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When Investigative Agencies Are Family Businesses

Thomas & Krystal Ham
Ham Investigations

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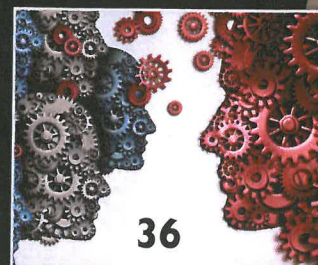
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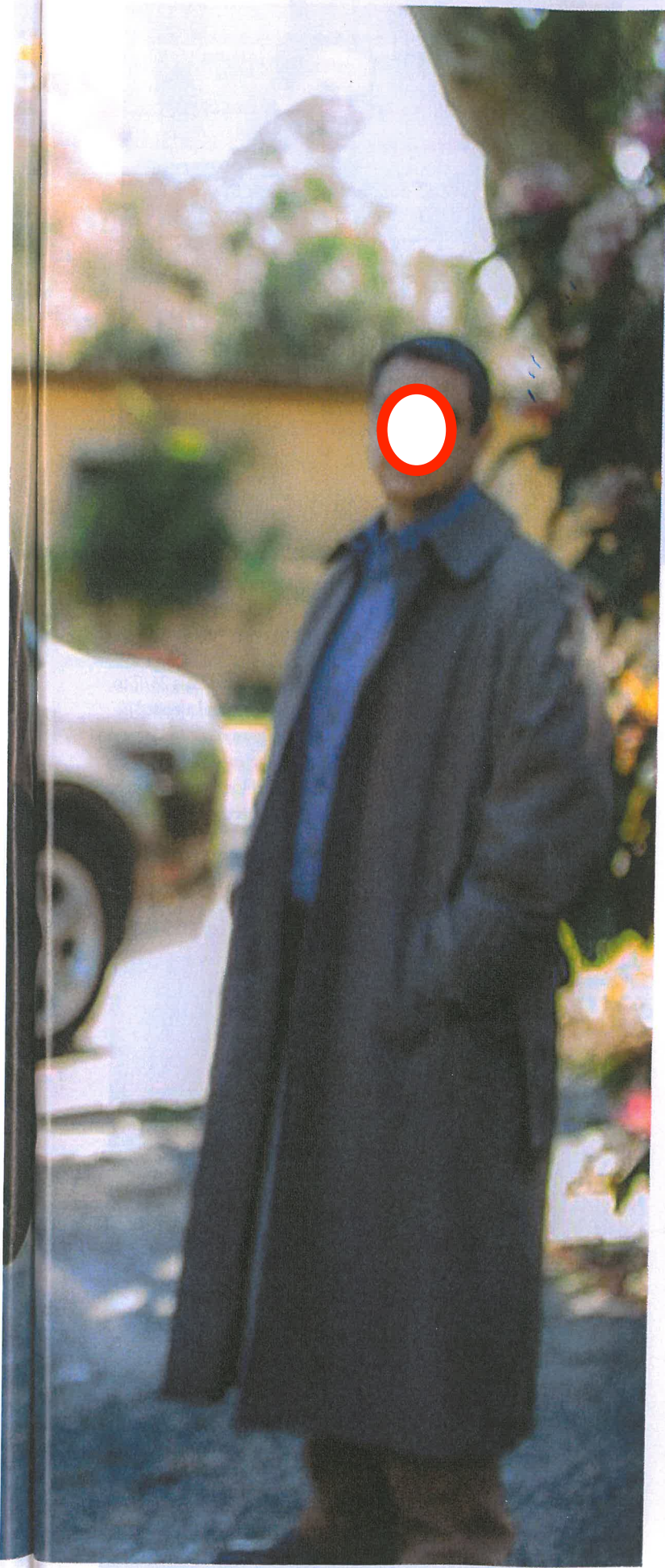


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When Investigative Agencies Are Family Businesses

BY JIMMIE MESIS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Amy, Brandon and Brad Perron



More than 80 percent of all private investigative agencies are individually owned and operated. However, there is an increasing amount of PI agencies that involve a spouse or other family member working full time, and many also include their children.

