

Introduction

Kirsten: Before the podcast begins, please note that this episode topic includes conversations where abduction, violence, human trafficking and death is mentioned or alluded to. Due to the theme of this episode, it is recommended for adult listeners only.

[Music]

Kirsten: You're listening to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast that dives into the stories of the people, programs and resources within the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. Each episode, we'll give you the scoop from department personnel on how NCDPS enhances the safety of the people of North Carolina.

[Music]

Season 2 Episode 5

Kirsten: The North Carolina Center for Missing Persons was created in 1985. Since then, the center has worked with local, state and federal law enforcement agencies to locate missing individuals and reunite them with their loved ones. The center is one of many missing child clearinghouses. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children maintains a liaison with these clearinghouses in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, US Virgin Islands, Canada and the Netherlands and ensures they are familiar with the many resources available for families, law enforcement and communities.

Nona Everett is the Director of the North Carolina Center for Missing Persons. She has a long career of public service, including many roles within the Department of Public Safety. However, her work with the center, as she calls it, has been a passion project for the last several years of her professional career. Not only is Nona a dedicated public servant, which you will hear throughout this podcast, but if I may be subjective for just a moment, she is an extraordinarily caring and kind person and is a wealth of knowledge. I'm—I'm excited to have you on the Safety Scoop, and so thank you for letting me come and have a conversation with you.

Director Nona Everett: Thank you for inviting me to have this conversation with you. I'm very excited about—*always* excited about talking about the center.

Kirsten: Well, let's just kick it off. What interested you in a career in this field, and what were you doing before you became Director of the North Carolina Center for Missing Persons?

Dir. Everett: Well, before I became the Director of the North Carolina Center for Missing Persons, and before I even started working for the state, I was in the military. So, I'm retired navy, and once I got out of the military, I wanted something totally different, so I started working for the women's prison here in Raleigh. And I did that for a while, and then I went to the SBI and did fingerprints on background checks, and from the SBI went to ALE as a supervisor to help bring on the lottery when we first started the lottery in the state. And then from there I went to the missing persons as a Missing Persons Technician. Then when the Missing Persons Supervisor resigned in 2009, I became the supervisor there.

Kirsten: Wow. So, you've kind of made a full circle...

Dir. Everett: Full circle!

Kirsten: [Laughs]

...through DPS.

Dir. Everett: Yeah, I— have. It's been a very interesting career. I've done the Missing Persons Center longer than anything else, but it's been great working for the Department of Public Safety.

Kirsten: Was there anything in particular that interested you in the Center for Missing Persons?

Dir. Everett: At the time, it was—it was, like I said, you know, as I'm coming out of the military, you want to do something totally different. I got close to the supervisor, you know, and just hearing her talk about some of the cases and the progress of the center. It was really something that I was interested in because I felt like that I could lend my skills and—and my management skills into help the center grow into a more civilian agency because before it was law enforcement, and then they switched it over to totally civilian. So, we had to do things totally different. But I found interest in helping people. I'm always willing to help somebody, so being involved in that was what made it interesting and just the investigative part of it sometimes. You know, it's interesting. So, I found it very interesting and—and worthwhile to look into. And I've enjoyed it.

Kirsten: How does the Center for Missing Persons fit into the North Carolina Department of Public Safety?

Dir. Everett: Well, when the center left ALE after the supervisor resigned, then they did not refill my position. So, it was only me. The center is required to, um, mandated by statute to respond 24/7, so they had to find something to back the center up. And under Highway Patrol, we have Troop C communications which is 24 hours/365, so they chose to move me to Highway Patrol from ALE so that I can have that back up.

Kirsten: The State Highway Patrol Troop C communications provide support for Nona. She handles most calls on her own, including on some nights, weekends and holidays. The center maintains a nationwide toll-free telephone number that is available 24 hours a day with a staff member always on call. Each year, more than 10,000 people are reported missing to the NC Center for Missing Persons. The reasons behind these reports vary, and most of the individuals who have disappeared eventually return or are found by law enforcement officers and do not involve foul play. Many adults who are reported missing don't want to be found, or the situation may involve memory loss, mental illness or a history of drug use or alcoholism. In 2022, 14,897 missing person reports were filed with the center.

Dir. Everett: Uh yeah, it's been me since 2009, and it—it is a big role to fill, but it's very fulfilling. And like I said, I couldn't do it without Troop C backing me up. They are really my—my first assistant is Troop C communications.

