

TORONTO — Dylan Reibling struggled to believe what the police had just told him.

The detective on the phone explained to Reibling that his close friend wasn't who he said he was. Every detail the friend told Reibling about himself was a lie, even the small town bond he thought they shared.

“And I bought it – hook, line and sinker,” Reibling said.

And now that friend, Michael de Bourcier, was dead.

In the 15 years since the phone call, Reibling has been on a personal quest to find out who his friend really was. The search hasn't been easy for the 38-year-old documentarian. He broke through slowly before finally discovering the true identity of his friend as a Syracuse University alumnus who disappeared in 1992.

The smell of a “significantly decomposed” body led authorities into de Bourcier's apartment on April 3, 2002. There they found him dead, the victim of an apparent heart attack. As police searched the house, they discovered fabricated documents and the information for a funeral company in his wallet.

“Mike was living under a fake identity,” Reibling said.

De Bourcier had prepaid his own funeral, and his death was ruled to have been under “mysterious circumstances.” It has since been determined that his death was a result of natural causes and there was no foul play.

Police then called Reibling, who had volunteered to be a reference for de Bourcier on his passport application. The two had become friends working together at a small Internet service provider in Toronto. Reibling said they “just hit it off.”



Michael de Bourcier, shown here working as a salesman at a small Internet service provider in Toronto in the early 2000s, assumed a fake identity. **PHOTO BY DAVE GILBERT**

Reibling and de Bourcier would grab beers and a bite to eat together across the street. When Reibling was transferred to the night shift, he'd come in early just to talk to his otherwise quiet friend with a dry sense of humor.

They bonded over their small-town roots – Reibling from Baden, Ontario, and de Bourcier, who said he was from Goderich, Ontario, with populations of 4,500 and 7,628, respectively.

Reibling believed he could help the police. He thought he had answers to their questions.

Do you know where he grew up? De Bourcier’s identifying documents were fraudulent.

Do you know where he went to high school? He faked his diploma.

Do you know where he went to university? The college degree was forged.

“It was a pretty big hole in my life,” Reibling said. “It was a pretty fundamental event.”

He questioned not only his past friendship with de Bourcier and the emptiness his death left him, but the new friends he met and the stories they shared about themselves.

Reibling wouldn’t be at peace until he found answers.

In his mind, he retraced his steps with de Bourcier to see if he’d missed something in their two years of friendship. Over the course of a decade, he compiled a file with the limited information he did know. He would open the dossier once or twice each year, chase down a few leads, hit a dead end and put the file away.

The search intensified in 2014 as Reibling successfully pitched the idea of a documentary to a Canadian foundation, which allowed him to hire private investigator Dave Perry and continue searching, albeit with limited results.



Dylan Reibling spent 12 years on and off searching for the true identity of his friend. His work on a documentary about the quest inspired a more invested search for answers. **PHOTO BY JAMIE MILLER**

“I’ve never seen a case like this,” said Perry, a former Toronto Police Service homicide detective who founded and runs the Pickering, Ontario-based Investigative Solutions Network. “It wasn’t going to be easy, but I’ve been an

investigator for almost 40 years and I knew that there was some potential here that we might be able to solve the mystery.”

Reibling, an amateur sleuth, talked to other former colleagues, but their memories of de Bourcier had faded. A trip to de Bourcier’s alleged hometown turned up nothing. He called dozens of Toronto cemeteries looking for the grave. When Reibling finally got a location — Section 19 of Beechwood Cemetery — he found an unmarked grave.

Police told Reibling about the real Michael de Bourcier, the one he later found out died in May 1973 at 4 years old after falling from a truck driven by his father. The Michael de Bourcier that Reibling met in 2000 would have been roughly the same age as the child.

In a last-ditch effort to learn his friend’s true identity, Reibling searched through dozens of pages of missing person records, in hopes he’d find a headshot that resembled his heavysset, brown-haired, blue-eyed friend.

On March 16, 2015, he found the photo he was looking for.

“That’s him,” Reibling said four times when he discovered the profile of James Scott Walton.

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I’ve never seen a case like this.

Dave Perry
Private Investigator

Walton, who went by Jim, went missing Aug. 2, 1992, from Caledonia, Ontario, when he left his family to come to the United States. He told his mother he was

traveling to Syracuse to visit his friends from SU, which he attended for 15 months as a graduate student, from August 1988 until his graduation in 1989.

That fabricated trip to Syracuse was the last time Walton's family and friends heard from him.

The car Walton drove was found near the Buffalo Niagara International Airport. Everything was inside except for his passport and the clothes he was wearing. No note. No apparent reason. Just gone. There's belief that he had some financial trouble and wanted to disappear. There are theories relating to his knowledge of Russia and the time correlation between his disappearance and the fall of the Soviet Union.

Reibling, anxious and hesitant to re-open old wounds, cold-called Walton's mother and sister along with Perry, the private investigator. The four agreed to meet to discuss the findings.

"It was tough," Reibling said about the call, pausing to catch his breath as his stoic demeanor faded.

He hadn't been able to hold back during his first meeting with the Waltons. In tears, they realized the man they both knew, one Jim Walton and one Michael de Bourcier, was the same person. DNA confirmed it on May 7, 2015. Yet the eight years between disappearance and friendship leave just as many questions as answers.

Missing Persons

There were many twists and turns in the life of Michael de Bourcier/Jim Walton. Here's a breakdown of key events.

- 1965: James Scott Walton is born
- 1968: Michael de Bourcier is born

- May 1973: De Bourcier is killed in a car accident at age 4
- August 1988: Walton starts at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs
- 1989: Walton graduates from SU
- Aug. 2, 1992: Walton disappears
- 2000: Walton, now going by the identity of Michael de Bourcier, befriends Dylan Reibling at work
- April 3, 2002: Walton (de Bourcier) is found dead in his Toronto apartment
- March 16, 2015: Reibling discovers Walton's missing person profile while searching for the real identity of de Bourcier
- May 7, 2015: DNA tests confirm Walton and de Bourcier are the same person

“The sad thing is, it’s such a waste of a life. Something that was so utterly forgivable – we certainly would have embraced him,” Walton’s sister, who, along with the mother, wished to have their privacy respected in the documentary, said about him disappearing. “It’s just sad that he felt that wasn’t possible.”

Sitting in his apartment — just a few blocks from the one where he got the original call — Reibling stops halfway through reading a text message from Walton’s sister. He wipes tears from his eyes.

“I didn’t really think of it as a missing persons case,” Reibling said. “It was always about me finding answers and it’s just been icing on the cake that they’ve gotten closure as well.”

Reibling isn’t settling on the fact that he found the identity of his friend. He’s moving forward with the search for what happened in those eight years, hoping to capture Walton’s entire life.

“That’s the big blank space,” said Perry, the private investigator.

It remains a mystery for now, though, as Reibling continues to press on, searching for answers about the man he thought he knew.

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Comments