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Film Review: Mark Wynn's Story

by Maya Galicia-Canto

Mark Wynn, one of the leading voices in America today on the role of law enforcement in addressing domestic violence, has had a distinguished 21-year career in the Nashville Metropolitan Police Department where he was the lieutenant in the Domestic Violence Division. He is the recipient of 121 commendations and 51 awards, including a commendation in 2011 by then- Vice-President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., for his dedication to reforming how law enforcement handles the issue of domestic violence. But before his distinguished career, he was a child growing up in a home plagued by domestic violence.¹

Early in the documentary “This is Where I Learned Not to Sleep” that features his story, Wynn recounts an incident from his childhood when his stepfather attacked his mother in their kitchen and then stepped over her injured body to get a beer from the refrigerator.² He remembers how his stepfather beat his mother so severely it resulted in two miscarriages and how he, as a young boy, would wait in the emergency room with her. Most poignantly, Wynn recounts these incidents while standing outside one of his two childhood homes where the abuse occurred. Before the filming of the documentary, Wynn had never returned to either of these homes.

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NamUs Helps Resolve Cases of Missing American Indian and Alaska Native Persons

by Charles Heurich, Christine Crossland & B.J. Spamer

I. Introduction

In 2020, more than 9,500 missing American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN) person entries were added to the FBI's National Crime Information Center (NCIC).¹ Many cases entered in NCIC are resolved quickly. However, there are no answers or resolutions for families and friends of the unsolved missing person cases. For these families, the trauma of experiencing an ambiguous loss becomes a recurring daily nightmare.

One program from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ is an agency within the U.S. Department of Justice) is helping to resolve long-term missing and unidentified persons cases. The program is called the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs). It connects criminal justice agencies, forensic scientists, and families nationwide with information and resources to resolve missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases.

NamUs offers a wide range of services, including an online database, or clearinghouse, of missing persons information; forensics services, such as dental record matching and fingerprint and DNA analysis; investigative support; and public and professional user training. All these services are provided free of charge. However, NamUs does not provide victim services; we encourage victims or their

families to contact local victim service providers. See “Help for Victims” (<https://ovc.ojp.gov/help-for-victims/overview>) from the Office for Victims of Crime to find resources by State.

NamUs was designed to support state, tribal, and local case investigations. It is not an authoritative source on the extent or nature of missing persons or unidentified remains problems in the U.S. In addition, the use of the NamUs program by law enforcement, medical examiners, and coroners is largely voluntary. Even when the use of NamUs is mandated by state, tribal, and local authorities, compliance is challenging to enforce. As a result, data published by NamUs does not represent the true scope of missing and unidentified persons in the United States.

It is also important to understand that NamUs is not a law enforcement operation and that the responsibility to report and enter data sits with the public and law enforcement. The authority to verify, investigate, and discuss specific cases rests with law enforcement agencies.

Having said that, since its inception, NamUs has received reports of 2,078 missing AI/AN persons, with the oldest unresolved case dating back to 1943. As of August 23, 2022,

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1,012 missing indigenous² person cases have been resolved, with 77% of those cases involving the person being found alive.

As of June 2023, NamUs contained 23,271 published missing person cases, 14,444 published unidentified person cases, and 15,532 published unclaimed person cases.³ After being reported to NamUs, over 28,000 missing person

justice systems. As a federal program, NamUs provides a resource that is available and accessible to tribal nations for reporting, investigating, and solving missing person cases.

This article provides an overview of how the NamUs program was developed and describes the services and resources offered. In addition, this article discusses efforts by NIJ to provide training and case support for missing AI/AN person cases, as well as how

representatives from law enforcement, the forensic medical community, the crime victims' community, and others. The task force's purpose was to review how the U.S. Department of Justice could collect better information about missing persons and provide improved access to that information to help solve missing person cases and identify human remains.

At the national strategy meeting held in Philadelphia, participants discussed ways to improve the initial information collected on a missing person, increase the identification of unidentified remains, and ensure law enforcement and forensic scientists have access to the technology needed to match missing persons and human remains.

