

Search Engine

Chicago's police investigator for lost adults is often the only one who misses the missing

BY ROBERT L. KAISER

The man in Apartment 204 is gone, just like that. Thirty years in the same place, and one winter day Anthony Dubinski disappears.

Chicago Police Investigator John DeBartolo cracks the window of his unmarked police car, sticks a Salem between his lips and flicks a blue lighter with one hand as he steers with the other. He is looking for Dubinski. He is frustrated. "Some of these people," he says. "They'll report a missing person, but they're not concerned." A tendril of smoke rises from his cigarette and drifts out the window of the rain-spotted Ford. "This guy, he's got a sister two hours away who's never called. I'm the one showing concern. I'm the one who's looking for the guy."

The 54-year-old DeBartolo, known to colleagues at the Area 3 police station as Johnny or John D., is the only cop in the department, and quite possibly in the nation, who is assigned full time to looking for lost adults. His job is to find missing persons who are age 17 and older. Most police departments don't bother looking for a grown-up unless the person is sick or old or is thought to be in danger or the victim of foul play; many cities have waiting periods before they'll even take a report.

This fall Congress approved a bill that would allocate federal money for the investigation and tracking of missing-adult cases. But while society won't abide missing children, most people still don't give a thought to looking for a 60-year-old loner named Dubinski or any of the other nearly 200,000 adults who, according to the FBI's National Crime Information Center, vanish each year nationwide.

"You know, I got two brothers," DeBartolo says, the words blunted by his Chicago accent. "We're not real, real close. But I'll be damned--if I live two hours away, I'll go see if I can find one of them if he's missing. Not because I'm a policeman. But because he's my family. My blood."

DeBartolo grew up amid the brownstones, fruit stands and white-ethnic groceries of the Taylor Street neighborhood on the Near West Side, a strict and structured place where adults never hesitated to spank or feed a neighbor's child. No one was anonymous. No one, it seemed, went unloved or unremembered.

But the city, DeBartolo would discover, can obliterate people. There are countless ways to go missing. People walk away from nursing homes or they fall into Lake Michigan, they cross paths with a murderer or they run away for love. They vanish without a trace. Sometimes they're never found.

It's a disheartening job, but DeBartolo would have no other. "I like what I do," he says. "I don't mind staying on the phone all day if I have to. I don't mind going out on some wild goose chase, whatever. There's a little bit of mystery to it when you get those heater cases."

HEATER IS THE WORD cops use for cases that demand full attention and right now-- "when the phone starts ringing off the wall," DeBartolo says. It happens when the missing person is famous or has vanished under especially unusual or ominous circumstances. Reporters and police brass start asking about the case, and the investigation shifts into high

gear.

For 2-1/2 months last winter, DeBartolo worked the high-profile case of Brian Welzien, the suburban college student who disappeared New Year's Day after a night of drinking. A Gary man eventually discovered Welzien's body while walking on the beach last March.

But heaters can turn cold. Consider the case of 8-year-old Tricia Kellett, who disappeared more than 18 years ago after going outside to play one spring day. Never found, she is presumed dead. DeBartolo, a 31-year veteran of the Police Department, inherited the 9-inch-thick file when he took the missing-persons job six years ago--she would be an adult now, if alive -- but he no longer investigates it.

"Suspended case, no further action required," he says.

Few of DeBartolo's cases are heaters. As you drink your coffee most mornings he's getting his new cases and he'll find the people or he won't and you'll never know it, and the next day he'll get some more at the 8 a.m. roll call from Sgt. Bill DeGiulio: "Johnny, you got adult missings." Most days a quiet poignancy permeates his work as he drives the streets looking for people no one else misses.

Dubinski's family has not seen or heard from him since mid-March, about the time he stopped reporting for work as a part-time doorman at the John Hancock Center. Nobody reported him missing until a friend passing through Chicago in August dropped by his apartment in Lincoln Park and couldn't find him.

Now DeBartolo is cruising through the missing man's neighborhood, his purple sedan reflected in the storefront windows--a pizzeria, an Ace Hardware, a corner tavern--that once held Dubinski's image. DeBartolo steers to a stop in front of Dubinski's yellow-brick apartment building. The sky looks swollen and bruised. A few blocks away, the lake that sometimes keeps grim secrets from DeBartolo churns darkly against a concrete shore.

