

The Missing Man

Fliers plastered everywhere. Friends scouring the city. High-tech search logistics. And psychics. Why can't San Francisco find Jerry Tang?

By Ryan Blitstein

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Today is Jerry Tang's 40th birthday, and his wife and children are here. So are his parents and sister, friends from as far back as elementary school, current co-workers, and colleagues from several jobs ago. But Jerry isn't in the room. He's been missing for 50 days. That's why they've all come to this Inner Sunset church: for a vigil.



James Sanders

Jerry Tang's friends and family pasted up thousands of fliers in the weeks after his disappearance.

\$10,000 REWARD - MISSING PERSON

The reward is offered for the SAFE RETURN of JERRY TANG

- Loving husband and father of 2
- Age 40; 6'1" tall; Asian-American; black hair and brown eyes
- Identifying marks: scar on shin and possibly reddish-pink blemish(s) on forehead and/or face
- Prone to seizures; requires medication twice daily
- Possible memory loss and/or confusion due to medical condition
- Last seen at his home in San Francisco on Nov. 29th, 2005
- San Francisco Police Case # 051347730



www.findjerry.org

Anyone having information regarding JERRY TANG please contact:

- SFPD 24/7: 415-553-1071
- Missing Persons (9-5 weekdays): 415-558-5508
- Direct family contact: 415-723-1111

Funding: \$5,000 from the Carole Sund/Carrington Foundation and \$5,000 matching funds

Jerry and Joyce Tang took their children hiking just weeks before Jerry's disappearance.



Courtesy of the Tang Family

Jerry and Joyce Tang took their children hiking just weeks before Jerry's disappearance.



● **James Sanders**

"Joker" is one of several people living on the street who claim to have spotted Jerry near the Transbay Terminal (top).



● **James Sanders**

The day after he went missing, Jerry was allegedly spotted near McLaren Lodge in Golden Gate Park.



James Sanders
Steve Ginsberg searches during his lunch break.



James Sanders
Many homeless people take shelter beneath the overhang outside the Transbay Terminal.



● **James Sanders**
Jason has helped search for Jerry for weeks.



● **James Sanders**
Though she keeps searching for Jerry, Joyce Tang has returned to her normal routine.

Austin Tang arrives, his shiny black hair soaked with drizzle. Raindrops speed down a clear plastic sleeve pinned to his backpack. The sleeve protects a flier now recognizable to almost everyone in San Francisco. More than 10,000 copies have been displayed in store windows, posted on decrepit building walls, taped 10 feet high on light poles. Austin resembles his younger brother Jerry, the man in the flier photo with the semismile and the distant look in his eyes. Few San Franciscans could identify any of the 4,000 or so people who go missing in the city every year -- except, perhaps, for Jerry.

A poster with that now-familiar photograph on it stands at an altar, facing stained-glass windows depicting biblical scenes. Jerry's loved ones sit in wooden pews, murmuring gossip about recent sightings of him all over the city. Three children march like soldiers around the benches, laughing, oblivious to the gravity of the scene.

A chaplain from UCSF, where Jerry's wife, Joyce, works as a nurse, leads a service that's part remembrance of a man who might stroll back home at any moment, part rallying cry for the cause of a continued search for him. Joyce steps to the altar, shaking to hold back tears, and thanks everyone for the help and support. The rest of Jerry's family stands up to announce a \$10,000 reward for his return.

Steve Ginsberg, one of Jerry's closest childhood friends, sings a song he wrote about how "We'll be home" when Jerry comes back. His eyes are closed, his voice is sincere.

The chaplain asks the attendees to pray silently as Jerry's parents walk through the church, lighting the tall white candles everyone grasps. "Communicate your hope to him," he says. "Let that hope be a source of strength to him, wherever he is."

News photographers snap pictures, zooming in for emotional close-ups. As those in attendance sing "Happy Birthday" to Jerry, a woman in the rear trembles and chokes through tears. Ginsberg closes the service with a slowed-down, country-ish version of "Bridge Over Troubled Water." There is no applause, only the sound of sniffing and a creaking floor as people begin to move about.

