

Global effort raises awareness of missing children

The AFP has taken a leading role in the first consolidated global effort to raise awareness of the plight of missing children.

On 19 December 1982, Michaela Godau, 15, spent a quiet Sunday night at home. The next morning family members awoke to discover Michaela was nowhere to be found. Some of her personal items, cash and her passport were also missing. Michaela has not been seen by her family since.

Michaela's disappearance nearly 27 years ago is just one example of the tens of thousands of children who go missing in Australia every year. The phenomenon of missing children is international. In the United States, with a population of more than 305 million people, more than 2,100 children go missing every day. In Australia, around 24 children are reported missing each day.

In an effort to increase awareness of the plight of missing children and their families, nine countries from four continents launched an international campaign on 25 May – International Missing Children's Day – to encourage the global community to think about the issues associated with missing children and strengthen global efforts to find them.

The AFP, in conjunction with the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC), led this global campaign.

Australia, through the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC), and the other eight countries are part of the Global Missing Children's Network established in 1998 by the ICMEC. The Network was initially established to provide access to a free website and searchable multi-lingual database displaying photos of missing children.

International Missing Children's Day is a day where people around the world commemorate the missing children who found their way home, remember those children who have been victims of crime, and continue efforts to find those who are still missing.

The main purpose of this special day is to encourage everyone around the world to think about all missing children, and to spread a message of hope and solidarity to parents who have no news about their children and do not know where they are or what has become of them.

The day has been recognised as a national day for missing children since the disappearance of Etan Patz from a New York street corner on 25 May 1979.

On that Friday morning, six-year-old Etan left his SoHo apartment to walk the two blocks to catch the school bus by himself for the very first time. When he did not return home from school at 3.30 that afternoon, his mother reported him missing. An intense search began that evening and continued for months. After three decades, Etan's case remains open.

The problem of missing children is complex. While the exact number of children missing internationally at any time is unknown, in Australia, around 20,000 people under the age of 18 are reported missing every year. This equates to one young person reported missing every hour of every day.

Commissioner Mick Keilty said that while 95 per cent of missing persons were found within a short period of time, the lasting impact, particularly on families, whether emotional, physical, financial or psychological, was devastating.

The AFP has been working with State and Territory police on missing children's issues for more than nine years and has



Mike Munro, Master of Ceremonies at the balloon launch, addresses the audience.



Bruce and Denise Morcombe prepare to release balloons



Commissioner Keilty with Denise and Bruce Morcombe



Mike Munro and Commissioner Keelty look on as Bruce and Denise Morcombe release the balloons.

been working with ICMEC and the Global Missing Children's Network since 2000.

ICMEC is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organisation. It is the leading agency working on a global basis to combat child abduction and exploitation and is the sister organisation of the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children.

To commemorate International Missing Children's Day, participating countries released identical balloons featuring photos of missing children from around

the world in the hope that someone, somewhere, would recognise them.

The then Minister for Home Affairs Bob Debus and Commissioner Keelty officially launched International Missing Children's Day on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra. They were joined by television journalist Mike Munro who has a long involvement in promoting issues relating to missing persons, and Denise and Bruce Morcombe whose child, Daniel, has been missing since December 2003. More than 80 balloons were released at the launch.

"We are very proud to be leading this global movement together with ICMEC," Commissioner Keelty said.

Nancy Dube, ICMEC Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer said International Missing Children's Day was important for all children and for all families.

"Together, we will make a difference, together, we will find them," Ms Dube said.



The balloon launch in Brazil



The balloon launch in the Netherlands

Missing persons - not knowing is like living in darkness

Interviews with families and friends of missing persons have revealed a common thread. They say that not knowing what has happened to someone you love, where they are or whether they are safe is like living in darkness.

Each year, 35,000 people are reported missing in Australia. That is equivalent to one person every 15 minutes. Ninety-five percent of missing persons are found within a short period of time – usually within a week. A high percentage of those reported missing are people over the age of 65 who are living with dementia.

National Missing Persons Week is an annual event organised by the AFP's National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC) with the support of State and Territory police, to raise awareness of the issues associated with missing persons in Australia. Each year, National Missing Persons Week focuses on a group at risk of going missing.

This year, the focus is on older people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease, a group which is a growing area of concern. As the Australian population ages, the incidence of dementia will increase in some sections of the older population.

Dementia is a broad term which describes a loss of memory, intellect, rationality, social skills and normal emotional reactions. People with dementia may experience confusion, distress, mood changes and aggression as they struggle with the frustrations of everyday life. There are many different forms of dementia and each has its own causes. The most common form of dementia is Alzheimer's disease. Memory loss and wandering are among the more common symptoms of dementia and Alzheimer's.

For the first time, families who have experienced a member going missing will share their stories as part of the National Missing Persons Week advertising campaign.

The campaign begins mid-July with a series of broadcast advertisements featuring four families who have each experienced the disappearance of an older person with dementia or memory loss. Their experiences give real meaning to the campaign's tagline 'Not knowing is like living in darkness'.

Radio network MCM will again broadcast a special edition of *MyGeneration* on 1 August playing two hours of 'lost classics' dedicated to the support of National Missing Persons Week.

The advertising campaign will include television, print and radio community service announcements as well as advertisements on various websites including menshealth.com, aboutmyage.com.au and seniorlivingonline.com – to reach families, friends, carers and people with dementia.

Governor-General Quentin Bryce will officially launch National Missing Persons Week in Canberra on 3 August, with Mike Munro as master of ceremonies. The launch will be hosted by the Minister for Home Affairs, Brendan O'Connor.

National Missing Persons Week will run from 2 – 8 August in conjunction with National Homeless Persons Week. Australians will be urged to 'keep an eye out' for older people with dementia.

The annual church service, hosted by ACT Policing, will be held on 2 August at All Saints Anglican Church, Cowper Street Ainslie ACT, at 9.30am. AFP representatives, stakeholders, and families and friends of missing persons attend the church service which is held in honour of missing persons, those who search for them, and those who are left behind.

For more information, visit <http://www.missingpersons.gov.au>



The poster features the Australian Federal Police (AFP) crest in the top right corner. The central text, enclosed in large curly braces, reads 'NOT KNOWING IS LIKE LIVING IN DARKNESS'. Below this, it says 'NATIONAL MISSING PERSONS WEEK | 2-8 AUGUST 2009'. At the bottom, the website 'WWW.AUSTRALIA.GOV.AU/MISSINGPERSONS' and the free call number 'FREE CALL 1800 000 634' are listed.