Ana Crisan, the owner of Dubinski's building, greets DeBartolo in a dusky office. "I think he left the country," she tells him in a thick Eastern European accent.

THE STREETS THAT swallowed Dubinski are some of the safest in Chicago. Town Hall District, on the North Side, has the fewest violent crimes among the city's 25 police districts this year. At its core is the

lakeside neighborhood of Lincoln Park and many of the places where Dubinski once could be found.

Dubinski is--or, perhaps, was--a tall, bearded man who likes to wear baseball caps. For three decades he lived quietly in the 2700 block of North Pine Grove Avenue, a narrow, shady street lined with apartment buildings and stately, ivy-covered graystones. For three decades he worked the same job, estimating work orders for a printing company.

Five years ago Dubinski retired and took the doorman's job, working two or three nights a week. Sundays on the clock with janitor Junior Spohn were filled with talk of baseball and road trips to games at the old parks.

"He was easygoing, never had any problems or nothing," Spohn recalls.

But Dubinski was not happy. A lifelong bachelor, he lived alone and talked to his two sisters only a few times each year. One of the sisters lives in Tinley Park, the other near Boston. DeBartolo was struck by how little either could tell him.

"I guess I don't know too much about my brother's life," Terri Dalton, Dubinski's sister in Massachusetts, says ruefully.

When their 84-year-old mother died last winter, she says, Dubinski--worried about a painful stomach ailment and haunted by thoughts of his own mortality--sank into depression.

"He looked just very sad and very alone," she says. "But when you're grieving yourself, like I was, you don't notice as much as you should. When I came home and got into my own grief, my own family, my own life, I didn't think about him."

Several days later, the normally reliable Dubinski did not show up for work. Then, in April, he failed to attend a family christening-- "one layer on top of another to say, 'Something's wrong, something's wrong,' " Dalton says. But it was baseball season. He's probably on a road trip, she thought.

When Dalton tried to call Dubinski in August and found that his phone had been disconnected, she began to worry. On Aug. 20 a friend who was passing through town stopped to check on Dubinski, couldn't find him and reported him missing.

The officer who took the report turned it over to his supervisor, who turned it over to the district review officer, who made copies and forwarded it to headquarters. Someone entered the case into the computer and into

the National Crime Information Center database, then filled out a white card with Dubinski's name on it and sent a fax to Area 3.

That night, on the second floor of the Area 3 police station at Belmont and Western Avenues, a desk officer in the youth division peeled the fax from the machine, filled out a white slip of paper on the case and left it for morning.

Those who vanish north of the Loop have their life stories reduced to a fax and a file card at Area 3. Missing-persons cases generally fall under the purview of the youth division in each area of the city. Investigators in the youth division look for runaway teens, investigate child-abuse cases and work with juvenile offenders. Only in Area 3--an enormous slice of the city bounded by the Chicago River to the south, Howard Street to the north, the North Branch to the west and the lake to the east-- is there an investigator assigned to tracking down missing persons full time, due to the large number of nursing homes in the vicinity. Many adults who are reported missing have walked away from one or another of the facilities.

The Area 3 youth division is a haunted place. A book containing gruesome photos of John Does at the Cook County Medical Examiner's

Office lies on a counter near the fax machine-- "like a horror novel," desk officer Mike Capesius says. Page 5 is all about a young suicide found shot to death behind Lane Technical School, less than a block down the street. In a metal box at the desk officer's station, missing-persons cases are filed two inches deep--about 200 active at any given time. DeBartolo has almost as many as the 30 other youth officers combined.

At roll call the morning of Aug. 21, DeBartolo-- tanned and rested and four pounds heavier after a vacation in Marco Island, Fla.--avoided the coffee cake and settled into a seat by the radiator.

Already his tie was yanked loose. Reaching up, he took a stack of missing-persons cases from the sergeant. The white slips were a litany: runaway teens, lost nursing-home residents--ba-da-bee, ba-da-bop, this-n-that, as DeBartolo says.

One of the slips was scrawled with the name Anthony Dubinski. It caught his eye.