A trio of television news cameras descends on Joyce, recording her hellos and hugs. Young mothers express concern, hiding their fear from her. Any one of their spouses could easily be the man who's missing. It must scare the hell out of them.

Joyce applies lipstick, embraces one last friend, and steps before the cameras. It feels strange to her, allowing these reporters into her private life, into Jerry's life. She's expected to play the part of the anguished, grieving wife, but she can't really grieve yet -- she still has no idea where her husband is or what happened to him. Since the week Jerry disappeared, though, the media has been the greatest tool for calling attention to the search. So Joyce stands tall but pigeon-toed in knee-high black boots, speaking into a microphone. Maybe, just maybe, someone who's seen Jerry will be watching the 11 o'clock news. Jonah, her 7-year-old son, clings to her waist, then jumps toward the cameras, making funny faces, excited at the mere prospect of getting on TV.

Steve Ginsberg turns left on Natoma and heads toward the Transbay Terminal. In the span of two blocks, the atmosphere changes from blue-skied SOMA chic to partially gentrified art gallery side street to dank, mini-urban wasteland, with filthy puddles on the sidewalk and a homeless man sleeping under a ratty, charcoal-colored blanket.

Ginsberg wears narrow jeans and a plain black jacket, typical dress for an information technology manager on the older side of Generation X. Until recently, he wasn't likely to spend his lunch break exploring the city's gloomy underbelly, but his search for Jerry has become an obsession.

Ginsberg descends a paved hill into the depths of the terminal parking garage and offers a flier to an attendant in a red jacket.

"My friend is missing, and there's now a \$10,000 reward," Ginsberg says in a calm, measured tone. "I wanted to let you know."

"Oh my God, he's still missing?" asks a female patron, a twentysomething professional in a long overcoat.

Ginsberg pauses, allowing his brain to re-comprehend the fact that Jerry hasn't been found, despite one of the most rigorous search campaigns in the history of San Francisco. Friends, family, and volunteers have hunted for eight weeks, but Jerry is still out there somewhere, in a place where none of them can find him.

"Yeah," he says. "He is, unfortunately."

Ginsberg continues on to the dilapidated bus terminal, where pigeons peck at crumbs on the yellowed tile. Many homeless people -- including, possibly, Jerry -- take shelter in the waiting area, so it's a great place to hunt for leads. As Ginsberg discovered weeks ago, unlike the average hurried commuter, the homeless actually pay attention to the faces of people passing by.

He stops to talk with an overweight man wearing gray sweat pants and a wool cap with a pot leaf on it.

"Yeah, I saw this guy," the goateed man says, looking at the flier.

"You're kidding," Ginsberg says, struggling to hold back his excitement.

Shadowing the homeless circuit -- standing in line at St. Anthony's with men picking up a change of clothes at 7:30 a.m., visiting Glide Memorial Church during the lunchtime rush -- has become central to the search for Jerry. Ginsberg even befriended a man named Jason who lives just outside the bus terminal. Since spotting a person he believes was Jerry, Jason has passed out dozens of fliers to friends on the street.

"I saw him at the Fifth Street BART station, then at Pier 39," says the large man in sweats. "I saw him yesterday at the Hyatt at Embarcadero."

"Are you sure it was him?" Ginsberg asks. Several others have claimed to have seen Jerry nearby.

"I'm positive," he says, his speech clear and confident, almost indignant, despite his unkempt appearance. "I'm not a liar."

"I'm not saying you're a liar, I just want to make sure you're sure," says Ginsberg.

"It was him," the man says.

It's been weeks since anyone Ginsberg met was this certain about having seen Jerry. Usually, when he asks how sure they are, people backpedal.

"What was he wearing?" Ginsberg asks.

"Black backpack, brown pants, messed-up light T-shirt, ball cap," he says.

"What's your name?"

"They call me 'Joker.'"