I have been very fortunate to have my wife, Rosemarie, as my business partner and working at my side for the last 20 years. She is also the PI agency licensee in New York and we are co-licensees in New Jersey. We became interested in other investigative couples and have been gathering examples where a family member/co-investigator was crucial to a successful case.

NEW ENGLAND

If you and your spouse are a team, you might think of yourselves as “Mr. and Mrs. Detective,” but that title goes to Mike and Deb [REDACTED], a New England couple who have been using it since 2002. It is the name of their Sunday afternoon radio show on WCRN, Boston. Their website is www.mrandmrsdetective.com. Mike is licensed in Massachusetts and Deb is licensed in Rhode Island. Other family members help in the agency, but the [REDACTED] are in charge.

Their routine is to brainstorm before starting a difficult case. One of their most difficult was a divorce/child custody matter where the six-year old child had frequent urinary tract infections. The mother suspected that the dad kept her in pull-up diapers when she was with him. Also, the mother believed that he and the child slept in the same bed. The husband was described as angry, verbally abusive and an expert in Russian Martial Arts, so he would have to be approached with care.

“This was a tough case to prove unless we could get into the apartment where the dad lived and we would have to be invited in,” said Deb [REDACTED]. “We came up with the idea of posing as bug exterminators. We had shirts made with a company name. We used two-way radios.”

The arrangement was for Mike to park his van nearby and play the part of the radio dispatcher. Before they started, they prayed together for Deb’s safety and their success. They went to the apartment house after 5 p.m. when the leasing office would be closed. As a prop, Deb carried a bee in a container.

“At the door, I let the dad know there was a bee problem in the building and we believed they were coming from the cracks and crevices in his basement apartment. I needed to video all the seams in the walls. He fell for it, hook, line and sinker,” Deb explained.





Olga and Fernando Fernandez (center) with their family

Under the guise of doing an inspection, she shot video of the apartment, including a trash can over-flowing with wet pull-ups and a bedroom with twin beds pushed together to make one large bed. Deb was in the apartment for so long that Mike became worried. He used the two-way radio to tell Deb that she and the “bee suit” were needed at another location. She was able to communicate to him that the dad was very talkative. In fact, he revealed that he and his daughter went to bed at 9 p.m. every night and shared the same bed.

“We had our case,” she said.

Good teamwork is the hallmark of strong investigative agencies, and the family-run agencies who shared their stories with me emphasized the value of working together.

PUERTO RICO

For years, I have known Fernando Fernandez and his wife Olga Cortes, who work in Carolina, Puerto Rico. Fernando is in charge of investigations while Olga handles accounting and other office matters, and sometimes does surveillance. Their home and office are on the same premises, with separate entrances. They have four daughters, including young ones who are home-schooled in a classroom adjacent to the office. An older daughter has done process serving for the agency.

“A few years ago,” Fernando said, “I had an investigation involving a former employee of a supermarket. He had an accident in the warehouse. His lawyer needed photos from inside that warehouse. I couldn’t ask for access because of the pending lawsuit. One of my daughters, who was 12, wandered through the warehouse as though she was lost. She took very good pictures. When she was asked by an employee what she was doing in there, she said she was looking for the bathroom, and he proceeded to show her where the bathroom was. The job was completed successfully.”

FLORIDA

In South Daytona, Florida, the uncle-and-nephew combo of Harvey and Ari Morse specializes in difficult locates and probate genealogy, tracking down missing heirs. The agency was started more than 50

years ago in Boston by Harvey’s grandfather (Ari’s great-grandfather). Today the staff includes Harvey’s wife, Marcia Goldstein, and some non-family employees.

