is done in America and the UK amongst other first world countries.

It concerns me that there are hundreds of family members out there, their lives turned upside down by the absence of a loved one, families breaking down and the deep scars of ambiguous loss always present. When in these long-term missing

person's cases their family members could be buried, unidentified and not present in any records because the authorities have not kept appropriate records, or lost them, have not taken DNA samples, have not sought dental records in a timely way thus they were destroyed as has occurred in Marion's case.

If Marion's dental records were sought in 1997, the dentist may have mentioned to police that he was the one who signed Marion's passport application indicating her change of name, as this would have been fresh in his mind.

It's time to acknowledge that the gatekeeping is not helping in long term "cold" missing persons cases.

When I first started researching in 1995, information was very hard to access, you needed to physically go to libraries and archival institutions and physically search through newspapers and other records.

Back then it was almost exclusively Law Enforcement that would solve these cases. Now there is so much available online for any person to locate. I acknowledge that this change means huge challenges and an increased workload for law enforcement in sifting through the avalanche of (mostly) useless information generated in a case and submitted to police. Also, accurate information being out there for a person of interest to take advantage of, such as websleuths and armchair detectives creating comprehensive timelines and elaborate alternative theories which ultimately help perpetrators, as it demonstrably did in Marion's case.

However, the amount of solid information that has been gained by the private research community in Marion's case over the past 7 years is simply astounding. The issue is then submitting it into the proverbial black hole that is Crimestoppers. It is most definitely a one-way street, despite submitting many of the key pieces of information used in the Coronial Inquest in Marion's case.

I would like to see NSW Police grapple with this new era and find ways to proactively work with other interested responsible parties in a collaborative way. The reality is that NSW Police are resource and time poor, they do not have hours to be chasing down every lead or diving down every rabbit hole to possibly come up with something, but likely nothing to move the case forward.

The media also has its challenges. It is usually the case as a family member of a missing person you are left relying on media, journalists and podcasts. This industry is very much a mixed bag ethically, especially as it is now revenue generating and has become very commercial as print media has almost vanished. Large media conglomerates have pivoted. The energy expended and re-traumatization caused to families having to endlessly give the media some sensational tidbit of information in order to have the media show any interest, or to be so distressed as to push the “trauma-porn” buttons is not okay. It's not ethical. It adds to trauma inflicted in the first place. Seeking media attention also can interfere with family relationships and at times, it forces family members of a missing person to basically blow up their support systems in order to try to get the word out there and find their missing loved one. This is what has happened to Sally.

In Marion's case the integrity of the case has always been paramount. The issue is that as a daughter you are stuck in the middle, between police and the media. With active media involvement, the police told Sally as little as possible, and then the media tried to extract information from her, even though Sally could not legally disclose it. The number of times both Sally and I have experienced secret recording devices casually left on cafe tables, weird beeps during phone calls with journalists and podcasters is significant. It adds to the paranoia, and adds to the emotional load of an intense time. It would be really helpful to have some ethical guidelines for the media in working with family members of missing and murdered loved ones.

Who is representing us ?

The final issue to raise is with the political process. Over the years I have written to numerous members of parliament about this case on all sides of parliament, on both a state and federal level. I have received the standard replies from the offices of ministers, despite following up numerous times over many years. This issue has sat squarely in all the politicians' portfolios I attempted to connect with. I have been disappointed by their dismissive responses and their total lack of interest and curiosity. Sally has flown interstate to meet with various politicians over the years too. Again, very little traction. It is really disheartening to not be able to even have a dialogue with people whose job it is to assist the communities they represent.

Improvements to consider

1. Legislate for a legitimate national register of all missing persons profiles and unidentified human remains and/or associated items like many other western nations do such as NAMUS in the US and the National Crime Reporting Agency database in the UK. So many cases could be solved by releasing this information and enabling volunteers to get to work. At the moment, there is no access to any information other than media and public documents, and the police hold the sole decision making power as to whether they publicise any aspect of a case. As we have seen in Marion's case, it was the community who located the information required to move the case forward, not police and we needed to work hard to even get police to look into the information once I had submitted it.

2. Create a dedicated genetic genealogy volunteer service that can assist in matching unidentified human remains and reported missing persons and/or perpetrators. A retired family member of mine does this in the US because she cannot do this here in her own country and has solved many cases with the dedicated teams over there.

3. Review all documentation relating to unidentified people who were buried in paupers graves in NSW without DNA or dental impressions on file and match to current missing persons' cases using the data that is available using the best techniques. Consider exhuming those where there is a possibility of a match to test for DNA. I suspect this exercise will unearth some shocking results based on internal correspondence seen during Marion's coronial inquest, especially in cases of females deemed to have been suicide and remains are unidentified. There is a possibility of many more linked cases along the NSW coast.