Missing spouses are reported all the time. But this guy had his sister worried. DeBartolo called the family friend who had reported Dubinski missing but got no answer. He left a message. The next day Dalton called. She was put through to DeBartolo.

Dalton wasn't expecting cops in such a big city to be interested in what she had to say. Why should they when Dalton's own family seemed unconcerned? The sister in Tinley Park had shrugged off Dubinski's apparent disappearance, declining to venture into Chicago looking for him after Dalton called to say she was worried because his line had been disconnected.

Dalton had hung up frustrated after that phone conversation with her sister. But part of her understood. "My brother's 60," Dalton says. "It's not like he's a young teenager missing and the parents are out looking for him."

But when Dalton called DeBartolo, he seemed attentive. He asked if Dalton could send photographs of her brother.

A week later the photos arrived. DeBartolo scanned one into the computer and put it on a flier under the words MISSING PERSON. Taking it off the printer, he stared at the flier as if looking for a clue in the shadowed eyes of the missing man. For a few seconds he was silent.

He ran his thumb over the corner to smooth it.

"This just miiiiight work," he said quietly.

DEBARTOLO IS A RARE breed. Issues of manpower and privacy conspire to make missing adults a low priority for most police departments, said Ben Ermini, director of the missing children's division for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

"They can be missing if they want to be," says Ermini, a retired cop from Yonkers, N.Y.

In 1990, Congress passed a law requiring police departments to forget customary waiting periods of anywhere from 24 to 72 hours and take immediate action in cases of missing children. The law also required police to enter every case involving a person under 18 years old into the FBI's National Crime Information Center, a computer database accessible to every police department in the country.

"But if your father with Alzheimer's disappears or your kid two days past his 18th birthday turns up missing, you're out of luck," says Kym Pasqualini, president of the National Missing Children's Organization and Center for Missing Adults. Chicago is unique in the way it handles missing-persons cases, she says.

"The initial interviews and preliminary investigation we do is the key," says Sgt. Robert Battalini of Area 3.

DeBartolo jumps on cases. He calls whoever reported the person missing. He calls the person's family. He calls the morgue to see if there are any new John Does. He calls credit card companies and banks to check for activity on the missing person's accounts.

"He's relentless is what he is," Area 3 Youth Officer Robert Hanrahan says. "He finds 'em. One way or another, he finds 'em."

DeBartolo, the story of his career contained in a stack of departmental commendations, might be the best missing-persons investigator the department ever has had, Battalini says. "John's done a better job than a lot of them that have had it in the past," he says. "He's really good because when he gets these good cases, he focuses in on them. He doesn't worry about the clock. He'll come in on his own time."

DeBartolo does much of his legwork in his cramped office, bouncing his foot on the floor feverishly as he works the phone. The butt of his revolver, its wooden grip grown dull and black after 31 years, jostles against the oxford cloth of his shirt. He taps his pen on the desk.

"You and I are a different breed, ya know?" he tells a Department of Children and Family Services case worker one afternoon as they

discuss a missing 17-year-old on the phone.
"Some people just don't care."

THERE IS A SYSTEM to DeBartolo's tenacity: Brains over bravado. Here's a cop who hasn't fired his revolver on the streets in three decades on the job. When it came time to surprise a drug dealer in a heavily fortified apartment one day many years ago, DeBartolo declined a sledgehammer and used his head: He called a friend in Streets and Sanitation to send in trucks as decoys and to turn off water to the building. Then he and partner Ted Kotlarz posed as sewer workers, gaining easy access and preserving crucial evidence, recalls his friend and former supervisor Dave Boggs, now commander in the 24th District.

"Most guys would have gone with the sledgehammer," Boggs says.

In July, DeBartolo found a missing man buried in the debris of the man's burned apartment. The building was boarded up, the basement was dark and only four inches of the man's pants leg showed through the rubble. The body of the man, who had died in the conflagration, had been overlooked by harried firefighters. It lay there for 10 days--and might have lain still longer if not for DeBartolo.

"I was impressed with myself," DeBartolo says, grinning.

In March 1998 a 27-year-old Minnesota man named Trevor Hoheisel came to Chicago to attend the Big Ten basketball tournament and disappeared after leaving a bar on East Illinois Street near the river. DeBartolo drove to the bar and noticed an oscillating security camera out back that provided sweeping views of the riverwalk.