They say that their biggest advantages are “having instant access 24/7 to their family members, thinking alike, having common goals, and a vested interest.” On one occasion, when a rush assignment in Iowa came to Harvey after hours on a holiday weekend, he couldn’t make the trip. No employee was willing to travel. When Ari was contacted, he left Florida immediately for the assignment in Iowa, and the case resulted in a successful outcome.



Harvey and Ari Morse

WEST VIRGINIA

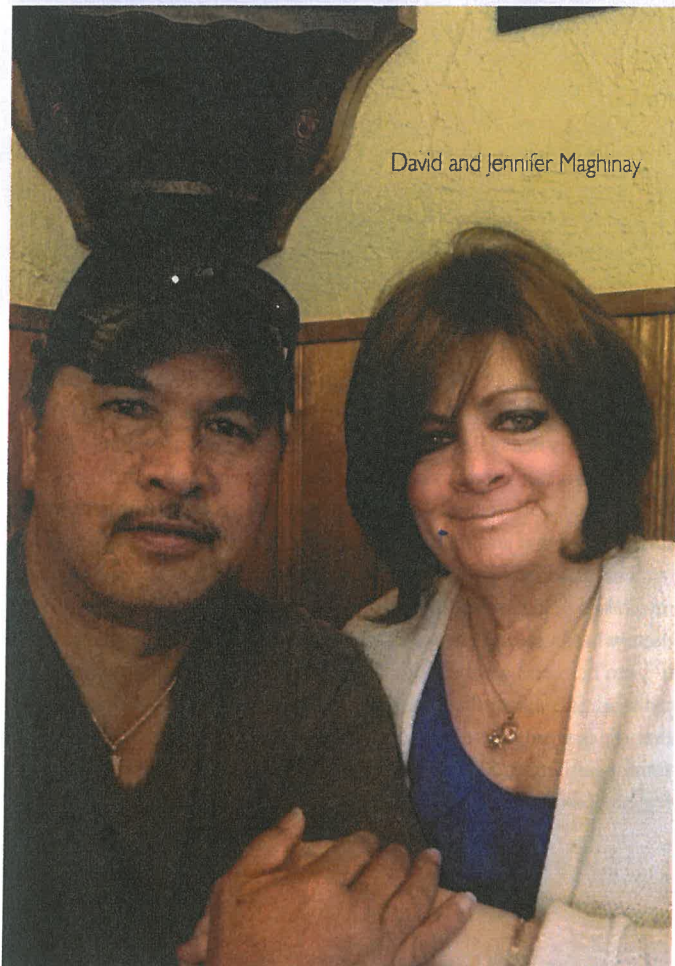
Tom and Terri Gorgone, who own Forensic Security and Investigations, Inc., moved this year from Pittsburgh to West Virginia to establish offices in Prociou and Charleston. A daughter and step-daughter, who live in other states, are called upon at times to help with insurance matters and photography.

Tom Gorgone said, "The most consistent assistance I get is when we're trying to locate a fugitive or serving papers on a subject that has moved, and my wife has been able to locate the person within 30 minutes so that we can get the papers served and impress our clients with our efforts." He said that Terri's computer expertise is of great value, because he considers himself 'technologically ignorant.'"

OREGON

In Salem, Oregon, Jennifer Maghinay started her company in 2005. She had been an investigative paralegal. Later her husband David left his career in corrections to join Maghinay Investigations. Jennifer is the lead investigator who handles client contact and writes the final reports. David creates the file folders and completes the intake form while Jennifer outlines the research and assignments needed. They divide the tasks depending on their areas of expertise.

"David and I were assisting the U.S. Marshall's office out of California on a fugitive locate case. The subject killed a law enforcement officer and was thought to be in Oregon. Having worked as a corrections officer on death row for 15 years, David understands how the criminal mind thinks. He knew there are three things these guys flee to: girlfriends, mothers, and money. While reviewing the file, he noted that the guy had an old girlfriend in Oregon. He suggested I start there. He was right. I placed a call to the woman. She admitted that he had called her, but she told him to stay away because she had children, and she didn't want to get caught up in his mess."