One of the outcomes of this strategy meeting was the decision to create a program that could be used not only by law enforcement, medical examiners (MEs), and coroners but also by the public. The resulting system, NamUs, was — and remains — the only national system for both missing and unidentified person cases that contains information accessible to the public. NamUs allows the public to be more involved in the search for their loved ones by entering case information and searching for potential matches, while sensitive case information is accessible only to registered and vetted professional users.

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The task force's purpose was to review how the U.S. Department of Justice could collect better information about missing persons and provide improved access to that information to help solve missing person cases and identify human remains.

cases and over 5,400 unidentified person cases have been resolved.

Due to the tenacious efforts of grassroots organizations and the effective outreach of social media, the missing and murdered Indigenous people movement, or MMIP, has become a call to action to address public safety conditions. This clarifies that the federal government is responsible for ensuring the well-being of tribes and their citizens, which extends to supporting tribal

NamUs helps tribal law enforcement, tribal leaders, and tribal victim advocates better capture and analyze data on their missing tribal citizens and residents wherever they may go missing.

II. The History of NamUs

In April 2005, the deputy attorney general announced a directive to establish a national task force for solving cases involving missing persons and unidentified remains. The task force included

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In June 2007, the Department launched NamUs 1.0. Initially, the system stored and shared information only about unidentified deceased persons. In January 2009, NamUs was expanded to include information about missing persons. In July 2009, the NamUs system began to automatically search for matches between unidentified and missing person cases in real time. In addition, information about unclaimed bodies was also added. In 2018, NamUs was fully upgraded.

III. NamUs Database

The NamUs database application offers state-of-the-art technology for storing, sharing, and comparing information on missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases. The system provides the following:

- A central, online database that serves as a national clearinghouse for missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person case information;
- Case management tools for law enforcement, MEs, and coroners to enter cases, disposition leads, and archive resolved cases; and
- Automatic case matching and sophisticated advanced search tools to expedite case associations and resolutions.

Over 93% of the missing and unidentified persons and 94% of the active AI/AN persons cases published in NamUs involve individuals who have been missing a year or more. The NamUs database is designed to manage and resolve these challenging, long-term cases. However, the system is not a historical database of all missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases. Cases that are deemed resolved in NamUs by the investigating agency are removed from the public view.

Anyone can search the NamUs database for information about missing persons. However, certain sensitive data, such as medical records and investigative details, are accessible only to registered, vetted criminal justice professionals who are given access to the full information.

Additionally, anyone can enter a missing person case into NamUs, including family members of the missing, victim advocates, and concerned

community members.⁴ However, to protect the safety and privacy of individuals reported missing to NamUs, all cases *must be verified* with the appropriate jurisdiction — local, state, tribal, or federal — before the case is published in NamUs.⁵ NamUs staff review all case data with the investigating agency to ensure that it is accurate, complete, and appropriate for public viewing. Once the investigating agency gives permission for the case to be included, NamUs publishes the information so that it is viewable and searchable by all users. This vetting process ensures that individuals

Public users can search many data fields in NamUs, including height and hair color, unique physical descriptors such as scars and tattoos, and descriptions of clothing, jewelry, and other accessories. Users with professional access to NamUs can search and view sensitive fields that are not available to the public, including medical data, fingerprint cards, dental radiographs, and the availability of DNA profiles developed by laboratories across the country. The sophisticated search tools in NamUs allow both public and professional users to locate potential matches and expedite case resolutions.

Anyone can search the NamUs database for information about missing persons. However, certain sensitive data, such as medical records and investigative details, are accessible only to registered, vetted criminal justice professionals who are given access to the full information.

who may be voluntarily out of contact with family, such as domestic violence victims who flee an abusive partner, are protected from having their information published in NamUs.

