

Sheriff's office launches volunteer Missing Persons Review Team

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The Del Norte County Sheriff's Office (DCSO) recently debuted its volunteer Missing Persons Review Team — Thomas Burke, Gloria Bobertz and Dan Thompson.

Sheriff Erik Apperson said they will be tasked with reviewing all outstanding DNSO missing persons reports and identifying areas of the cases that can be strengthened. They may also organize and aid in the investigations.

"It's important that we constantly review policy and the ways we conduct our investigations," Apperson said on the DNSO's Facebook page. "We must always try to improve. We are expected to do so by the communities we serve. I believe this team will help us do just that. They have already helped create better policy and practices. I have no doubt that they will represent a positive addition to the DNSO and our mission. It's critical that missing person reports stay current and keep moving forward."

Burke, with more than 40 years in law enforcement, recently retired after spending the last 13 years as a sergeant for the DNSO. Burke was also a sergeant with the Crescent City Police Department for more than 20 years.

He has investigated countless cases and served many years as a Field Training Officer. Just prior to retirement, Apperson directed Burke to prepare a comprehensive review of the missing persons policy for the DNSO, as well as review standard operating procedure. Burke, still a paid annuitant, presented his findings to the sheriff and policy was updated. He also began organizing all outstanding cases and making them more easily obtainable to investigating officers.

Burke said a key role for the team will be working with the Department of Justice to determine if family DNA is available in the missing person files, looking all the way back to 1986. To facilitate the search, the team will reach out to families, asking them to come in to the office and provide DNA samples.

“Because I’m annuitant, I can add that information to case files,” Burke said.

“We’re more of an audit team,” Burke added. “We look at cases, see issues that may need to be addressed and hand them off to an active patrol officer or investigator.”

Bobertz grew up in Shasta County, California, and moved to Del Norte County in 2001. Her family had members go missing in 1982 from Lewiston, Idaho, and their remains were found in 1984, murdered by a serial killer.

Since then she has educated herself on the use of several missing persons databases, doing research on the behaviors of serial killers and has been in contact with law enforcement agencies passing along tips regarding their cases and other cases. Her work has even been featured in a special “Cold Valley,” featured on Netflix, Hulu and Discovery Channel.

“My cousin’s murder in 1982, along with my step sister, the case has never been solved,” Bobertz said. “It’s given me the passion for doing this, helping missing persons.”

She looks forward to helping the DNSO Missing Persons Team.

“Sheriff Apperson has done so much for the county,” Bobertz said. “Especially improving communication within agencies — Curry, Humboldt, tribal law enforcement. That’s a huge factor when you have a missing person to have everybody at the table talking. If you have a homicide you have all the people talking, so the right hand knows what the left hand is doing.”

Thompson said one of the best jobs he's ever had was as a deputy sheriff in northeastern Washington. But that only lasted a couple years due to budget cutbacks and he was laid off.

After retiring from the printing business in Southern California, Thompson and his wife moved to Del Norte County, about four years ago. He then read a post by Apperson needing volunteers for a program he was starting.

“I am glad I spotted that post, I really missed my old job and thought it would be great to do something for this county that I enjoyed,” Thompson said. “When the sheriff asked me to join his missing person’s team I gladly accepted.”

Thompson said he thought it was a great idea, as he’s heard a lot of people have gone missing in Del Norte County over the last couple decades that the sheriff wants to clear up.