He asked to see the videotapes from the night of Hoheisel's disappearance and noticed something strange: As the camera had panned east to west it caught Hoheisel for a moment standing near the rail. But when it had panned back again seconds later, Hoheisel was gone.

DeBartolo had a hunch. Lake Michigan and its attendant rivers are old nemeses of his. He asked for divers, who found Hoheisel's body caught on a slip below the rail where he had been standing. He had leaned over too far--to rest, maybe, or to be sick? --and had fallen in.

"There's a finality with a homicide case: Someone's dead, it's over, now let's find the bad guy," Battalini says. "But with missings, there's this pressure to find the person. It's hard on the family not knowing. 'Where is he? Is he alive?'" DeBartolo put in 40 hours of

overtime running the search for Brian Welzien, following every lead and listening politely to every psychic, one of whom sat in his cramped office turning the lost man's hairbrush over in her hands.

"He really seemed to take it to heart," Welzien's mother, Stephany, says. "That case was important to me, of course. But he sees a lot of these. It didn't seem to have become routine."

DeBartolo keeps photos of his family tacked above his desk, constant reminders of the job's high stakes. A family man with two college-age children and a 25-year marriage, he leads a dichotomous existence that includes workdays immersed in a kind of eerie ambiguity diametrically opposite his own life. DeBartolo's own college-age son gazed down on him as he worked on the Welzien investigation, a case that bothered him like no other.

"That really worked on me," he says.

In March, Welzien's body washed ashore in Gary and police ruled his death an accidental drowning. For the first time in his career, DeBartolo attended a wake for someone whose case he had worked.

Standing over Welzien's coffin, he wore a

dark trench coat and an expression of exhaustion.

LOOKING FOR JOHN DEBARTOLO isn't easy. He feels no need to find himself the way a New Age man might, so he is ill-equipped to help anyone else ferret him out. He is what he is, a city guy from the old neighborhood. Though friendly and talkative, he is not given to introspection.

If there is a road map to DeBartolo's heart it starts in his family's little beige house on the Northwest Side, runs through the Town Hall District and then veers south to the streets where he was born and raised, the oldest of four sons.

DeBartolo and his brothers, Anthony, Albert and Carmine, grew up on the streets of the heavily Italian Near West Side. Their parents had grown up with their friends' parents. Their grandparents had grown up with their friends' grandparents. Summer nights past sunset the grown-ups sat on front porches and watched the children play ball in the narrow streets. When DeBartolo was 7, his father, a Chicago firefighter named Albert, left home. For 15 years, John virtually never saw or heard from his father. But the boy's extended family--a close-knit group including both pairs of grandparents, several cousins

and an aunt--buffered him so that he scarcely felt the loss.

Except for two years spent overseas in the Army, DeBartolo held a string of short-lived and relatively unsatisfying jobs after graduating from high school in 1965. City jobs were common in the old, political 1st Ward. DeBartolo wanted one he could depend on no matter who won the next election. He signed the waiting list to be a firefighter. Like his father. He signed the waiting list to be a police officer. Like his cousin.

The Police Department called first. Since graduating from the academy 31 years ago, DeBartolo has worked as a beat cop, a tactical officer and a youth officer. In 1973 he was put on airport detail and met the woman who would be his wife; Gale Kaufman, then an Avis Rent A Car employee at O'Hare International Airport, allowed him to keep his citation booklets at her counter and romance blossomed.

FROM 1974 TO 1982, DeBartolo worked as a beat cop and then a tactical officer in the Town Hall District, where he met Ted Kotlarz. Kotlarz, fresh out of academy, took to calling DeBartolo "Vito." They became partners and best friends and their young and growing families started spending time together.

In 1982, after Kotlarz had left Town Hall for another job in the department, DeBartolo left to begin processing evidence and recovered property for court cases. In February 1988 he was promoted to youth officer at Area 3, where he processed juvenile offenders and worked with kids who had been sexually assaulted or otherwise physically abused.

"I didn't feel comfortable doing it," he says. Many of the children he saw were the same age as his own young son and daughter. He began worrying about his own kids, watching them closely, peering at them out the window as they played in the yard.