Kirsten: For those telecommunicators, is there any additional training that they receive to assist the center?

Dir. Everett: Well, mainly they assist the center with activating alerts after hours. Any other phone calls that come into the center when I'm out of the office during the day or after hours, they forward it to my either my voicemail, or they send it to me in email. So, the main thing they assist me with is mandating the 1-800 number 24/7, and the only thing they actually work for me after hours is alerts.

Kirsten: Since you brought up alerts, what are the different types of alerts, and what do they mean?

Dir. Everett: So, right now we have five alerts in the center. We have the Blue Alert which is for law enforcement down. We have the Ashanti Alert, and that is for an adult abduction. We will see that in domestic violent cases. We have the Silver Alert now which we've known. That word is familiar for a long time, but we have separated it, and the Silver Alert is now just for anyone who is 50 and older that has dementia or Alzheimer's. And then we have the Missing Endangered Alert which is for any age, and that is for anyone with a cognitive impairment. The last one is the Amber Alert which is for anyone that is 17 years or younger to believed to have been abducted or to be in imminent danger of injury or death.

Kirsten: What qualifies as a missing person?

Dir. Everett: Any missing child or person, regardless of the circumstances, that a parent or legal guardian or person responsible for the supervision of that person has reported missing to a law enforcement agency. The individual is believed to have been missing or become missing regardless of the circumstances. So, it's just any person that, to simplify it, that is out of place. Any person where you don't know where they're at and you don't understand why. A lot of times we get phone calls on adults, and it's like, this is not their usual behavior. Because law enforcement, they get a missing person's report on an adult, and they're

like, “Well, you know, they're adults. They can go and come.” But as long as you know that that's not their usual behavior, you can do a missing person's report. And of course, on children, we want you to do a missing person's report immediately if you do not know where your child is.

Kirsten: And what are some misconceptions people have about the process of filing a missing person's report?

Dir. Everett: I think the biggest misconception we still deal with is the waiting period, especially for adults. We definitely know that the law says there's no waiting period to, um, to report a child missing. Of course, you're mandated to report your child missing. But adults and teenagers, there seems to be, um, that still, that miss—that myth of 24 hours or 48 hours, and there is no waiting period to report someone missing. If you believe someone is out of place, it's unusual that you can't get in contact with them, report it to law enforcement immediately.

Kirsten: So, really trust that gut instinct that you have. If someone is not where they should be...

Dir. Everett: Right.

Kirsten: ...just go ahead and report it.

Dir. Everett: Right. We have employees that call in and say, you know, “Well, Mary never misses work, you know. She's always here, and she's missed two days, and we can't get in touch with her.” That's very high unusual conduct, and so they—there should be high concern to report someone like that missing. If you have someone that lives alone, and you can't get in touch with them, either do a welfare check on them, have law enforcement do a welfare check on them, or ask for a missing person's report.

Kirsten: Can you take us through what happens from the time someone reports an individual as missing?

Dir. Everett: Okay, so, I tell families when you report someone missing, they're either going to send a patrol officer out to you to take a report, or you can go in and give a report. And if you're unable, like sometimes we have people call in from out of state or out of town, you know, you may need to do a missing person's report in Charlotte and you live in Greenville, and so they can take it over the phone. But once the law enforcement agency takes the missing person's report, puts the person in the system as missing, then that case has to be assigned to a detective. The person that takes the report initially, most likely it's not the person who's going to actively work the case, so I tell families to wait at least 24 to 48 hours and call back. Make sure your, um, your missing person was put in the system and ask who your case was assigned to. And that detective that the case was assigned to will be the family's point of contact.

Kirsten: So then from there, do you—can you provide any insight on what happens next after a detective is assigned?

Dir. Everett: Once the detective is assigned, I explain to families that these detectives are very busy, and a detective most of the time is not in the office. So, you may have a hard time getting in touch with your detective. But I always say, “The family is the voice of the missing person.” You have to keep your missing person's name out there, their face out there, their case out there. You have to sometimes keep calling and keep calling with any information that you get. You can't just take the report to the law enforcement agency and think that they're going to do everything. You have to do something, too. I mean, we get over 10,000 missing persons reports a year, so you have to get out there and advocate for your missing loved one.

Kirsten: Every podcast I like to ask our guests if they have a success story that really stands out during their time in their role. While working for the Center for Missing Persons, has there been a moment that has stuck with you that showcased extraordinary teamwork or a job well done?

