



## Banners recognizing missing persons are reminders of unsolved cases that remain important to Center for HOPE and police

BY ANN HAUPRICH

Mary Lyall has faced many agonizing decisions since receiving the news that her cherished 19-year-old daughter Suzanne had vanished without a trace in 1998.

But the one to cancel the 2020 New York State Missing Persons Day tugged at the widow's heartstrings like no other she'd previously made in her capacity as director of Ballston Spa-based Center for HOPE (Healing Our Painful Emotions).

The event, which has taken place in Albany on or near Suzanne's April 6 birthday each year since 2001, has earned accolades for bringing friends and relatives of legions of missing persons together to reflect, remember and provide mutual support. The thought of the pandemic robbing loved ones of the chance to gather and embrace weighed heavily on Lyall. However the prospect of even one attendee contracting COVID-19 or contributing to the disease's spread upon returning home ultimately left her with no choice but to err on the side of caution.

"The cancellation saddened me not only because I knew how much those coping with the unexplained disappearance of a loved one were looking forward to being together under one roof, but also because the annual event simultaneously assists in boosting public awareness about unsolved cases," recalls Lyall.

Just when she thought nothing could ever soften the blow of the loss of the 2020 NYS Missing Persons Day, Lyall heard from Mark Blech who was then commencing work on a community arts exhibit honoring First Responders that was officially presented to the village on September 11, 2020.



“Ballston Spa Police Chief Dave Bush felt it was important for a way to be found for cases involving missing persons to be recognized as part of the initiative because such crime victims and their loved ones are important to him and the law officers who serve under his command,” says Lyall.

Before long, Blech and Lyall were exchanging ideas about how best to create “family-friendly” banners that would call attention to more than a dozen unsolved cases, including that of Suzanne Lyall, who graduated with the BSHS Class of 1996 before being abducted from her SUNY/Albany college campus two years later.

“We had to strike a balance between including a photo of each person as he or she looked around the time of his or her disappearance and few key facts about each criminal justice mystery on a banner while at the time taking as much care as possible to be sensitive to the feelings of those who would be viewing the outdoor exhibit along parts of Front Street and Milton Avenue.”

What the banner does not reveal is that families and friends of missing persons typically experience intense emotions ranging from shock and disbelief to sorrow and grief to frustration and anger before finally coming to the gut-wrenching realization that this is not some nightmare from which they will awaken if pinched. At this point, the most devastating emotion of all – despair – often enters the scenario.

There was, Lyall explains, no place she and her husband Doug (who passed away in 2015) could turn for the kind of guidance and support they needed when they received the life transforming call about their youngest child nearly a quarter of a century ago. The lack of resources and support available to them and Suzanne’s older siblings, Sandra and Steven, ultimately became the spark that ignited the flame that led to the founding of The Center for HOPE and its outreach initiatives.

It was out of the ashes of their anguish and grief that the couple co-founded The Center for HOPE around the turn-of-the-millennium. Advocacy, education and prevention are cornerstones of the not-for-profit which has earned a national reputation as a beacon and a life raft for those struggling to cope with the unexplained disappearance of a loved one.

Mary Lyall’s purpose-filled life has increasingly been heralded as a shining example of what can happen when the human heart and spirit summon the strength and the courage to transform a tragedy of immeasurable proportions into rays of hope for others. Indeed the April 2018 New York State Missing Persons Day had proven to be extra meaningful when NYS Senator James Tedisco presented her with the state’s highest award: The Liberty Medal. In a poignant tribute, Tedisco had praised Lyall as “a community hero who turned her own personal tragedy into a positive crusade to help other families across the USA.”

In addition to co-founding The Center for HOPE, Lyall helped to lay the groundwork for the NYS Campus Safety Act (now federal legislation called Suzanne Lyall’s Campus Safety Law) as well as a second piece of federal legislation titled Suzanne’s Law which boosted the age for those protected by The Center for Missing and Exploited Children from 18 to 21.



Dreams of a “happily ever after” Fairy Tale ending filled young Mary’s heart when she wed Doug Lyall in 1964.



1988 family portrait includes Doug’s mother Lucie at far left, big brother Steven beside “Mama Bear” Mary whose hand is on “Baby Bear” Suzy’s shoulder while “Papa Bear” Doug embraces eldest daughter Sandra.



Mary and Doug Lyall as photographed by Antonio Bucca using an early digital camera inside The Center for HOPE on Prospect Street in Ballston Spa in 2002.





She and Doug also spearheaded efforts to introduce the Missing Persons Alert System through the NYS Thruway and Missing Persons profiles on NYS tax forms. Having decks of Cold Case playing cards produced for circulation among inmates in county jails and Coasters for HOPE featuring missing persons distributed for use in restaurants and bars are other notable achievements.

