

Ursula Barwick inquest hears of catastrophic failures by NSW police in missing persons cold cases

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Peter Barwick passed away months before a coronial inquest into his daughter's disappearance. (*Australian Story/supplied*)

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It took more than three decades for the family of teenager Ursula Barwick to receive the apology it had longed for.

Key points:

- A coronial inquest laid bare a litany of police errors and at times lack of investigation into Ursula's disappearance
- The inquest heard police and partner agency databases were riddled with errors
- NSW Police are collecting DNA from families of missing persons in the hope it will lead to answers

"I would like to assure you that we are going to do so much better; that those mistakes that were made won't be made again," the head of the NSW Missing Persons Registry, Detective Inspector Glen Browne, said in the NSW Coroner's Court.

Ursula's parents were never able to hear those words. Her mother Cheree died in 2004 without knowing the fate of her daughter, and her father Peter died unexpectedly just six months ago.

So Ursula's stepmother Elizabeth Barwick and aunt Dianne Panov sat alone in the near-empty court last month, intent on bearing witness to this moment on behalf of their loved ones who could not be there.



Ursula at age 11, with her mother Cheree. *(Supplied: Barwick family)*

It was a bittersweet moment that came after decades of police inaction on Ursula's missing persons case that had hidden the truth about the 17-year-old's fate in a file, just waiting to be discovered.

"I was grateful they finally acknowledged that they didn't do their job," Elizabeth says. "But why couldn't we have got that before? It was a little too late for me at the time because of Pete."



Ursula was mistakenly marked "located" from 1994 to 1999 due to a data-entry error.*(Supplied: Barwick family)*

The apology came at the end of two and a half weeks of evidence that laid bare a litany of police errors and at times lack of investigation into Ursula's disappearance.

Even more shocking, the inquest brought to light that police and partner agency databases are so riddled with errors and missing information, that officers are unable to provide families of the missing with answers that could be in the files right now.

Country girl searching for adventure

Ursula was last seen by her family in the late spring of 1987 boarding a train at Tuggerah on the Central Coast, bound for a new job and big adventure in Sydney.

And then she vanished.

She had just turned 17. A country girl, trusting and naive in her denim jacket and jeans. "She was in a joyful mood," her father Peter remembered.

"Never in our wildest dreams when she got on that train, did we ever, ever think that that would be the last time we actually saw her."

Space to play or pause, M to mute, left and right arrows to seek, up and down arrows for volume.

WATCH

Duration: 1 minute 26 seconds



Ursula Barwick boarded a train bound for Sydney and was never seen by her family again.

What he didn't know then was that just weeks after he reported Ursula missing, she was found. But he would not learn the truth for another 30 years.

Instead, Ursula's family and friends were thrown into a nightmarish world of panic and fear that all families of the missing know so well.

"It's a grief that you can't explain," her aunt Dianne says. "Is she dead or is she alive? Is she coming home? Is she not? It's a really hard way to live."



Instead of phoning her parents when she arrived in Sydney as she had promised, Ursula ended up in Kings Cross, hanging out with a group of street kids. (AAP: Paul Miller)

Investigation 'didn't go anywhere'

Ursula's family and friends endured 29 years of torment before the [police finally discovered she had died in a car crash just weeks after being reported missing](#).

It was a case that could have been solved quickly — Ursula's father reported her missing with a photo at police headquarters in Sydney's CBD, and weeks later her body arrived at the Glebe Coroner's Court under the name "Jessie", just a few kilometres away.

But during evidence at the recent inquest, Ursula's family discovered the original missing persons report no longer existed, and there was no record of any initial investigation into her disappearance. Police had all the opportunity to connect the two cases, but no-one was looking.

"We were all extremely surprised and quite shocked," Dianne says. "We did believe that when we did say that she was missing that they would investigate it. We didn't realise that it didn't go anywhere. It just went into a void."



Ursula's family has questioned why, in the initial stages of their investigation, police never crosschecked bodies in the morgue with missing persons reports. *(Supplied: Barwick family)*

'Unforgivable' oversights

Ursula's family is not alone.

Ursula's case is one of four missing persons investigations under the microscope at the inquest before deputy state coroner Derek Lee.