David and Jennifer Maghinay

Jennifer knew from the paperwork that this woman had posted a bond for the subject, so she pointed out that the woman would lose her house if the guy wasn't captured before the end of his bond. "Her tone changed and we were able to set up a ruse to lure him to a location where the Marshals were waiting. He was taken back to California to stand trial," she said.

TEXAS

In Fort Worth, Texas, the all-female surveillance company of Morrison Investigations is operated by Krissy Morrison with assistance from her sister-in-law, Meredith Reily.

"She is always a phone call away if I need help with something, and it is usually last-minute needs that are urgent." Krissy said. "Family members want to see your business be successful. They strive to make it better and are willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen, not for a paycheck but for the betterment of the family and the company. Our family has created what we like to call the 'dream team' and it creates success."



Krissy Morrison and
Meredith Reily

MASSACHUSETTS

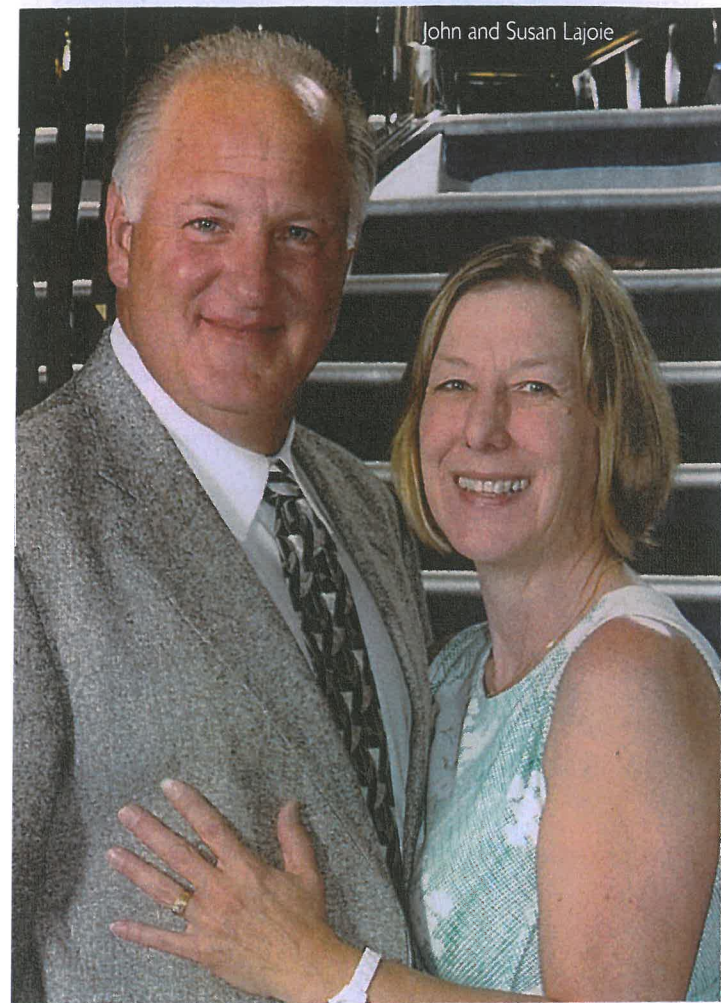
The search for a missing family member – who was also a fugitive from the law – proved to be one of the toughest cases for another family-run agency, Lajoie and Associates of West, Boylston, Massachusetts. John Lajoie, CLI, CCDI, founded the agency in 1983. He and his wife, Susan, who came from the field of medical technology, are both licensed in Massachusetts. Their three children have also worked for them doing surveillance, field work or research.

A few years ago a client hired Lajoie to find a long-lost brother who had deserted from the US Army 33 years earlier. The complicated investigation lasted nine months and cost more than \$75,000. They started with basic identifying details and a very old photograph of the missing man.