"Joker," Ginsberg says, "his family deeply wants him back. If you see him and you can't detain him, if you're certain it's him, call 911."

Joker agrees, and Ginsberg leaves the bus station, still agitated. He reproaches himself for forgetting to ask for details about Jerry's baseball cap.

Ginsberg walks back toward his office, trying to suppress the high that comes with each potential sighting. Joker is one of dozens who claim to have seen Jerry. None has brought the search any closer to resolution. There have been at least two "sightings" in which someone thought to be Jerry turned out to be just another tall, disoriented Asian man on the street. But that's no reason for Ginsberg to give up. Joker's information might be the one clue that leads to Jerry's discovery. On the other hand, it might lead to nothing.

"We're looking with skepticism toward everything," Ginsberg says later. "If I went to Anchorage, Alaska, and asked enough people about Jerry, someone would say, 'Yeah, I saw that guy.'"

Jerry Tang walked out of the Victorian on Ashbury Street late Tuesday morning, Nov. 29, wearing a navy blue nylon jacket, jeans, and worn-out sneakers. He probably took his cell phone, but never made any calls, and didn't use his credit cards or stop at the ATM, either. Though Jerry had \$80 or so in his wallet, he carried none of his anti-seizure medication. The night before, he had asked his doctor to phone in a refill of the prescription.

Although he called in sick to work that day, Jerry didn't have a cold. He was depressed. Two years before, a spontaneous tear in his vertebral artery caused a stroke. He bounced back in just a few weeks, but it brought about a series of seizures, which his doctors combated with increasing dosages of medication. Jerry didn't like that the drugs made him feel drunk and disoriented, so sometimes he'd "accidentally" miss a dose, his brother Austin says. Jerry had also recently become an executive at a small start-up in San Mateo, and even though he worked only 40 hours per week, the job still stressed him out.

On the day he vanished, it was all probably swirling in Jerry's mind: the stroke and the seizures and the start-up, the financial pressure of putting two kids through private school while saving up to buy a house in the East Bay. Along with his material worries, Jerry had always been a spiritual person, and his health problems caused him to ask even deeper questions about the meaning of his existence. Always the dutiful husband, father, son, brother, and friend, though, Jerry didn't want to be a burden. When his family asked if he was all right, he brushed off their concerns.

Nevertheless, Jerry hardly fit the outward profile of a person likely to disappear without warning. He had young children and had been married to his college sweetheart for two decades. He had no criminal history and was under the regular care of a prominent physician/researcher at UCSF. He was involved in his community, volunteering at a food bank and sorting clothing for victims of Hurricane Katrina. He was the kind of guy whose close friends, brother, and sister would ask him to officiate at their weddings -- even though he was not particularly religious.

While a University of Pennsylvania student, Jerry saw a homeless man in the same spot every day, opening the door of an ATM booth. He once stopped to ask how the man, also named Jerry, ended up on the streets, and then bought him dinner. The restaurant staff didn't understand why a college student would take a homeless man out to a meal, but that didn't bother Jerry.

Everywhere he went, Jerry left behind the same impression of astonishing kindness. Joyce received several letters and donations to the reward fund from classmates of Jerry's who hadn't spoken to him since high school graduation.

Few outside the family were aware of Jerry's disappearance until, after two sleepless nights, Joyce sat in front of her computer at 5 a.m. Thursday and e-mailed everyone she knew. By midmorning, 30 people crowded into the Tangs' modest apartment, ready to search for Jerry. The San Francisco Police Department was already conducting its own investigation. Inspector Angela Martin began fielding the first of hundreds of tips and sent cops hunting all over the city. (In mid-December, she would borrow search and rescue dogs from Marin County to conduct a rigorous, dawn-to-dusk search of Golden Gate Park.) Soon, though, the efforts of Jerry's family and his wide circle of friends dwarfed anything the SFPD could do.