Dir. Everett: [Sighs]

I mean, since 2009, that's been a lot, a lot of cases. There's been a couple of Amber Alerts where, you know, we were really, really lucky to get the child back alive and unharmed. Especially one out of New Hanover County where the young girl was found the next day tied to a tree. Then you have one out of Fayetteville where, you know, where she was recovered, and it went on for days. And the ones that make the international news and national news, you know, are the ones that—that really stick out.

I think the biggest one, though, that I will take with me is when I brought my own cousin home after being missing for 20 years. To be able to locate her after 20 years and bring her home to her family and to finally have a service for her, that will always be the highlight of my career because it's family, you know? And she was gone for so long.

There have been a couple of abducted parental abductions that I assisted with that are near and dear to my heart. My first one which took me, like, I think we worked that case for two and a half, almost 3 years before we got his son back, but w-we stuck with it. We worked with four or five different law enforcement agencies as she moved across the country. But after about two and a half, almost 3 years, we finally got his son back. And then there was one other case out of Tennessee where I helped the father get his daughter back across the state lines of Tennessee. So, there's just, you know, there's a lot of cases that I will never forget, but I think the, of course, the star will always be able to bring my family home after 20 years.

Kirsten: I—I just got goosebumps when you said that.

Dir. Everett:

Yeah. Angie Toler was her name, and she went missing in Virginia with her boyfriend, and he returned, and he returned without her. And he told the family that she left Virginia, went to New York with some other people which, you know, we never believed, but we could never prove. And she ended up being unidentified in—in Virginia.

I was in Atlanta, Georgia at a training for [unintelligible], and the corner from Virginia was there doing a training session, and he flashed her picture, and I saw it. And so, after—after the training, I went back to him and asked him to show me the picture again. And when I saw it, I knew it was her. And so, from there we were able to DNA and—and get her family notified and locate her. So, it was a joyous closure. Her homegoing service, even though she wasn't there, she was there in spirit, and it was just beautiful to be able to do this for her mom before her mom passed away. She still living, but before she passed away, you know, to finally bring Angie home. It was—it was just wonderful for the whole family. The entire family.

Kirsten:

So, you know what the—the emotions that people go through. You—you understand.

Dir. Everett:

Yes. I understand firsthand, and you know, it's so weird because people always say, when you tell them what you do, they're like, "Oh what a great job! What interesting job!" And I'm like, yeah, but every time I answer the phone, there's a loved one on the other end saying somebody's missing. That's not lovely and interesting and fun, you know? I've talked on the phone to people crying and hurting and pleading and telling me that people just don't disappear off the face of the Earth, but sometimes they do. I mean, they're still on the Earth somewhere, but we have no idea what happened to them.

Kirsten:

So, bringing that up, what keeps you going? I mean, like you said, this is not all sprinkles and rainbows. There are some dark moments. What keeps you going? What keeps you motivated?

Dir. Everett:

I think what keeps you—keeps me going is the cases that you assist with that you solve, that you help, and—and when you hear that person on the end of—even if you're just giving of information. You know, people will call you and say, you know, "I'm being transferred here and transferred there," and when you stop and take the time and get them to a person where they know they won't be transferred anymore, they're so appreciative of it because they're so stressed out, you know, that someone is missing. And they just need someone to say, "I got it. We're going to take care of it. We're going to do it."

And so, it's just like the guy that called me from South Carolina the other day. They had a missing father with a child, and they had been spotted in Fayetteville about three days before that. And he's like, "And so, South Carolina wouldn't do an Amber Alert because it's been too long." But after I got off the phone with him, I'm like, I—I can't let it go, you know? If this father is with this child, and

she's handicapped, and he's a fugitive, and it's cold, and they're panhandling, I'm getting ready to light up North Carolina.

[Laughs]

You know? Until we find that child, if she's still in North Carolina. You know? So, it's things like that, having that discretion to make that decision. All the decisions are not easy to make, you know, they really aren't. You know, when you deny—deny or delay an Amber Alert, you just don't roll over and go back to sleep. You know, it's "did I make the right decision? Will that child be safe?" You know, you have to bring in your faith sometimes, you know, and just pray your way through some of these decisions that you make as Amber Alert coordinator and everything like that.

Kirsten: Kind of looking to the future and kind of what happens in the present that kind of drives everything. Are there any initiatives or partnerships that you'd like to share with your listeners?

