

U.S. NEWS

Internet Sleuths on the Hunt for Next of Kin

A Group of Online Genealogists Is Helping Coroners' Offices Track Down Relatives of People Who Pass Away Unclaimed

BY ERICA E. PHILLIPS

Justin Alexander was 5 years old the only time he met his father, James Fuller.

"I remember he bought me a bike and was helping me ride it," said Mr. Alexander, now 32, who grew up with his mother and grandparents in Michigan and Ohio. "That's the only memory I have of him."

Earlier this year, Mr. Alexander, who lives in Midland, Ohio, with his wife and three children, received the first news of his father in nearly three decades. Mr. Fuller, 56 years old and homeless, had died of natural causes outside a restaurant in Stanton, Calif.

Investigators in the Orange County coroner's office spent more than a month trying unsuccessfully to track down Mr. Fuller's next of kin. Having exhausted the office's resources, a supervising investigator submitted Mr. Fuller's file to Unclaimed Persons, a behind-the-scenes crew of volunteer Internet sleuths who specialize in genealogy. Within a few weeks, they had found his son.

For the past five years, Unclaimed Persons has been taking on unsolved cases like Mr. Fuller's from coroners' offices across the country. Of nearly 600 cases submitted to date, they have found family in 355.

Unclaimed Persons assigns a case manager for each investigation who monitors an average of 15 volunteers via a private message board. The volunteers comb through social media, people-search websites, newspaper obituary archives and genealogy sources like Ancestry.com, where they access family trees, birth and death records, immigration data, and local and national archives. The group, made up of more than 500 volunteers, has worked with more than 40 counties in 20 states. Volunteers are

Search Missions

Where to comb for clues

◆ Familysearch.org (Church of Latter Day Saints resource)

◆ GenealogyBank.com

◆ Social-media sites

◆ People-search websites (with phone-book listings, etc.)

◆ Newspaper records/obituaries

◆ Court records

◆ Ancestry.com (birth, tax, probate and other records)

Source: WSJ reporting

now probing about 90 cases.

Finding and contacting the next of kin in death investigations is a perennial challenge for coroners and medical examiners nationwide, particularly in cases where the dead were homeless or estranged from their families.

"This really is one of those classic epidemics," said Unclaimed Persons founder Megan Smolenyak, a forensic consultant for the U.S. Army. "There are so many unclaimed people."

Ms. Smolenyak, who also has conducted genealogy research for President Barack Obama and Michelle Obama, founded the organization in 2008 after helping the coroner's office in Lackawanna County, Pa., with a handful of cases. When she published a video about that experience online, she said she was "bombarded with emails" from other genealogists who wanted to help. At first, it took some persuasion to get coroners' offices to bring their cases to Unclaimed Persons, she said. "Now it has come full circle—there are too many coroners knocking on the door."

Orange County is one of the group's regular clients. It also of-



Justin Alexander holds a photo of his father. Unclaimed Persons helped the coroner's office find Mr. Alexander to notify him his father had died.

ten works with Chelan County, Wash., Montgomery County, Pa., and Hillsborough County, Fla. Janis Martin, a genealogist who is the group's liaison to coroners' and medical examiners' offices, said Harris County, Texas, which includes Houston, sent in 106 cases this summer alone.

Ms. Martin was the manager for Mr. Fuller's case in Orange County. She said that once his case made it through the group's backlogged queue, it took about two weeks to complete. Like many cases they take on, Mr. Fuller's file arrived with his name, birth date and the place he had died, plus a few "clues" Orange County county investigators had uncovered but couldn't confirm, Ms. Martin said.

"We took it from there," she said. The 15 volunteers on Mr. Fuller's case hailed from Illinois, California, New Jersey, Texas and beyond. Ms. Martin is based in southeastern Minnesota.

Everything they searched was in the public record, Ms. Martin said, and was mostly available online. She said through their investigation they were able to confirm a connection between Mr. Fuller and Justin Alexander's mother, but privacy laws prevented them from obtaining Mr. Alexander's birth certificate. The team also found names for Mr. Fuller's mother and half-siblings

through his mother's obituary. The group never contacts anyone directly other than the coroners' investigators, who are trained in notification procedures.

Once Ms. Martin and her fellow volunteers had gathered as much family history as they could, she wrote a summary laying out the fresh leads they had found, and delivered Mr. Fuller's file to the coroner. As in most cases, the information on him included a detailed family tree.

"I know more about some of my decedents than I know about my own family," said Kelly Keyes, a supervising investigator for the Orange County Coroner. Her team, which investigated more than 5,000 deaths last year, has called on Unclaimed Persons in about 60 cases since she first started working with the group in 2010. Of those, the volunteers have cracked more than 75%.

On April 4 of this year, Ms. Keyes emailed Ms. Martin: "Good news, Justin was in fact the son and I just got off the phone with his grandfather who will be notifying him of the death tonight."

Ms. Keyes spoke later with Mr. Alexander to arrange for cremation. For Mr. Alexander, the news of his father brought closure along with regret. "Now it was never going to happen," he said. "I was never going to meet him again."



Mr. Alexander, who hadn't seen his father since he was five years old, received a watch and a bracelet his father was wearing when he died.