"God forbid I didn't see them," he says.

In April 1992 he was detailed to the superintendent's office to serve as driver for then-Supt. Matt Rodriguez. It's a job some cops might see as glamorous. But the hours were too long for a family man. After two years DeBartolo wanted to go back to Area 3. All his friends were there, his history.

In April 1994 DeBartolo asked to become a youth officer again. The lieutenant in Area 3 said, "How would you like to do missing persons?" The officer in that job was retiring. DeBartolo jumped at the chance.

"It seemed to be interesting and seemed to be something I'd like to do," he says. The hours are good--he typically works 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day--but the job can be overwhelming. Since last November, when the Police Department installed an in-house computer system to keep track of such things, the number of white slips that have crossed DeBartolo's desk representing missing persons in Area 3 amounts to about 100 each month. The file of closed cases, in a box under his computer, runs a foot and a half deep, not counting Welzien's. It alone is six inches thick.

For years DeBartolo loved his job like none he'd ever had. Like a man who had found himself. Then someone vanished from his own life.

ON JAN. 16, 1999, Ted Kotlarz died of pancreatic cancer. DeBartolo was crushed. Kotlarz's widow, Sharon, and her sister had to talk the grieving DeBartolo away from his friend's coffin when it came time to leave the wake.

That winter, like never before, DeBartolo struggled with a feeling of emptiness and the specter of his own mortality. He missed Kotlarz. Work became work. For the first time he thought seriously of retiring.

"Being a policeman was a little bit of a burden," he says.

Faithfully, he wore the watch Kotlarz gave him on his 50th birthday, wishing that he, in turn, could have given his friend the gift of time.

Last winter, in the midst of investigating Welzien's disappearance, DeBartolo drove to a Northwest Side cemetery for a small, quiet memorial service for Kotlarz.

"He's my missing," DeBartolo says. In grief, DeBartolo and Dubinski share a common bond, but Dubinski apparently allowed his sorrow to get the better of him. DeBartolo, surrounded by a loving family and sustained by his job, has prevailed.

Kotlarz's death, which shook DeBartolo to the core, has, in the end, made him better at his work, Boggs says. He doubts DeBartolo would have gone to Welzien's funeral without first suffering an excruciating loss of his own.

"It just reinforced with John the importance of family and friends," Boggs says. "It reinforced the need to be sensitive with other people."

Says DeBartolo: "You start thinking life's too

short, boy, life's too short."

After rushing to the hospital with chest pains on Memorial Day--it was only gas--he decided to make some changes.

"I walked in and weighed myself and I was 257 pounds," says DeBartolo, a round, ruddy-faced man whose girth is a testament to the pasta at Tufano's in the old neighborhood. "I thought, 'My God, I've never been this fat in my entire life.'"

Now, as he stands in a dim office at Dubinski's apartment building, DeBartolo weighs a mere 235.

"Lemme ask you a question," DeBartolo says to building owner Ana Crisan, opening a black binder containing photos of Dubinski. "Is this him?"

Crisan nods.

Making a gesture like drinking from a bottle, DeBartolo says, "Does he, uh..."

"No, no," Crisan says emphatically. "Never I have problems with that guy."

She hands DeBartolo a sheet of paper. It's a letter, handwritten. It's from Dubinski.

"George and Ana Crisan," the letter begins. "I am sorry, but I have decided to vacate my apartment. I cannot live here anymore. Too many sad memories. . . . "You have my permission to do whatever you want with the furniture and the rest of my clothes, since I plan to do cross-country traveling."

The letter is signed "Anthony Dubinski, Apt. 204."

DeBartolo puts it in his binder, climbs back in the car and points it toward the office. He drives past a woman with bright orange hair on a scooter. He drives under the roaring "L" tracks over Belmont. He drives past the leather shop where he gets his holster repaired.

After eight days of trying -- days of phone tag with the Crisans and long-distance conversations with Terri Dalton--DeBartolo has closed the case. But he has not solved the mystery.

Somewhere out there, perhaps far beyond the heft and grit of the city, is Dubinski -- one more closed investigation for John DeBartolo but, in truth, a man no more found than the missing. **END**