4. Look closely at Northern NSW and the unique challenges this area holds in regards to missing and murdered women, being that Queensland law enforcement and resources are closer but largely unavailable, this area operates very differently from southern NSW with many locals telling me it was "literally the wild west and lawless" back in the 1980-90s. Specialists from NSW Police services had to travel up from Sydney and countless Coroners have found significant time delays and glaring errors in cold cases in that area of NSW. Workload in the 1990s-2000s has been specifically mentioned to me by ex-police in this area, where it was simply impossible to do all the jobs properly or at all. This was also in

the media at the time, with senior police calling for more resources for the Tweed-Byron LAC.

5. Consider a Memorandum of Understanding process or similar between law enforcement and volunteer skilled researchers to value add to these cold cases and find the information the police need without jeopardizing the case. In Marion's case there was a significant level of open source information generated from many private researchers like myself that police would not have had the resources to fund because of the sheer volume of work completed and the micro nature of the work.

6. Consider the use of new technologies in cold cases for case review and investigation. Some of the investigative pathways suggested by an AI Evidence review using machine learning that I used have been vital in the leads we have generated for investigating police in Marion's case, especially recently where it has gotten a lot better and faster.

- ➔ **Forensic Investigative Genetic Genealogy (FIGG)** : Unlike traditional DNA profiling (which requires a direct match in a criminal database), FIGG uses hundreds of thousands of genetic markers to find distant relatives (like 3rd or 4th cousins). Family Trees: Investigators use these matches to build extensive family trees, narrowing down suspects through historical records and public data.
- ➔ **Artificial Intelligence (AI) for Evidence Review** : Rapid Evidence Review: Tools like Soze can review 27 complex cases in just 30 hours—a task that would take a human investigator roughly 81 years. Pattern Recognition: AI systems like Valcri scan millions of police files to suggest connections between cases and identify traits of a serial offender that human analysts might miss.
- ➔ **DNA Phenotyping** : This process can analyze DNA to predict the physical appearance (such as eye color, hair color, skin tone, and face shape) and ancestry of an unknown suspect, providing a physical profile that can narrow down suspects.
- ➔ **Digital Evidence Management and Data Analysis:** Machine learning is used to analyze vast amounts of data, such as old archived documents, phone

records, and digital evidence, to find previously undetected patterns, connections, or inconsistencies.

→ **Digital Forensics and Social Media Analysis:** With many older cases, investigators are now able to re-examine digital footprints, social media profiles, and online activity that did not exist at the time of the original investigation, providing new avenues for leads.

→ **Digital Breadcrumbs and Geospatial Data:** This includes geographic profiling, LIDAR and remote sensing and predictive mapping.

It may be advantageous to see how much of this modern technology is being currently utilized by NSW Police in their unsolved homicide cases.

Conclusion

In closing, as an observer of this situation from the outside, how family members and the next of kin are treated by the process of attempting to locate their loved one was truly horrific to watch. Even after appearing as a witness professionally over many years in my various roles, it truly surprised me how brutal the system is for family members fighting for the answers to what has happened to their loved one, especially if they bring a large part of the answer to the police themselves. Immediately, the police are defensive, on notice and actively insular.

There is very little care, concern or support for the families in the missing space and so many closed doors – correspondence simply ignored, no response, not even an acknowledgement that they have received the information that may have taken weeks or months to develop. I wonder if people working in the system ever stop to think that for someone living with ambiguous loss, adding more ambiguity to their minds by simply not responding at all or only giving half an answer compounds the trauma for that person.

I heard many times over this journey with Sally, the Police saying, “it’s not a crime to go missing”, in other words, it is not our responsibility as we are law enforcement. They are right, it is not, but Police need to acknowledge that until they have sighted and spoken with a person and confirmed that they are alive and well, it is their responsibility to actively investigate the circumstances and not leave it up to

families to do the lions-share, over years, decades and lifetimes. Many long-term missing persons cases are in fact unsolved homicides and that is squarely in the police's remit.

It is too high a price to pay for their own health, wellbeing, relationships, and even financial security. In some cases, the search strips these families of their life savings after spending thousands of dollars on ground searches, private investigators, lawyers, solicitors and even psychics. Funds that could be used to search for their loved ones are unable to be released until they go through probate, and for that they need a death certificate. Another huge hurdle.

In addition to this, opening their lives to the media means opening their lives to the trolls, the fantasists, the stalkers and harassment from members of the public who feel entitled to know every last detail of their lives, as I have observed over the past five years. That has been horrific in itself. I have been stalked online myself, doxxed, people openly attempting to locate where I live. We have increased security in our home because of this case and some associated with it.

As a member of the Australian community, I am shocked, dismayed and disillusioned by the way the cases of missing and murdered women in NSW have been managed. I hope like hell that I never personally have to interact with the current system on behalf of a family member or friend who is murdered or goes missing.

I apologise for the 23 pages it has taken me to attempt to explain this experience and the jumping around, excessive detail and repeats. I really hope you get somewhere and the outcomes really change the current state of affairs in the unsolved murders and long-term missing persons cases in New South Wales.

If you require clarification of any issues raised, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Kindest regards,

Joni Condos, Victoria, Australia