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Searching for the missing children

Louisvillian takes on national role

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The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children is a lot more than putting kids' photos on the sides of milk cartons. And nobody knows that better than Ernie Allen, a Louisville native who's been the center's CEO for the past two decades.

"It's been a continuing evolution," Allen, 64, said during a recent phone interview from Las Vegas, where he was visiting partner companies at the Consumer Electronics Show. "When we started over 25 years ago, you couldn't enter information about stolen children" in national crime databases. "So one of the first things we tried to do was to raise the level of awareness of what these problems really were."

Back then the challenges were daunting. It was easier to track a missing Chrysler than a missing child. Police departments typically wouldn't even take a report until at least 24 or 48 hours had passed, and most "missing" kids were thought to be runaways who'd soon return anyway.

"A lot were runaways," Allen acknowledges, "but the problem was that — in the most serious cases where children were abducted and murdered — our data said those kids were dead within three hours."

Living amid today's world of pervasive, Internet-driven, always-on connectivity, it's sometimes hard to recall a time when information was fragmented and police departments seldom talked with one another. Yet that's how the law enforcement community worked (or didn't work) in the mid-1970s, when Allen — a graduate of the University of Louisville and its law school — became head of the Louisville-Jefferson County Crime Commission.

Tasked with distributing federal dollars and providing a degree of inter-agency liaison, the commission also became an engine for innovation. Perhaps the prime example came when Allen and several colleagues, seeking to combat a rise in child prostitution, organized the first city-county Missing and Exploited Child unit.

"He always did his homework," said Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson, who served on the old Board of Aldermen when Allen was city safety director under then-mayor Harvey Sloane. Allen "was well-liked by people throughout Kentucky who were both Republicans and Democrats," Abramson recalled. "He put policy above politics."

Policywise, Allen had a moment of professional epiphany in 1979: Visiting Chicago to look at that city's 911-emergency system while the news was consumed with serial child-murderer John Wayne Gacy.

"I called the superintendent of the Chicago police department," Allen recalled, "met with the police, and they showed me where (Gacy) was picking up his victims."

Not long afterward, Louisville hosted a national conference on missing children. Before long, Allen and his staff were consulting in cities like Atlanta, where Wayne Williams was arrested in 1981 after the disappearance of numerous young African Americans.

It happened, too, that 1979 jump-started national awareness of missing children. That year, 9-year-old Etan Patz vanished after leaving his New York City apartment to walk to a nearby bus stop. Media coverage was unrelenting. And parents everywhere were wondering: "Could this happen to our child?"

Then came another blockbuster case — the 1981 disappearance of Adam Walsh, who was later found murdered. A year later, his father, John Walsh, co-founded the first nationwide clearinghouse for information on missing children: The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children — "NCMEC."

Initially, the Alexandria, Va.-based center was headed by a former corporate CEO. In 1989, after that executive retired, Allen was asked to run the organization. "I committed to do it for five years," Allen said.

Moving to the Washington, D.C., area had not been on his radar screen — either personally or professionally.

"I grew up on M Street, three blocks from Churchill Downs," said Allen, who graduated from duPont Manual High School before entering UofL. "When you were on that sort of home ground, leaving was a hard thing to do."

There were sufficient opportunities right here — or so Allen thought. He would marry a Hoosier — Linda Broadus, a former head of communications for the Special Olympics (they have no children). And Allen seemed content to work close to his roots. "I was a lawyer, and my intent had been to pursue my life in Louisville and practice law and all that."

But the tug of NCMEC proved impossible to resist, and soon five years had become 20. And as Allen's commitment has been extended, so has the purview of the center he administers.

In many respects, NCMEC is a hybrid of overlapping resources. It's a charitable, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) entity with an annual operating budget approaching \$50million. About \$30million of this is channeled through the U.S. Department of Justice, with the balance funded by individual and corporate contributions.

The center has a formal, congressional mandate to serve as a nationwide clearinghouse for missing children, to coordinate efforts after natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, and to assist law enforcement agencies in indentifying victims and perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

"The missing-child problem is really four or five separate problems," Allen explained. According to a 2000 survey, "an estimated 800,000 kids a year are reported missing in this country." Allen said. "The largest number are reported runaways — lost children, not because of foul play. Of abducted children, 202,000 a year are by other family members; the largest number are non-custodial-parent abductions." About "58,000 are non-family abductions," although Allen emphasizes that in most of these cases, the child and the abductor are at least acquainted.

"These are more 'seductions' than 'abductions,'" he said. "The vast majority of these cases are not guys who look like they crawled out from under a bridge."

Finally — and by far the smallest segment — there are what Allen calls “stereotypical kidnappings”: abductions of a child by a total stranger. The 2000 survey counted only 115 of these in a year.

Some observers have criticized NCMEC for fostering a climate of ever-present “stranger danger,” where every adult is deemed guilty until proven innocent. Allen insists that such people have, at best, an incomplete notion of what the organization does.

“We have tried to persuade parents and communities to be vigilant and aware,” he emphasizes, “but not to be paralyzed by fear.”

Still, much of NCMEC's current mission — the “exploited” side of the center — is occupied with the dark side of life: tracking sexual abuse of children, particularly through the Internet. The center has officials from the FBI and other agencies constantly on site, and employs its own analysts who use forensic tools to identify victims seen in illicit videos and still images.

Not long ago, NCMEC partnered with Microsoft and Dartmouth College to use a technology dubbed “Photo DNA,” which tags each image with a unique digital identifier that allows investigators to track and sort by a variety of criteria.

“The use of technology, and the role these private companies are playing in this effort, is really extraordinary,” Allen said. “There are over 400 companies who, at no cost to us or taxpayers, distribute images of these missing children. We recover one of every six of these kids as a result of seeing these photographs.”

Contributions from computer magnate Michael Dell and his wife, Susan, helped establish “Team Adam,” a program of go-teams comprising former law-enforcement agents who assist smaller police departments. And leveraging the good of the Internet, NCMEC helps track attempted abductions of children by perpetrators who move quickly from city to city, or state to state.

The sober reality is that child abduction and abuse recognize no borders. Non-custodial abductors frequently flee to Mexico, Allen said, or to Europe, Africa or Asia. That was one impetus for establishing (in the late 1990s) the International Centre for Missing and Abducted Children, a privately funded offshoot that works alongside INTERPOL and law-enforcement agencies within individual countries.

Ultimately, NCMEC's ongoing success may depend on parents — and children — finding a workable balance between the nest and the world at large.

“We aren't in favor of the ‘free-range’ child movement,” Allen cautions, mentioning a celebrated recent case where a New York City mother allowed her young son to ride the subways by himself. Instead, “our whole premise is that children need to protect themselves with their heads. We want the focus to be on recognition and avoidance.”

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