NamUs connects criminal justice agencies and families across the nation with information, resources, and investigative support. Over 5,600 professional law enforcement, MEs/coroners, and allied forensic professionals actively use NamUs to create a nationwide network of information sharing and case support. Moreover, 58 professional users representing 25 tribal law enforcement agencies are registered in NamUs. This support includes assistance with collecting DNA samples from family members residing in other jurisdictions.

NamUs Regional Program Specialists (RPSs) also provide support to families who need help filing a missing person report. RPSs have a vast network of professional criminal justice users across the country that they can connect to families to file reports and obtain additional assistance. You can find a list of the RPS staff and their contact information at <https://namus.nij.ojp.gov/about/staff>.

NamUs also contains tribal data fields to record if a missing person:

- Was enrolled or affiliated in a state or federally recognized tribe at the time of disappearance;
- Went missing from tribal land; and
- Had a primary residence on tribal land at the time of disappearance.

Medical examiners and coroners can also indicate if an unidentified deceased person was recovered on tribal land.

Each month, a report is produced on all AI/AN cases published in NamUs, which provides information on the location of cases, demographic data for all cases, and aggregate statistics related to the tribal data fields. Current and historical reports can be downloaded at <https://namus.nij.ojp.gov>.

Currently, 13 states have legislation that requires missing or unidentified person cases to be uploaded to NamUs: Arizona, Arkansas, Illinois, Michigan, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, West Virginia, and Washington. In addition to these states where reporting is required, NamUs

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Case Studies From NamUs

by Charles Heurich, Christine Crossland & B.J. Spamer

The following case studies (cases that do not involve AI/AN persons) highlight some success stories that were possible from NamUs.

Case Study #1: Clothing Match

In 2017, an adult man went missing in California. The detective investigating the man's disappearance entered the case into NamUs and searched the database for unidentified deceased persons who might be a match for his missing person. During his search, the detective noted that a particular deceased person was found with clothing that matched what this missing person was last known to be wearing. The detective obtained the missing person's dental records, which were compared with the deceased person's records in NamUs. The dental records were a match, confirming the missing person's identity. The missing person's

family was contacted and notified of the man's death.

Case Study #2: Fingerprint Match

An unidentified adult man was found dead in Texas in 2002. Investigators collected DNA samples and searched for a match in the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS); however, no associations were found. The man remained unidentified until 2020 when the medical examiner's office found a fingerprint card collected from the man during his autopsy. The medical examiner submitted an image of the card to NamUs. Searches of the FBI's Next Generation Identification (NGI) system, which are done for all fingerprint cards submitted to NamUs, resulted in a hit. Eighteen years after the remains were recovered, the man was finally identified.

Case Study #3: Familial DNA Match

In 1989, an adult woman disappeared in Florida after leaving her home with no belongings, money, or clothing. During a cold case review in 2018, investigators entered the woman's case into NamUs. They also submitted a DNA sample from a relative of the woman to the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification (UNTCHI), the former grantee of NIJ who managed the NamUs program and performed DNA testing. In 2020, a DNA match was made to a woman who had been found deceased in 1991. Two additional family members provided DNA samples to confirm the association. As a result, the woman was positively identified and her family was notified. ■

has been voluntarily incorporated into investigative protocols and procedures with agencies across the nation and contains cases from every U.S. state and territory. NamUs also includes a network of professional users consisting of law enforcement officers, medical examiners, coroners, medicolegal death investigators, and allied forensic professionals who work together to increase case resolutions and provide cross-jurisdictional support.

IV. Investigative Support

NamUs RPSs have decades of experience in investigations of crimes against persons, forensic laboratory analyses, medicolegal death investigations, and analysis of missing and unidentified persons cases. RPSs have received training on working effectively with tribal governments and are strategically placed across the country to build strong relationships with law enforcement officers, medical examiners, coroners, allied forensic specialists, family members, and the communities they serve.