Errors examined in 2008

Graeme Charles Taylor, 39, Sydney

Reported missing: December 1993

Body found: May 1992

Match discovered: 2007

Police had his fingers prints on file, but his body remained unidentified for 14 years

Mark Thomas Davis, 35, Sydney

Reported missing: December 1998

Body found: May 1998

Match discovered: 2005

Disappeared while bushwalking in the Blue Mountains. His body lay in the morgue for two-and-a-half years and he remained unidentified for seven years

Daniel James Alexander Cumming, 22, Sydney

Reported missing: September 1, 2001

Body found: September 7, 2001

Match discovered: 2005

Disappeared from Waverley. Six days later his body was found off Bronte Beach, less than 2km away. His body remained unidentified for four years

Gary Jones was 27 when he vanished in November 1990, Christof Meier disappeared in 2002 and Lionel Daveson went missing in 2007. Like Ursula, their remains were not matched with their missing persons files, and the fates of all three men remained a mystery for years.

This has been a recurring problem for police.

Another three separate inquests, held more than a decade ago in 2008, examined cases of men who again had all died not long after going missing.

"There are hundreds of remains and bones in the custody of police and morgues. To think that they belong possibly to your loved one, but due to a lack of resourcing you've got to continue with that daily torment of not knowing and the grief, it's unforgivable," says Loren O'Keeffe, founder of the Missing Persons Advocacy Network.

In 2008, NSW deputy coroner Paul MacMahon concluded [the NSW Missing Persons Unit was guilty of a "gross failure"](#) and he recommended the unit be overhauled.

In response, the NSW Police launched Operation Firenze in 2010, which ultimately led to the breakthrough in Ursula's case. Its goal was to review the 587 long-term missing people in NSW and look for matches within the 326 unidentified bodies or sets of remains.

Missing Persons case records are kept across three different agencies — the NSW Police, Department of Forensic Medicine and the coroner's court. But through Operation Firenze, NSW Police discovered they were missing records of many unidentified bodies and remains.



In 2010 the Australian Federal Police featured Ursula in a major campaign using new age-progression technology. (Supplied)

Breakthrough for Ursula

In 2010 Senior Constable Adam Marsh found a file from the coroner's court that was not on file with NSW Police. It was about a teenage girl who'd died in a car crash in 1987, and had been listed as unidentified, but was known as "Jessica Pearce".

When he looked at the crash scene photographs, he soon recognised a resemblance to the photos on file of missing teenager Ursula Barwick. The dates and locations also matched up.

He raised his suspicions with his superiors at the time, but he couldn't establish proof and did not feel supported to pursue his hunch.

Counsel assisting the coroner: "Why not ask the officer in charge of Ursula's case, Detective Noble?"

Senior Constable Marsh: "I'd already been ridiculed by the people I was working with about what I thought. Detective Noble, who is busy working on other cases, is going to say, 'Why are you wasting my time?'"

Five years later in 2015, when he saw a photo of Ursula he'd never seen before, Senior Constable Marsh raised his suspicions again with his superiors, even though he had moved on from the Missing Persons Unit.

When the new detectives in charge of Ursula's case showed the photos to Ursula's family, it proved the breakthrough they needed to close the case.

"I got up, I went and sat on the end of the bed," Ursula's father Peter told Australian Story in 2019. "I couldn't handle it. It's been so long, so hard. And there it was sitting in front of me."



Ursula at age 11 with her father Peter and little sister Kate. (Supplied: Barwick family)

Working with a broken system

Other successful matches came from Operation Firenze, but it was a huge workload, and the Ursula Barwick inquest heard it was significantly understaffed, with less than half the recommended officers.

The operation was wound up in 2015 despite not being completed. Missing persons staff continued to try to find matches between long-term missing people and unidentified remains, but they were working with a system that had still not been fixed.

Missing Persons Unit team leader email to management — July 2017:

"It is now at a critical point where the team are really not in a position to do their job accurately ...

