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Youth minister Lisa Valentino and her daughter view the wall of remembrance at the missing persons rally at Assumption Parish, Hackettstown, Aug. 23. Jim Viola, whose wife Patricia Viola is missing, is in the background to Valentino's left. — **Donald Anderson photo**

Assumption hosts rally for missing persons

By Donald Anderson
Correspondent

HACKETTSTOWN — By some estimates, there are more than 100,000 persons reported as missing in the United States. To Lisa Valentino, youth minister at Assumption Parish, that constitutes a crisis which demands public awareness and community action.

To raise public awareness, Assumption's Youth Ministry hosted a stop on a cross-country tour led by North Carolina-based Community United Effort Center for Missing Persons Aug. 23 on the parish grounds. The rally included a balloon launch in honor of Allison Jackson Foy, Patricia Viola and Margaret Haddican-McEnroe.

Family members of two missing persons were present at the event including John R. Mazalewski of Oyster Bay, N.Y., whose daughter, Foy, has been missing from Wilmington, N.C., since July 30, 2006, and Jim Viola, husband of Patricia, missing from Bogota since Feb. 13, 2001.

Haddican-McEnroe, a Warren Town-ship mother of three, was last seen Oct. 10, 2006.

Remains that may be those of Foy are pending identification. Viola and McEnroe are still listed as missing.

Following a Mass that was offered for the missing and their families, attendees had the opportunity to spiritually adopt a missing person and their family.

Jim Viola was instrumental in passage of "Patricia's Law" by the New Jersey General Assembly by a vote of 80 to 0. Gov. Jon S. Corzine signed the bill into law Jan. 7, and it became effective Aug. 1.

Named for Patricia Viola, the law specifies protocols law officers must follow when a missing person report is filed. Law enforcement agencies must accept without delay report of a missing person and cannot refuse to accept such reports for any reason.

An important provision of this legislation is that when a person has been missing for more than 30 days, a DNA reference sample is to be secured from family members and forwarded to an appropriate agency for analysis and entry into the national Combined DNA Index System for Missing Persons.

DNA sample collection kits are provided without charge by CODIS.

Due to Jim Viola's efforts, New Jersey was the fourth state to adopt a law patterned after a Nebraska precedent for this purpose. Viola also stresses the importance of flyers and other means of information dissemination to elicit tips and clues from the public.

A similar family tragedy occurred to the Mazalewski family, when Allison Jackson Foy vanished without trace in Wilmington, N.C. Allison, who is also the sister of Valentino, disappeared two years ago, leaving a husband without a spouse and two children without their mother. The great frustration for the Mazalewski family was that the local police seemed to not consider the case seriously.

As related by Mazalewski, the investigator assumed Foy to be a runaway and that she would eventually turn up. A chance advisory from the desk clerk at the motel where they were staying led them to contact Monica Caison, founder of Community United Effort. Through CUE, the family was provided the information and support necessary to getting Allison registered in the CODIS database.

"If we didn't pursue this, she would still be missing," Mazalewski said.

With DNA testing, at least identification might be possible. For a better ending, however, quickness in following up the initial missing person report is of the essence.

Father David Pekola, pastor of Assumption Parish, said he considers the youth ministry's efforts an important outreach.

"It brings attention to the situation and educates people as to things they can do such as fingerprinting their children," Father Pekola said.

Pastoral assistant Chris Demarco said such events "bring the community together" and show that people can do something positive.

The CUE 2008 cross-country tour for missing persons' awareness began Aug. 21 in North Carolina. It plans to travel 5,000 miles in 12 days making 30 stops, such as the one at Assumption Parish.

The 17-state tour will publicize 110 missing person cases and six unsolved homicides. The CUE Center for Missing Persons sponsors a 24-hour hotline, (910) 232-1687, for support of family and friends of missing persons.

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