

The Searcher

When someone goes missing and clues dry up, many call in Monica Caison—a North Carolina volunteer sleuth who specializes in cases gone cold



Missing Child - 10/5/00
 CUE Center 1-877-838-7852
 "Buddy" Myers



"I'm on call 24/7," says Caison of her work with the families of missing persons.



NO STONE UNTURNED

After her parents died, Leah Roberts felt lost. Inspired by the work of Beat author Jack Kerouac, the 23-year-old North Carolina State student hit the road to reexamine her life. In March 2000 she drove cross-country to Bellingham, Wash. There, that March 13, she bought a ticket to the movie *American Beauty*. Five days later her Jeep Cherokee was found in a park. "There was no body, no blood," says her sister Kara, 31. "Her valuables were there—cash, guitar, my mother's engagement ring. The car's windows had been busted out and covered with blankets—like someone had been living in it."

For months Kara prayed for a break in the case, but police had few leads. Then someone told her about Monica Caison, a mother of five from Wilmington, N.C., who has become

Caison heads to the woods for a canine search-and-rescue training session with her dog Heidi, who accompanies her when she's looking for real missing people. "When I get Heidi's harness," says Caison, "she knows she's going to work."



Crusaders

one of the nation's foremost citizen sleuths. In 1994 Caison launched the nonprofit Community United Effort (CUE) for Missing Persons. Her goal is to keep unsolved cases—even long cold ones—alive by any means necessary. With help from 5,000 CUE members, Caison prints up flyers, woos the media, raises money and pressures officials to keep the heat on. She also acts as a guardian angel to distraught loved ones. "My concern is what a missing loved one does to a family—it tears them apart," she says. "Whether they need an aspirin or a call to the governor, I'll stay with them. Whatever will help."

She also organizes searches—trudging into remote areas with her German shepherd Heidi. Working with law enforcement, CUE helps in about 600 cases a year; in the vast majority the

missing person—or body—is found. "There will be times when there's a dead end, but Monica never stops," says Sheriff Hubert Peterkin of Hoke County, N.C. "We can't afford *not* to use her."

Most of Caison's work, which is funded by donations, centers on North Carolina. But she also travels the country to help in high-profile cases and appears on national TV shows such as *Unsolved*

Mysteries. Still, she's careful not to give families false hope. "I won't tell them I will find their loved one," she says. "I won't tell them not to worry."

It's a lesson she learned in her first high-profile search: the 1998 case of

Peggy Carr, a 32-year-old bride-to-be from Wilmington abducted in a carjacking. After seven months in a massive CUE-led search, a volunteer found Carr's body in a field 50 miles from where she had been taken. Despite the outcome, Carr's mother, Penny Carr Britton, is grateful: "Monica would sit for hours and just comfort me." But the heartbreak takes its toll: The case of a 9-

“My concern is what a missing loved one does to a family—it tears them apart”

year-old boy found stuffed in a suitcase sent Caison to bed for four days. "I was asked to plan the funeral," she says. "When it came to selecting the casket, I didn't think I could do it." She did.

Few would have predicted Caison's calling when she was growing up, one of 11 children, in St. Petersburg, Fla. When her parents, John, a shoe salesman, and Irene (both deceased), divorced, Caison, who remained with her father, spun out of control. "I started running with gangs," she says. At 15, though, she went straight after joining her mother in North Carolina. There she met her husband of 20 years, Sam, 40, a subcontractor, and settled down. In 1994 she volunteered for a safety-awareness group that fingerprinted local children. When the group's director left, Caison took over, and CUE took shape. "I felt compelled to help," she says.

In her first search Caison helped find a teen runaway in four days. But increasingly, she has specialized in adults like Leah Roberts—whose loved ones don't have the resources available to families of missing kids. Five years have passed, but Caison has kept working the case, taking a caravan of volunteers on a Road to Remember tour last year to trace Leah's route west. "She won't give up until we find her," says Kara Roberts. And no matter what happens, Caison says she'll keep searching for missing persons. "We do it," she says, "because everyone is someone's child."



LOOKING FOR LEAH

For five years Kara Roberts has held out hope that her little sister Leah will somehow return home. With Monica Caison's help, she is still searching for her



When I think of Leah, I think of the bond we had growing up. We're two years apart, and we took care of each other in difficult times. She blossomed into a beautiful young woman and talked of joining the Peace

Corps. Leah could often be found in a coffee shop writing in her composition book, and I thought maybe one day she'd write the great American novel. Now, when I drive by a cafe, I think of her. In a weird way it's a comfort, like when I hear the song "Circle," by Edie Brickell & New Bohemians, which she loved. Or when I see a bag of Cheetos and think how she loved them when she was little. Thinking of Leah also makes me feel lost. I always felt the need to look out for her—and it's hard to know I can't protect her now.

If you have information about the whereabouts of Leah Roberts, please contact the Whatcom County, Vaah., Sheriff at (360) 676-6707, Det. Joseph, Ext. 50445 or CUE at (910) 232-1687.

By Richard Jerome, Michael Ballard in Charlotte, N.C., and Kristin Harmel in Charleston, S.C.