On Friday, Joyce and her friend Ingrid Overgard, who also happens to be Steve Ginsberg's wife, relocated the increasingly professionalized search operation to a neighbor's garage. They spread maps onto tables

and overlaid them with sheets of transparent paper to plot the locations of volunteers. Friends and family searched the neighborhood during a storm so strong that one volunteer, bicycling through the park, heard trees falling from the wind and hard rain.

During the next few days, a crescent of orange dots on the map recorded the first alleged sightings of Jerry. Tuesday night, he was spotted (perhaps) on the corner of Haight and Shrader, down the street from his apartment. The next day, a groundskeeper saw him (maybe) crying in the pouring rain near McLaren Lodge in Golden Gate Park, and offered him an umbrella. He was (possibly) at 16th and Geary, then 19th and Geary, in the Richmond the day after that. Someone said he showed Jerry a "Find Jerry" flier. He (supposedly) looked at the photo for a moment, then kept walking.

The phone was rewired to ring in the garage, and Joyce brought in a fax/copier. Volunteers out searching often called the garage to check in. Tips came into Overgard's cell phone -- her number was printed on the fliers. The Tangs' home phone and e-mail accounts, usually staffed by Joyce, were the catchall for everything else.

That first week, as the number of volunteers pushed into the 60s, the search quickly expanded throughout the city, from Ocean Beach to the Financial District. Because so many of Jerry's friends worked in the technology industry, their efforts became ever more high-tech. Overgard and others were pulling 20-hour days on the search, then writing pages-long e-mail updates at 2 a.m. Someone had the idea of setting up a wiki Web page, which anyone can edit, to maintain current information about the search. When the wiki filled up with posts by random users, another friend set up an invite-only Yahoo! group for the campaign's leaders to strategize and plan. Ginsberg discovered that he could use satellite images from a program called Google Earth to pinpoint details -- the incline of a hill, the shape of an alley underneath Interstate 280 -- about search locations before he even visited them.

The search continued amid increasing worries about Jerry's health. Without medication, he was probably experiencing occasional seizures, but none that was life-threatening, according to his neurologist, Dr. Wade Smith. Except on a few occasions, Jerry's seizures were minor spasms or disorienting *déjà vus*, not serious, grand mal convulsions. It's also possible, though unlikely, that Jerry entered a dissociative fugue state, forgetting everything about his life and wandering off. Fugues often occur among veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, and Dr. Smith compares experiencing an out-of-the-blue stroke at age 37 to being shipped off to a war zone. Jerry might be wandering the city, unaware of who he is, unable even to recognize his own face on the fliers.

Jerry's brother Austin has a less clinical explanation: During the weeks leading up to his vanishing, Jerry seemed to be showing signs of losing control of reality, and possibly having thoughts about escaping his life. In Jerry's dresser drawer, folded up as if kept in his wallet, was a very metaphysical *San Francisco Chronicle* column by Jon Carroll from Nov. 2 about watching "the room of reality drift apart." The day before he disappeared, Jerry ordered a copy of a poster that he'd quietly read over and over on his sister Audrey's fridge. Titled "How to Build Community," the eerily prescient list included suggestions such as "Learn from new and uncomfortable angles" and "Leave your house."

Two weeks after Jerry's disappearance, a security guard at the One California building (believes he) saw Jerry in the outdoor part of the complex. "Jerry" had laid out not just a piece of cardboard, like most homeless people, but also a brand-new bamboo sleeping mat. Later, he awkwardly rolled his shopping cart down Market Street, and the cardboard fell off a few times. Generally, the guard told Jerry's family, the guy looked like an amateur homeless person. Family and friends organized another targeted search, unearthing yet more alleged sightings.

The search traveled beyond San Francisco to places like Las Vegas, which Jerry had said he might visit the week he disappeared, and Framingham, the Massachusetts town where he grew up.

Friends and family arrived from Boston, Philadelphia, even London, taking time out of their lives to spend a week or weekend searching, providing a short respite, so local volunteers could return to their daily routines.