Recent additional undertakings included working with students at the College of St. Rose Cold Case Analysis Center and involvement with a popular WGY investigative podcast series titled Upstate Unsolved.

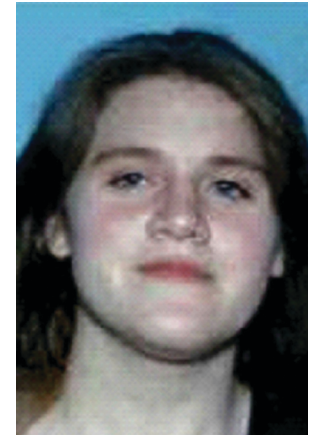
“It’s impossible to articulate how much I miss Doug, his empathy, his encouragement, his insights, his optimism,” reflects Lyall. “And there will always be a hole in my Mama Bear heart only Suzy, who was my Baby Bear, can fill. But when (prior to the pandemic) I began meeting the students, several became close to me, almost like surrogate children. Their presence in my life made me realize there’s always room in one’s heart for more love. There’s increased reason to hope that the answers I seek involving my daughter and other missing persons will eventually come into the light aided by their efforts – and now, by the added efforts of the community arts exhibit honoring First Responders.”

There is no way of knowing how many families may yet be spared the agony of losing of a loved one because of the tireless efforts of Mary Lyall and The Center for HOPE.



Counterclockwise from top left are a banner featuring Suzanne Lyall as created by Mark Blech; College of St. Rose Cold Case students flanked by Professor Christina Lane, Mary Lyall and NYS Senator James Tedisco; Mary Lyall with Phoebe Wells, host of the Upstate Unsolved podcast on 810 and 103.1 WGY News Radio and a vintage picture of Mary and now late husband Doug Lyall with Tedisco at the Remembrance Memorial in Albany.





Counterclockwise from bottom right: Mary Lyall holding a portrait of late husband Doug at the entrance to playground named in honor of their daughter Suzanne as photographed by Ann Hauprich in 2016; Mary beams after being presented with a Women of Distinction award by NYS Senator James in 2017; a favorite family photo of Doug waving from his Sunbeam convertible; Tedisco presents the Liberty Medal to Mary in 2018 and a copy of the photo on Suzanne's SUNY student ID card that was widely circulated following her 1998 disappearance.







# The day Suzanne vanished without a trace

BY ANN HAUPRICH

An uplifting phone call from daughter Suzanne was the icing on Mary Lyall's birthday cake on the evening of Sunday, March 1, 1998.

"Suzy had been studying hard for her college midterms and was a little on the broke side, but other than that, she was pretty upbeat," recalled Mary. When offered some bridge financing to tide her over until she came home at the start of Spring Break that Thursday, Suzy graciously declined.

"Suzy told me she had a paycheck coming from her part-time job at Babbage's at Crossgates Mall and was sure she could stretch the last of her funds a few more days. She was looking forward to her father (Doug) and me coming to pick her up from college in Albany on Thursday and how we'd celebrate my birthday then."

Suzy's birthday was also nearing. The youngest of the three Lyall children was to turn 20 years old on April 6 so if anything her parents expected their home to be filled with added light and laughter as signs of life renewing itself sprang forth all around their idyllic neighborhood on Rowland Street in Ballston Spa.

Fast forward 36 hours from the joyous March 1, 1998 phone call and the scene in the Lyall home is one of unimaginable angst as Suzy's parents struggle to process the news that their daughter never returned to her college dorm room the night before.

In fact, they were soon to learn, their 19-year-old had seemingly disappeared into thin air after stepping off of the CDTA bus that had transported her from her Crossgates Mall job to her SUNY/Albany campus at around 9:45 p.m. on Monday, March 2, 1998.

That meant 12 hours had passed since Suzy, who by all accounts was conscientious, responsible and predictable, vanished without a trace.

In March 2013 – 15 long years and endless agonizing days and nights later -- the wound that punctured and shattered the hearts of Suzy's parents after her father answered his phone at around 10 a.m. on Tuesday, March 3, 1998 remained open and the long awaited pay check from Babbage's was still uncashed.

"Time does not heal in such cases," explained Doug (who passed away two years after the 2013 interview about his youngest child). "You eventually carry on and do your best to rebuild your lives, but the suffering never truly ends as long as a loved one is missing. The loss of our daughter, the not knowing what happened to Suzy, is with us each and every day."

The call that Doug said "changed our lives forever" came from Suzy's boyfriend who said he had grown concerned after being unable to contact her via phone or Internet the previous night. "Our reaction was one of shock and disbelief, leaving us confused and unable to think clearly. We were numb. We knew our daughter well and we were positive she had not run away."



