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**When calls come in about missing children,
Alvarado-based organization springs into action**

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SPECIAL FEATURES WRITER



Photo by Steve Edmonds

United Response Search and Rescue director Dana Ames and research coordinator Bill Anderson work on a case.

Whenever the call goes out that a child may have been abducted or is lost, a team of professionals springs into action.

Ready to assist regardless of whether the search entails finding a child, a teenager or an adult, the Alvarado-based organization is ready at a moment's notice.

Members and volunteers of United Response Search and Rescue quickly assemble and begin coordinating a search in conjunction with law enforcement. The more than 100-member organization assists families and law enforcement agencies in locating lost or abducted children and adults. With several former law enforcement officials as part of the team, URSAR members ensure that they are not impeding the official investigation.

“We were operating as a volunteer group, but the need was so great, that we had to go ahead and get a non-profit organization designation,” said Dana Ames, director and co-founder of URSAR.

Whenever an alert is established that a child or adult is missing or has been abducted, URSAR notifies its member and volunteer base. The organization obtains a photo of the person and creates a flyer that includes the person’s pertinent information.

“We notify law enforcement if it wasn’t their initial request,” said Ames. “We fax blast and email blast.”

A search is coordinated.

“We basically sit down and look at the information that’s provided to us and we say, ‘Okay, we may need to do a ground search, drive search or diving search.’”

The Bishop Dunn Academy in Dallas, a private high school with a mapping department for students interested in law enforcement careers, creates and donates 4- to 5-foot maps of the last known area where the person was previously seen. After briefing the school about the situation, students design maps using a layering technique in order to identify roads, commercial industry, bodies of water, elevations and other critical information. Grids are assigned to volunteers and members.

Ames said the truck stop network is also contacted in order to notify all truck drivers in the area in the event of abduction. Airports are also notified. The H.A.M. radio network works with URSAR and the Citizen’s Band (CB) system is also utilized.

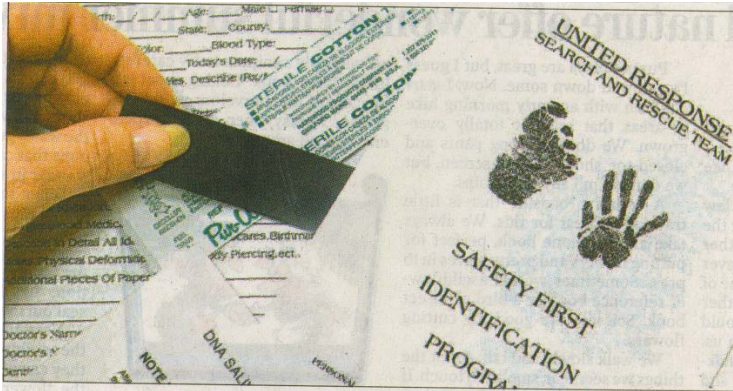
“This is a way of getting the information out there without the Amber Alert,” Ames said. “And it’s far reaching.”

Ames said some of the volunteers have experienced the heartache and anxiety of child abduction first hand. Others may understand the plight when an adult family member is missing.

“They have personally experienced the tragedy of this type of event,” Ames said. “We have given them an outlet to be able to take the loss and their grief and their pain and search with their whole hearts.”

The organization started with roughly 40 volunteers and now operates with 100 highly qualified members who now operate state wide. Active duty law enforcement officers, retired officers, certified divers, paramedics, firefighters as well as the head of a Texas SWAT Team help coordinate and implement the search.

“We had no idea what were getting into when we did this,” Ames said.



The non-profit organization was born in 1999 during the search for Opal Jo Jennings. Ames, a friend of Jennings' aunt, recognized the need for additional resources in order to aid in the official investigation. Charlie Lewis, Fort Worth police officer who worked in law enforcement for the city of Joshua at the time, was also instrumental in Ames' pursuit of truth for the family of the little girl.

"There was a connection to Joshua at the time," said Lewis.

Lewis said that the Joshua Police Department received a tip but the area mentioned was located in a vicinity where three law enforcement jurisdictions were involved.

"I never felt good that a thorough search was ever done," Lewis said.

"Charlie and I were discussing this one day and he said, "There was a place that I wanted to search that I never got to search," Ames said. "We started searching again for Opal and we were able to eliminate that area. It snowballed from there.

The group received a significant amount of media coverage during that time which led to phone calls from other families asking for help – and the requests weren't limited to missing children.

"There are a lot of adults missing and trust me those situations are just as critical as these children," Ames stressed.

Not only is URSR known statewide, Ames said she's been contacted by a California family. There simply aren't enough resources, time or people. Ames said every major city in America needs to have a similar search team in place in addition to law enforcement.

"A lot of cases that we deal with have some element of criminal activity," she said.

Housed in the Diamond W Arena – an indoor arena – the URSR headquarters was generously donated to the group by the building's owner, Lisa McCool. Additionally, McCool allows the group to use the facility for fundraising activities.

"They have really taken good care of us," said Ames. She is just a cool person and she has a heart as big as Texas."

Often, a search turns up tragically. But there are success stories. A 36-year-old Saginaw man reported missing in late April was discovered under a bridge in Mesquite late last month. William Trim's car was found abandoned in Forney, more than 70 miles from the area he was last seen. Taken to the hospital by law enforcement officials where he was treated for dehydration, Trim was recognized from a missing-person report and later reunited with his mother at her Alvord home.

"We can never have too many people looking for a missing person," Ames stressed. "The only thing that stops us truly is funding. We never have enough money."

For more information, to become a volunteer, or to make a donation, call Ames at 817-501-9296.

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