"Jerry definitely knew he was loved," says Ginsberg, "but even he could not have envisioned how many people would show up to look for him." _____

When she first read that Jerry had gone missing, Tina Webb walked straight out to her car and cried. She had never met the man, hadn't even heard his name until that day. It was so sad to Webb, a single mother, to think that Jerry had disappeared shortly before Christmas. She decided almost immediately to join the cause.

Today is her second morning searching for Jerry, handing out index card-size fliers downtown. Webb wears a turquoise fleece pullover and leather sandals that expose pedicured toenails. She has lived in San Francisco since 1968, but has never joined anything like this. She isn't sure what she'll do if she actually sees Jerry. Her plan is to ask him for help "to keep him engaged," and then to call 911.

A man with slick blond hair and a broken leg wanders up and asks Webb for money. She listens to his long story about being laid off, not quite knowing how to end the one-way conversation. Webb tells him she has no money for him, that she's just out here trying to find Jerry. Then she walks away, feeling extreme guilt at not having given him anything.

Every day, Webb checks the FindJerry.org wiki and the Yahoo! group, hoping that maybe a message will say Jerry came home. She is one of a small group of people with no connection to Jerry who have become heavily involved in the search. Many of the hundreds who've looked for Jerry, though, have only tenuous, six-degrees links to him. Volunteers like Webb speak of their desire to be a part of something, to feel like they're helping their community. Few made a conscious decision to choose Jerry instead of another of the hundreds missing in the city right now. They latched onto him for many reasons: He's an upper-middle-class executive and family man, like most of them; he has an amazing personal reputation among a large social network; and his friends and family did a remarkable job publicizing his disappearance.

Heather Barnes, a Pacifica resident, joined the search after she randomly clicked a "find jerry tang" link

on Craigslist. "You can walk around this vast city and it seems so small and there's all this support and concern and care coming from every category of people," Barnes says. "These crackheads standing on the street corner ... they showed just as much compassion [as everyone else]. It blows your mind."

On this morning, almost everywhere Webb searches, the homeless people know about Jerry, and no, they haven't seen him. The same goes for the flower vendors on Market Street and the professionals in suits taking a cigarette break in the plaza. This area has been canvassed several times since the One California sighting a month ago. On many blocks downtown, there are multiple "Find Jerry" fliers on both sides of the street.

Webb walks up Ellis Street and arrives at Glide, where the free lunch line stretches to the next block. She ambles along, handing out minifliers, like a promoter passing out invites to an after-hours party outside a club. Webb repeats some version of the question "If you see Jerry, will you call us?" dozens of times.

Most everyone in line has thick facial hair and dirty hands and wears mismatched clothing. Several silently accept the flier and stuff it in a pocket or bag. A few say, "No thanks," or express disbelief that Jerry still hasn't been found after all that searching.

A Glide worker steps outside and sizes Webb up, then snatches a flier. "Still lookin' for 'im, huh?" he asks, and shakes his head, then returns to his post inside the doorway.

Webb reaches the end of the queue and keeps hiking up the hill toward another flock of homeless people across the street.

"Oh, why couldn't he just be in the line?" she asks. "Wouldn't that be nice?" _____

Joyce's voice-mail greeting still conveys a cheery tone: "Hi, this is Joyce. Leave me a *mess*-age ... bye!"

It seems to have been spoken by a different woman from the one sitting in a chair of her living room, slowly rocking back and forth. The phone greeting is one among many anachronisms in Joyce's new life: her husband's iPod, which he took everywhere he went, perched on top of the stereo; the photo of ecstatic newlyweds in the corner; the keyboard Jerry loved to play for hours, positioned across from the couch.

Joyce wears a denim skirt and tall schoolgirl socks. When she jokes, she smiles out of the side of her mouth, as if she's embarrassed at laughing. Detail by detail, she recounts the story of the day her husband disappeared.

Joyce last spoke with Jerry around 10 a.m., about an hour before he logged off his computer and left the apartment. She arrived home that afternoon, and he wasn't there, so she called his cell phone. It went straight to voice mail, which seemed odd to her, because Jerry always kept his phone on vibrate. She called a few more times, but dinner came and went with no Jerry.