Although the terrifying thought that brought Suzy parents their knees was that Suzy had been abducted, they wanted to first rule out every other possible explanation.

"We were battling the logical and the emotional," explained Doug. "On the one hand we thought: maybe she fell. Maybe she had a seizure. Maybe she's on the campus grounds injured or sick. Maybe someone will find her unconscious and call for medical help. Anything but what in hindsight we instinctively knew in our hearts to be true."

As excruciating hours stretched into days riding on an emotional roller coaster from which there was no escape, Suzy's parents began to accept the unthinkable: that harm had surely come to the daughter they had spent so much of their lives nurturing and protecting. "How could this happen?" the couple asked over and over. "We thought missing young people were those who took undue risks by using street drugs or hitchhiking – not a wholesome, responsible young lady like our daughter. How wrong we were! We were not prepared for this catastrophic event. How could we be?"

Although the Lyalls secured the assistance of the campus police department as well as local and state police after reporting Suzy missing, the couple insists valuable time was forever lost between around 10 p.m. March 2 and 10 a.m. March 3, 1998.

"A state college campus is a busy place with lots of people coming and going at all hours. It's possible someone who was passing through SUNY/Albany that night witnessed something, but didn't put two and two together because they moved on before Suzy's disappearance was broadcast by the media. It's also possible critical evidence was removed from the path between the bus stop and Suzy's dorm – or even from her dorm room. We'll never know."

That Suzy's failure to return to her dormitory was not reported until 12 hours later was bad enough; subsequent campus procedural confusion compounded her parents' anxiety and frustration. Even now it's hard not for them not to feel regret that every second that passed without action after Suzy failed to return to her dorm that night 22 years ago was a second when witnesses and evidence may well be lost.

Upon finally being admitted to his daughter's room a few days following her disappearance, Doug saw that Suzy's computer was still on and that her blow dryer was still on the bed – both clear signs to them that she had planned to return there after getting off the bus following work two nights earlier.

EDITOR'S NOTE: During an October 2020 interview, Mary Lyall added: "I didn't have the strength to accompany Doug that day. He was my strength." One way to assist in supporting the not-for-profit co-founded by Suzanne Lyall's parents is to purchase mugs created by her mother that feature artwork of historic village landmarks. All proceeds from the sale of the \$10 mugs (available at O'Brien Pharmacy on Front Street and The Old Chocolate Factory on Prospect Street) benefit The Center for HOPE which lights the way for the families and friends of missing persons across the USA. Please turn the page to view other masterpieces created by the multi-talented Ballston Spa woman.



# MISSING PERSON



**Suzanne Gloria Lyall**  
DOB 4/6/1978

Last seen March 2, 1998  
exiting a bus at  
Collins Circle at the  
Albany State University NY  
Her case is viewed as a  
suspected homicide.

**Submit An Anonymous Tip by:**  
**Phone, Email or Text**

- 1-800-448-3847
- [www.troopers.ny.gov](http://www.troopers.ny.gov) (click on) CrimeTip Link
- Text: NYMISSING (+Tip) to 274637 (Crimes)



---

---

# Portrait of an artist

Masterpieces by Center for HOPE co-founder Mary Lyall

---

---



PHOTO BY  
ANN HAUPRICH



While limited edition prints of a mural showcasing historic village landmarks are no longer available, the popular nostalgic image created by Center for HOPE cofounder Mary Lyall has been reprinted on mugs that are being sold to raise funds for the not-for-profit.

What those who are pondering the purchase of one or more of the hot beverage vessels at O'Brien Pharmacy and The Factory may find of added interest is that the featured artwork represents but a small sampling of the masterpieces crafted over the decades by the multi-talented Ballston Spa grandmother. (Many insist Mary's cake decorating and gardening projects also qualify as works of art.)

From the exquisite self-portrait of a young Mary cradling infant son Steven that was presented to now late husband Doug on a long ago Father's Day to those of daughters Sandra and Suzanne as young girls, the artist's portfolio speaks for itself.

On a light-hearted note, this section also includes a humorous picture that was sketched by Mary one day when her normally level-headed better half, whose hobbies included restoring vintage automobiles, didn't seem to have his head on straight. "Doug laughed and laughed when he saw I had titled it ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT!"







The masterpiece showcased on the facing page is a self-portrait of Mary Lyall cradling baby Steven that was presented to Doug on a long ago Father's Day. Exquisite examples of Mary's art on this page include paintings of daughters Sandra and Suzy as little girls and a humorous sketch Mary was inspired to create titled ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT.