RPSs provide technical assistance and investigative support by:

- Helping users enter new cases into NamUs;
- Vetting, activating, and renewing professional user access to the NamUs database;
- Vetting and publishing data related to missing, unidentified, and unclaimed persons cases entered into NamUs, which includes obtaining permission from investigating agencies to publish cases in NamUs;
- Enhancing existing NamUs case records by adding new information, such as biometrics, as it becomes available;
- Facilitating the collection and submission of biometric records and samples, including fingerprint cards, dental radiographs, written treatment records, and DNA samples from family members of the missing;
- Providing classroom and online training to public and professional users of NamUs; and

- Performing direct outreach and assistance to families of the missing during Missing Person Day events, including meeting with families to collect DNA samples.

Additionally, NamUs analysts provide investigative support to law enforcement, MEs, and coroners by:

- Searching criminal justice, government, and proprietary commercial databases looking for indications of life on persons reported missing to NamUs;
- Locating contact information for family members to facilitate DNA collections and next-of-kin notifications; and
- Locating and addressing incomplete data to enhance missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person case data.

V. Forensic Services

A. Fingerprint Examination

With over 50 years of combined law enforcement and forensic crime

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laboratory experience, NamUs fingerprint examiners:

- Ensure the quality, completeness, and accuracy of all missing and unidentified person fingerprint information entered into NamUs;
- Assist with the collection of fingerprint records, including fingerprint cards for past and present military personnel;
- Perform fingerprint comparisons using state-of-the-art technology; and
- Facilitate fingerprint searching through local and federal databases.

NamUs works with the National Personnel Records Center to obtain fingerprint cards, as well as dental records, for past and present military service members. With AI/AN serving in the Armed Forces at a rate five times the national average, this partnership is critical to ensuring that every available biometric record is entered into NamUs for missing AI/AN persons.

NamUs collaborates with the FBI's Latent Print Unit to securely transmit all fingerprint images from unidentified decedents for searching through the national Next Generation Identification (NGI) system (the FBI's fingerprint identification software). NGI is the world's largest and most efficient electronic repository of biometric information for criminal justice agencies. If the NGI search fails to find matches, the fingerprint images are submitted to the Department of Homeland Security for searching through the Automated Biometric Identification System (IDENT). IDENT contains more than 200 million unique identities. These efforts have resulted in over 440 fingerprint identifications since 2017, with the oldest identified case dating back to 1971.

When fingerprints are available in NamUs, they can be compared to other fingerprint records by NamUs examiners or forensic subject-matter experts across the country. These comparisons can result in rapid identifications of decedents, as well as exclusions. Over 1,800 missing and unidentified person cases in NamUs have been resolved through fingerprint comparisons.

B. Forensic Odontology (Dental Records)

Law enforcement, medical examiners, and coroners rely on dental records to establish legal and verifiable identifications of missing and unidentified persons. Dental records provide an opportunity to make rapid, cost-effective, detailed comparisons between individuals to find or rule out potential matches.

NamUs forensic odontologists combined have over 40 years of experience. They ensure the quality, completeness, and accuracy of all dental information entered into NamUs case files and perform dental comparisons to disposition leads.

Agencies can directly upload dental information for missing and unidentified persons to NamUs. Agencies can also ship original records to NamUs to be digitally scanned, coded, and uploaded to the NamUs case file. NamUs provides prepaid shipping labels to submit records for processing, and all original records are returned to the submitting agency after upload.

Forensic odontologists can perform immediate comparisons when dental records are pre-loaded into NamUs case files. Over 1,800 missing and unidentified person cases in NamUs have been resolved through dental comparisons.

C. Forensic DNA Analysis

Due to historical misuse of DNA samples collected for research, such as an Arizona State University project that used DNA samples from the Havasupai Indians to study issues outside their original research proposal, tribal leaders and citizens often have concerns over providing DNA for missing person investigations. Unlike some past research projects and direct-to-consumer DNA services, however, DNA samples collected from family members of missing persons are carefully protected.