Joyce began to worry that he might have had another seizure or stroke. She called her in-laws, and Jerry's brother Austin stayed with her that night. She filed a police report but didn't immediately publicize it. "I didn't want to make it a huge deal," she says. "It was a very personal thing, to say your husband didn't come home last night."

Now, everyone knows, and everyone expresses sympathy for Joyce's plight. They tell her how strong she is, but she's only able to cope because it usually doesn't feel real. Once in a while, though, during her daily routine, at the gym, or at the grocery store, she'll think to herself: "This is so meaningless, this is not important. This is not what I should be doing."

When Joyce talks about the man she used to call her Buddha, her voice cracks and her eyes tear up. She misses family hugs and family dinners, and being alone with Jerry, holding him, talking the way people talk to each other when they've been together for 20 years.

Today is her son Ian's fifth birthday. It's hard for Joyce to know what to say to him, other than trying to keep Jerry alive in Ian's mind. She reminds him of how his daddy loved playing math games with him, and of how they played the "chasing tickle game" until they were both exhausted, lying on the floor. Ian's older brother, Jonah, asks his mother the kind of practical questions a 7-year-old would ask, about what Jerry is eating, where he's sleeping, and whether she'll hug him when he comes home. After all, won't he be smelly from living on the street?

During the four days a week when she doesn't work, Joyce spends much of her time in the apartment, where she and Jerry have lived since 1993. Families from her children's school bring home-cooked meals, and until just after Christmas at least one other person was always in the house. She has rarely joined the search. She doesn't want to be the one to find him -- in case he isn't alive.

When psychics began offering their services, she accepted, even though she knew they might bring only false hope. She and Jerry used to watch the show *Crossing Over With John Edward*, in which the host claimed to communicate with deceased relatives of audience members. They both believed him (at least a little bit). One psychic who visited the Tang home clutched a few of Jerry's possessions in her hands and said he was still alive. To Joyce, the woman's visions of Jerry walking down the street seemed so real. "It's like she's seeing his head and telling me she's talking to him," Joyce says, "and you come away with this sense of it, as if we're gonna find him, because he's out there."

Like everyone else, Joyce has her theories about what happened to Jerry but little evidence to support them. She isn't even sure which direction Jerry turned when he left their home, or whether he rode Muni, because no witnesses have been found. Still, Jerry could be downtown, or somewhere in the East Bay, not knowing who or where he is, living on the streets but relatively healthy and waiting to be found. It's hard for Joyce to think about the nightmare scenarios: Jerry having jumped into San Francisco Bay, his body caught beneath some rocks; Jerry the victim of a random homicide and burial; Jerry having fallen off a cliff in the Marin Headlands; or, the best and worst case, Jerry living outside San Francisco, feeling great, knowing that his family wants him home, but not wanting to come back.

A looming sense of futility has set in among the least emotionally involved searchers: The SFPD has scaled back its efforts, though the case is still technically active, and two weeks ago, Craigslist removed its "find jerry tang" links. Even some of Jerry's closest friends are starting to burn out, and considering hiring a private investigator or project manager to supervise the search.

"The thing that depresses me the most is how little we know," says Hal Rucker, the CEO and founder of the start-up SmallTown, from which Jerry is nominally on a leave of absence. "We don't know any more than we knew from day one. If you wanted to disappear from the planet without leaving a clue, I can't imagine it happening any 'better' than this."

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the longer a search for a missing person goes on, the less likely he'll be found. Yet circumstances have forced Joyce into a strange mental calculus, which tells her that a 10-week search without finding Jerry infirm or deceased might actually bode well. "It gives me hope that we're not finding him in that condition," she says.

Every time Joyce hears about a lead or a sighting, she can't help but get excited. Every time her friends go searching for Jerry, she waits for the phone to ring, hoping, praying, knowing that this next call might be the one.

"Chances are," she says, "he can still be out there."