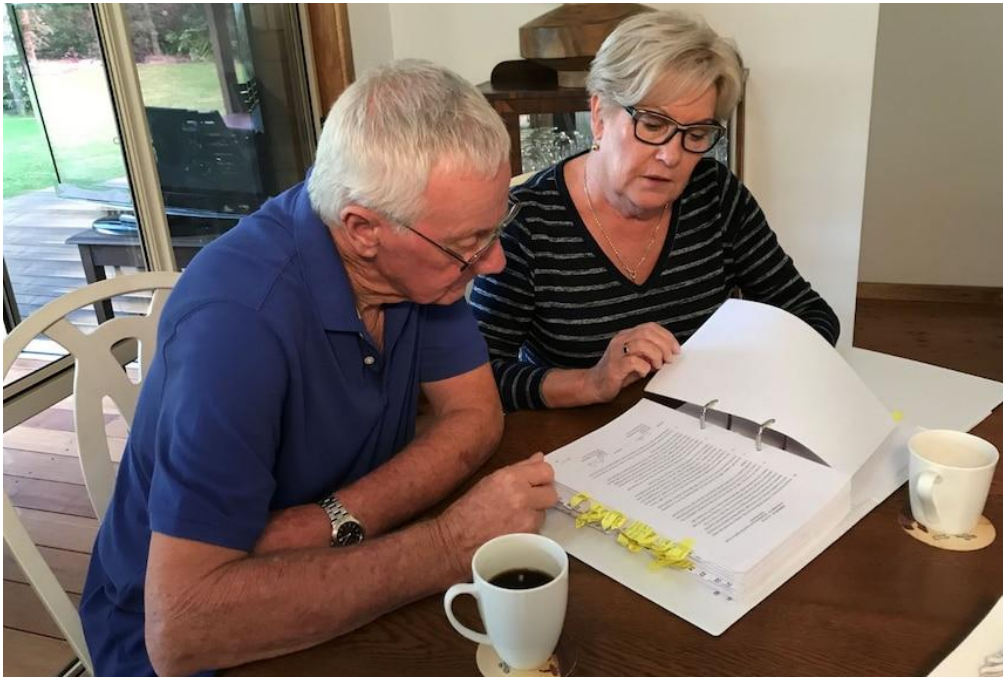
"We are unable to accurately match bodies/remains with long-term missing in NSW and around Australia if the data in each of the databases is incorrect ...

"We have dropped the ball and fallen so far behind with technology and advancements ..."

YOUTUBE Full episode: Forever Young

Data entry error lists Ursula as 'located'

Loren from the Missing Persons Advocacy Network described the evidence heard at Ursula's inquest as "unfathomable".



Peter and Elizabeth Barwick look through the police file into the 1987 disappearance of Ursula. *(Australian Story: Winsome Denyer)*

Aside from there being lost files, incomplete databases and a lack of investigation from day one, the court heard Ursula was mistakenly marked as "located" for five years, seemingly due to a data entry error.

"After 34 long years, the police are finally being held accountable for the catastrophic failures that Ursula's case has highlighted," Loren says.

The inquest heard the detective who was assigned her case between 2002 and 2014 did very little to investigate. He did not take statements from family members or source a photograph when the original went missing.

Inquest, February 2021:

Officer-in-charge, 2002-2014: "Unfortunately I can only say it was due to prioritisation of other work which pushed this case down."

"It's a real kick in the guts because families are looking to the authorities for support and guidance," Loren says.



Liz Barwick speaks outside the NSW Coroner's Court at Lidcombe, Sydney, after the inquest. (*Australian Story: Winsome Denyer*)

The NSW Police Force was approached for comment but declined to make a statement prior to the coroner's findings. They are due in August 2021.

Since Ursula's case has come to light, the NSW Police Force has restructured the previous Missing Persons Unit. Earlier this year it also launched initiatives to collect DNA from families in the hope that matches could be made.

In August 2020, the National DNA Program for Unidentified and Missing Persons was launched through the Australian Federal Police.

"The fact that it will bring answers to countless families around the country is very exciting, it's long overdue," Loren says.

"We just hope that all of the police jurisdictions collaborate and get involved so that they can give families the answers that they deserve."



There is no record of any initial investigation into the disappearance of Ursula, pictured with her brother Andrew and sister Kate. *(Supplied: Barwick family)*

For Ursula's family, the inquest into her disappearance and subsequent investigation has been a long time coming.

"If they had done their job back then, like they've done now, it would have made our life a lot easier ... easier to live with the facts," Elizabeth Barwick says.

"I feel very frustrated that other families are going through what we did unnecessarily because the system should have been fixed by now."

Source: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-26/ursula-barwick-coronial-inquest-police-missing-person-mistakes/100082262>