

SATURDAY, AUGUST 20, 2005

## 8/20/05: Beating Around the Bushes

Sheila Holland and Dana Ames spend their spare time beating around the bushes, literally. These two sisters head a Texas based SAR team, URSAR, which stands for United Response Search and Rescue.

Back in March of 1999, 6 year-old Opal Jennings was



abducted while playing outside with her friends in Saginaw, Texas. It took nearly 5 years, but little Opal was found. Sadly, she had been murdered by Richard Lee Franks, a convicted child molester. It was Opal's case that spurred the two sisters into action. URSAR was founded in 2003 in memory of Opal. Dana and Sheila's team assisted in the search for Opal, whose family is still actively involved and supports the sisters' efforts.

Not only do these two work to reunite families of the missing, but they also each deserve the title "Super Mom", since they both work other jobs and are devoted to their husbands and children. Sheila also has 6 grandchildren to spend time with.

This fall, Sheila and Dana will make another 6 hour drive to Lubbock to search for Jennifer Wilkerson and Joanna Rogers. (Please read "The Lovely Ladies of Lubbock, Parts I & II" for the stories of Jennifer and Joanna, located in the Archives.)



The long drive is nothing new to them, as they have made this trip 7 times in order to find these missing women. They recruit hundreds of volunteers to help with the searches, utilizing volunteers from the community, team members, family members of the missing, law enforcement, and other agencies geared towards disaster relief or social services.

Sheila explains the resources behind a typical SAR, and how it is executed.

*“The information supplied by law enforcement, or the family will generally tell us if a search is warranted. There are usually some facts that are known, such as the person was last seen walking down Willow Street, or the ex-husband or boyfriend had been making threats, or a strange vehicle was seen outside the house.*

*As soon as our organization receives the request to do a search on a missing person, we swing into full action gathering as much information about the missing person, and the circumstances involved in their disappearance as possible. We inform our members, and volunteers of the search. We generally alert the media of the missing person if law enforcement has not done this, and request help of the community. We map all areas of interest out, and establish an area to use for a command center during the search. We must determine in advance what resources are needed, and plan accordingly in order to properly execute the search. A location, time, and date or dates are then publicized.*

*We offer air search capability, canine search teams, dive search teams, ground search teams, ATV search teams, mounted search teams, food, water, shelter, flyer distribution and crisis intervention.*

*Since our inception the team has grown in size and capability, currently consisting of approximately 100 + members and more than 2000 volunteers. United Response Search and Rescue Team currently consist of active and retired Law Enforcement Officers, Homicide Detectives, Swat Team Members, Medical Examiners, Paramedics, Fire Fighters, members of the U.S. Marshall's Posse, Military Reserve Personnel, retired Navy Core personnel, Forensic Osteologist, Forensic Psychologist, Criminal Justice Students, Certified Public Safety Divers, Swift Water Rescue Divers, Aquatic Crime Scene Investigators, Pilots, Vet Techs, as well as other trained SAR specialists. "*

Sheila and Dana don't give up easily when it comes to these searches. Some have even lasted for a very long time. *"Each search is different, and must be treated as such. The amount of time spent on each search varies greatly depending on resources and information available. Some of our searches have ended within 45 minutes after the search began with remains, or the person being found, and others have lasted several days, months, or years,"* Sheila explains.

When they are in the midst of the search, numerous concerns go through the sisters' minds: *"Will we find our missing person? Is the person we are looking for still alive, and in what condition? We wonder what the missing person may be going through, or has gone through, and how much time has lapsed. We're also concerned about the weather conditions for searching, the well being of the family, the safety of the search for the volunteers, and where else we could search if needed. The possibility of having to break the news to the family and volunteers that we have to call off the search if we don't find the missing person is a difficult thing."*

And indeed, the hardest part of what they do is when they have to call off a

search. *"We exhaust all efforts to find the missing. After searching all possible places of interest, and chasing down any information that might be available, if we do not find the missing person we are looking for, we must call the search, and notify the family. Seeing the absolute fear, panic, and helpless desperation in their eyes is always overwhelming. It just breaks our heart to not be able to give the family those answers they need, and bring their loved one home. Keeping the morale of the volunteers up, after a fruitless search is just as overwhelming at times. We all want to find our missing, and bring them home, no matter what the circumstances may be."*

The group once discovered the remains of a man within 50 yards of his abandoned vehicle nine months after he was reported missing. URSAR located his remains within 45 minutes of being on the property. Sheila admits one of the toughest things about her job is to make this sort of discovery: *"The family helped on this search and it was so sad to see them so upset, because he could have been found months earlier. The vehicle was originally found within a month of his disappearance and other agencies searched the area and were not able to locate the gentleman. We had been contacted by this family after seeing us on the news while we were performing another search in their area."*

There is, however, joy in the sisters' work, which they do for free. *"We also help families to search for runaways. We were able to locate a 15 year old girl that had run away from home after an argument with her mother. She had been gone for a couple of days before we were contacted. The mother had exhausted all her resources to locate her daughter. We were able to locate her through her friends at a drug house (after a reward was posted). We were able to get assistance from Law Enforcement and had her removed from a bad situation. We were then helped the family get the necessary counseling that was needed to help this family to heal."*

The URSAR Mission Statement is as follows:

*"United Response Search and Rescue Team will provide search and recovery*

*crisis intervention service for missing and abducted children and adults of all ages and backgrounds. The Organization seeks to provide these services so that no family will ever have to suffer alone while faced with such an unexpected tragic event. We will do this with compassion, dedication, professionalism, and expediency. Our primary objective being the safe return of a missing loved one to their family. Until there are no more missing children or adults, until all people who are lost, runaways or victims of crime are found - we will be there to help.*

*We will also provide preventative educational awareness programs, and identification programs that will educate children, parents, families, teachers and law enforcements in the community on how to prevent abductions and what to do with critical information on reporting a loved one missing."*

A simple, but yet powerful response summarizes Sheila and Dana's drive and resolve: *"We have dedicated to these families (Jennifer and Joanna's) that we will continue to search until they are both found."*

I can tell you that if I ever needed someone to beat around the bushes for me, I would want these two on my side, and by my side, supporting me for as long as I needed it.

You can learn more about URSAR and Sheila and Dana's efforts at <http://www.ursarteam.org>