Dir. Everett: Well, the biggest thing I think I would like to share with our listeners now is that, you know, we—we launched a new website, and it's NCCMP at ncdps.gov. And it's everything missing persons, so we're not... You don't have to go to the Department of Public Safety's website anymore and dig through to get to. And so, we have our own website now. We have stats up there, and we can grow that to anything we want. And hopefully, they'll be able to go up there in future and see posters, do some training, get training materials. And so, that's a website that the future is just wide open for information and training and learning. So, I'm excited about that. I'm getting short.

[Laughs]

Hopefully I'll be retiring next year. So, it's just that—that project that we got done this year is the future for the center. It is the future of the center because everything is automated. All the alerts are automated now. You don't have to wait to find the information. You can go straight to our website to find information, and like I said, as we grow that website, anything missing persons in North Carolina, you'll be able to do—get in one click and be there. So, I'm excited about that.

Kirsten: And just out of curiosity, I saw the human trafficking poster in the hallway. Does the Center for Missing Persons have anything to do with those initiatives?

Dir. Everett: Well, we, um, we have very little to do. We do training on it. I'm, so, I have to go to all the human trafficking trainings that I can go to because I am required to go out and train law enforcement on—on all aspects of missing persons, and—unfortunately, human trafficking is a part of missing persons a lot of times. Our kids that fall through the crack end up in human trafficking, so I have to make myself familiar with those things and get training in that and be able to give training in that. And then we do get reports of missing kids that are suspected of

being in human trafficking or are in danger of being human traffic, and it's our job to make sure that information is passed on to the proper authorities.

Kirsten: Is there any way the public can help support your efforts?

Dir. Everett: I think the biggest thing that the public can do is when they see alerts to be aware and—and be interested in—in finding out what the information is and, you know, just being aware of their surroundings, especially if the alert is in their area somewhere. And like I said, once we get training up, training yourself on missing persons and—and not just thinking that it doesn't happen to you, or it doesn't happen in your community. And—and being able to talk to young people about how and why kids become missing.

Kirsten: Any final thoughts or anything else that we left out that you'd like to share?

Dir. Everett: Just being aware, you know, educating yourself on seh—human trafficking, educating yourself on how kids go missing through the Internet, being aware of what your kids are doing on the Internet. It's so important for parents and guardians to train yourself on social media because we are losing a lot of our teens because of social media. Meeting people, running off and running off to meet a 16-year-old and get there and it's a 50-year-old. So, just making sure that parents educate theirself to help keep the kids safe in our communities.

Kirsten: Any of those resources on the website now?

Dir. Everett: Most of those resources you can get through the National Center which is on our website. They have abundance of resources on anything pertaining to missing children. So, we're connected to them. They are our biggest partner. And so, I encourage parents to go straight to their website or go through our website to get anything that they need as far as educational materials for the classrooms, for church events. They can get all that from the National Center.

Kirsten: And thank you for shedding light on this. I know it's not the brightest of subjects to talk about, but just speaking with you about it, it gives me hope, and—and I really appreciate it.

Dir. Everett: Yeah. It's a... Yeah. It's a very important subject and, um, but the most important part of it is—is training. You know, educating ourselves on why kids go missing. You know, we always say ki—most likely kids are running *from* something other than running *to* something. So. Once we find out what they're running from, we're better able to protect them.

Kirsten: To find all the information discussed in this podcast, you can go to the North Carolina Center for Missing Persons website at nccmp.ncdps.gov. You can also call the center's toll free, 24-hour line at 1-800-522-5437. That's 1-800-522-KIDS, k-i-d-s. Thank you for listening to this episode of the Safety Scoop. National Missing Persons' Day is observed on February 3rd of every year. The purpose of this day is to bring awareness to the hundreds of unsolved missing

persons cases across the United States. Before this episode ends, we invite you to pause with us in a moment of silence for all missing individuals and their families.

[Several seconds of silence]

Kirsten: Thank you.

Conclusion

[Music]

Kirsten: This is the Safety Scoop, a podcast written, produced and edited by the NCDPS communications team. The mission of the North Carolina Department of Public Safety is to safeguard and preserve the lives and property of the people of North Carolina through prevention, protection and preparation. Follow the department on social media for a closer look at ongoing initiatives and resources. We're on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram at NC Public Safety. If you enjoyed today's episode, be sure to subscribe to the Safety Scoop on your favorite podcast app. I'm your host, Kirsten Barber. Thanks for listening.

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