

David (below, right) was often homeless and lived in the woods, says his sister Sue D'Agostino (right).

CASE CLOSED

Finding LOST LOVED ONES

A national website helps solve longtime missing persons cases—and gives families a chance to say a final goodbye

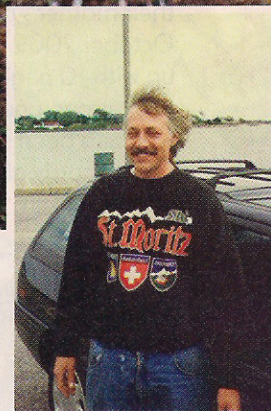
BY NICOLE WEISENSEE EGAN

Each year some 4,400 new John and Jane Does are added to medical-examiner databases. While the majority are soon claimed, thousands are not. There is now hope: the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (namus.gov), which matches unidentified remains with missing-persons cases. “This takes the local, fragmented system and puts it in one place,” says John Laub, director of the National Institute of Justice. Here three families discuss how NamUs helped end their anguish.

A BROTHER IS AT PEACE

David Brennesholtz Last Seen: February 2008

Diagnosed with schizophrenia when he was 19, David Brennesholtz drifted from mental hospitals to rooming houses; at times he even lived in the woods in New York. But he stayed in touch with his sister Sue D'Agostino and had his disability checks sent to her home. In February 2008 he told Sue, now a 47-year-old homemaker from West Islip, N.Y., he was moving to Florida, but months went by without a call. “I knew there was no way he was still living,” Sue says. She checked NamUS and noticed a photo of a corpse with scarred legs. “He lived in the woods for 15 years, so that would cause scarring on his legs,” she says. DNA tests confirmed she was right. David, 50, had been found dead of an overdose on a sidewalk in Clearwater, Fla., on March 8, 2008. Despite his tragic end, Sue says she's glad he's finally at peace. “I'm relieved he doesn't suffer anymore.”





"I thought about Paula every day," says Stephanie Clack (center, at her sister's grave with her other sister Alice Beverly and father, Stephen Beverly). Paula (below, middle) posed with Stephanie (left) and Alice.

A SISTER NEVER STOPPED LOOKING

Paula Beverly Davis Last Seen: August 1987

Stephanie Clack last saw her older sister Paula Davis, then 21, when they went out for pizza and Davis dropped her off at home in Kansas City, Mo. That was August 1987. "She said, 'I love you. Talk to you tomorrow,' and drove off," says Clack, 37, of Kingsville, Mo. Her sister's disappearance led to their mother's nervous breakdown. After seeing a PSA about NamUs in October 2009, Clack plugged in her sister's age, race and gender and came up with 10 pages of missing women who fit Paula's description. Her sister's two tattoos, one a rose and the other a unicorn, narrowed it down to a woman who had been strangled to death, then buried as a Jane Doe in Englewood, Ohio, shortly after Paula vanished. She was reburied next to their mother last June. "I am sure they are dancing around in heaven together," says Clack.



"My heart still hurts," says Hope Jennings (with a photo of her son Toussaint).

A MOTHER GETS ANSWERS

Toussaint Gumbs Last Seen: June 1995

Toussaint Gumbs was just 16 when he sneaked out of his grandparents' home in Richmond, Va., late one night in June 1995. "By the second day, I filed a police report," says his mother, Hope Jennings, 50, a nurse in Charlotte. "It was like he disappeared into thin air." In October 2009 Kylan Johnson, a volunteer with a missing persons group, was on NamUs and spotted similarities (a scar and tattoos) between Toussaint and the body of an unidentified teen who'd been shot about the time Toussaint went missing. A DNA test confirmed it was Toussaint. His mom held a memorial service last June that was attended by 75 friends and relatives. "It was helpful to some of the family members to bring closure and to move forward with life," she says. "But for me, I miss my son."