

News

California Inferno Gives Rise to Family-Reuniting ‘Angels’

Online sleuths help families search for missing loved ones

By Jocelyn Gecker
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — They have become known as the Angels of Paradise. But there is nothing ethereal about them.

They are online sleuths who know how to find people, and they have been putting their skills to use in the aftermath of California’s catastrophic wildfire.

In the dark days that followed the Nov. 8 inferno, the deadliest in California history, social media filled with posts from people trying to contact loved ones from the Paradise area.

Panic spread as the magnitude of destruction came into focus: At least 85 dead. Nearly 14,000 homes destroyed. From across the U.S., people posted names of aunts, uncles, foster parents, distant relatives and long-lost friends or acquaintances and asked, “Does anyone know if they are safe?”

Nancy Collins knew she could help. A mother of two and a 911 dispatch-



In this Wednesday, Dec. 5, 2018, photo, Diana Sauer holds a family photograph of her father, Warren Deboer, holding her as a baby, and his best friend Russell Anderson, left, in Concord, Calif. In the aftermath of Northern California’s catastrophic wildfire, social media sites filled with posts from people trying to find loved ones in and near the town of Paradise. A group of women scattered across the U.S. knew they could help. The women volunteer as “search angels,” those who help adoptees find their biological parents. So far, they have tracked down nearly 250 people and linked them with friends and family who were looking for them becoming known as the Angels of Paradise

er, Collins volunteers as a “search angel,” someone who helps adoptees find their biological parents. She knows her way around public records and how to track people down.

She offered her services to the administrator of a newly created Facebook page, “Camp Fire Missing Persons, Paradise CA,” after noticing panicked posts were piling up.

“I said, ‘I have a bunch of genealogy friends, and we can help,” said Collins, who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and formed a team of eight “angels” from around the country and one in Canada, all of whom volunteer with a group called Search Squad. “The rest was history.”

Working on laptops from their living room sofas, home offices and kitchen counters, they



In this Wednesday, Dec. 5, 2018, photo, Dawn Kosmakos, left, and Nancy Collins pose for a photo in Concord, Calif. Collins, a 911 dispatcher, and Kosmakos are volunteers known as “search angels” to help adopted people find their biological parents. In the aftermath of Northern California’s catastrophic wildfire, social media sites filled with posts from people trying to find loved ones in and near the town of Paradise. A group of women scattered across the U.S. knew they could help. The women volunteer as “search angels,” those who help adoptees find their biological parents. So far, they have tracked down nearly 250 people and linked them with friends and family who were looking for them becoming known as the Angels of Paradise

communicated in online chat groups and divvied up hundreds of posts. They used public databases to find property deeds, court records and bankruptcy filings, and logged onto people-finding sites like Ancestry.com, BeenVerified.com, the online White Pages and others. They looked for cellphone numbers and email addresses and names of friends, relatives, neighbors and associates who might have clues.

In the four weeks since the fire started, the search angels have connected nearly 250 people with the relatives and friends they were searching for. They are one of several missing persons groups that sprung up on Facebook with the intention of helping strangers in a time of need, harnessing the power of social media and dogged investi-

gative work.

“I reached out to the angels, and they really are angels,” said Delisa Gaeta, 55, who was concerned about her foster father, whom she hadn’t seen in years. “I threw a lifeline out there, and they grabbed hold of it and reeled it in. They just made it happen.”

At first, Gaeta didn’t know if her foster father, Dale Wingett, had made it out of his Paradise home alive. Authorities had no information on him, and after two weeks of trying to contact him, she was losing hope. Then she saw his picture in a local newspaper at a Thanksgiving dinner for survivors in the Northern California city of Redding. Gaeta desperately wanted to speak to Wingett and see if he needed help.

“It became a group project,” said Dawn Kosmakos, a search angel

who lives in Martinez, in the San Francisco Bay Area. “It was like, ‘OK, girls. Let’s find him!’”

They alerted the sheriff’s office, did online searches and tried calling family and a property management company, Collins said. They found out Wingett had left Redding and was heading about 80 miles (130 kilometers) south, to the city of Willows.

“We called every hotel in Willows and said, ‘If he checks in, can you give him this message?’” said Collins, and that’s how they found him. Wingett got the message, called them back, got Gaeta’s number and called her. They have since emailed and spoken several times.

For Wingett, the connection brought happiness at a time of great loss.

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A Savior is Born

Christmas Service

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. Luke 2:11

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