The DNA profiles developed from these samples are uploaded only to the Combined DNA Index System, or CODIS. Once in CODIS, family profiles can only be searched against the DNA profiles of unidentified persons and their remains in CODIS. Family profiles are never shared outside of staff who require access to this

information to perform comparisons. Because the condition of remains often precludes visual and fingerprint identifications, DNA can become a critical tool in identifying remains and, in turn, locating missing persons.

For missing person cases, voluntary DNA samples can be collected from family members to compare to unidentified persons; the samples then remain in CODIS. At the time of collection, family members will be asked to sign a consent form specific to the laboratory that will process their samples. Family DNA samples are typically collected through buccal swabs, which are oral swabs used to collect skin cells from the inside of the cheek. Samples must be collected by criminal justice personnel for the resulting profiles to be uploaded to CODIS. Once uploaded to CODIS, family profiles will be searched only against the unidentified person and remains profiles to locate missing loved ones. Family profiles are not searched against any other profiles in CODIS, such as suspect profiles from unsolved crimes, and families may request that their profiles be removed from CODIS at any time by submitting a written revocation of their consent to the laboratory.

There are different kinds of DNA profiles that can be created from samples. In general, DNA profiles from a missing person's biological mother, father, children, or full siblings will be most effective for searching for matching profiles in CODIS. Some types of profiles can only be created for males; in these cases, only men from the paternal lineage, such as the missing person's father, can provide family DNA to search for these profiles in CODIS.

NamUs staff work with criminal justice agencies and forensic laboratories across the country to ensure all missing and unidentified person cases have sufficient DNA profiles for searching in CODIS. Although the *actual* genetic profiles are not stored in the NamUs database, each case file can be updated to reflect the *types* of DNA profiles available, the laboratory that performed the analyses, and other important information.

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Over 4,900 missing and unidentified person cases in NamUs have been resolved through DNA comparisons.

In 2021, the NamUs program began offering forensic genetic genealogy, a technique that combines traditional genealogy research with DNA analysis. When a CODIS search does not yield results, law enforcement and crime labs may turn to alternative strategies, including forensic genetic genealogy. Forensic genetic genealogy combines genetic and genealogical methods to generate leads for law enforcement entities investigating crimes and identifying human remains.

VI. Conclusion

The NamUs program provides a system to help resolve missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases across the United States. Information entered into NamUs is publicly accessible, searchable, and comparable across states and jurisdictions. After being reported to NamUs, over 28,000 missing person cases and over 5,400 unidentified person cases have been resolved to date.

Although the use of NamUs is required by legislation in 13 states,

entry of cases remains largely voluntary for most of the country, which means cases entered do not represent national trends in missing and unidentified person cases, nor does it represent every active case being investigated.

Trust must continue to be built between the public (including AI/AN communities) and law enforcement concerning investigations, forensic science, and the cultural and spiritual sensitivities surrounding these cases. It is imperative that communication continue between all parties involved. NamUs can help facilitate that communication.

Adding forensic genetic genealogy to the NamUs suite of services is just one way the program has grown. We hope that future improvements can be made to aid in the resolution of cases; however, the effectiveness of NamUs will continue to rely upon the number of cases, and the quality of the information entered. As more cases are added to the system, the greater likelihood that more cases will be solved.

End Notes

1. Task Force (Jan. 2021). Operation Lady Justice's First Report on increasing the safety of American Indians and Alaska Natives,

Vol. 14, Issue 1. Available at https://cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/01-2021/cp_dispatch_jan_lady_justice.html.

2. For this article, AI/AN people signify the cultural distinction between the Indigenous peoples of the continental U.S. and those of Alaska. The terms are in no way intended to minimize or ignore the great diversity of Indigenous cultures, languages, and nationalities in the U.S.

3. Unclaimed person cases involve deceased people who have been identified but whose next of kin have not been located or whose bodies have not been claimed.

4. Entering missing persons information requires the user to register for an account with the system.

5. Cases entered into NamUs may be unpublished, published, or archived. All case entries are vetted with the appropriate law enforcement agency prior to publication. This vetting includes a review of the case data for accuracy, completeness, and appropriateness for public viewing.

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