When they were stumped, John recalled, "Susan suggested that we have the old photo 'aged' by an expert to see what the man might look like as he grew older."

Then, with field work aided by colleagues from the National Association of Legal Investigators, (NALI) the team identified ten different aliases and old addresses from a dozen different states. Finally, the search was narrowed to a hotel in Florida where their subject had lived in recent years.

John and Susan Lajoie



The hotel had been sold. A previous owner recognized the photo as that of a man who had left belongings at the hotel -- including the false ID he was using at the time -- when he was arrested for a chain of bank robberies. That ID was "a perfect match" for the aged photo of the client's missing brother. Further investigation showed that he had a long criminal history and was doing time in yet another state for bank robbery. None of his convictions was in his real name.

"The subject is now out of prison and enjoying his time where he belongs, with his family," John said.

SOUTH CAROLINA

In many agencies, one person is the "face" of the company and the spouse (and, perhaps other family members) do backup. That describes Alec Sharp and his family in Columbia, South Carolina. Alec retired from law enforcement two years ago. He and his wife hold licenses, and two of their six children assist with the office work and serving papers. When Alec was working a domestic case out of town, he realized that he needed a second investigator to watch an alternate location. When his wife came to help, their children kept the office running and served papers.

FLORIDA

Brandon Perron takes the lead in his Florida agency, Investigative Support Specialist, Inc. The team includes his wife Amy and his older brother Brad. Brandon had been a criminal investigator for the US Air Force. Brad came from a background in biology and developed a specialty in forensic science. Amy has become a capital case mitigation specialist. They say they work closely and engage in "true team think."

In one of their most difficult cases, a father learned that his two young children had disappeared from school. It appeared that their estranged, heroin-addicted mother, and her drug dealer boyfriend, had taken them out of state--somewhere. All three Perrons worked the case over a period of days and months. When they executed an undercover operation with a known associate of the fugitive mother, Amy was able to learn that the mother and her children were traveling with a cult. The team infiltrated the cult and finally recovered the children. after almost a year of painstaking effort.

In addition to doing investigative work and training Public Defender investigators, Brandon, Brad and Amy all hold positions with the Criminal Defense Investigation Training Council, which requires a major time commitment. *

COLORADO

The current president of the National Council of Investigative and Security Services is Dean Beers who runs a Colorado agency, Associates in Forensic Investigations, with his wife Karen. On the side, Karen is the administrative manager for the World Association of Detectives. Their investigative specialty is medico-legal death investigations. Dean said when they work with families distraught over the death of a loved one, Karen's background as a social worker is invaluable.

In other cases, her research skills are the key. For example, in a civil suit against a Wyoming school district, the plaintiff claimed that she had been brutally assaulted on school grounds and was so injured that she could never have children, but Karen found through social media that the plaintiff was pregnant at the time the lawsuit was filed.

TENNESSEE

Again and again I hear how the special expertise of family members has helped to build an agency.

For example, in Knoxville, Tennessee, Tom Ham opened his firm in 2002 after a career in law enforcement. His cases include criminal defense, cheating spouse, child custody, and missing persons. His wife, Kristal, has been licensed and working with the firm since 2008. She holds a degree in paralegal studies and works closely with attorneys on witness preparation, jury selection and trial strategy. Also, she is certified as a National Animal Cruelty Investigator. Her mother, Candy Keller, who joined the team in 2014, has a gift for resolving the most difficult process serving cases. She has also been trained in DUI investigations through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, so she assists in reviewing videos and compiling reports to aid attorneys doing DUI defense. (See Cover Photo)

MICHIGAN

In Fraser, Michigan, Eye Spy Investigations is operated by Michael Torrice, who founded it over 20 years ago. He's the businessman. Twelve years ago, his new wife, Casey, joined the firm. She's the people-person. Casey is an actress, so her skills are perfect for role-playing and decoy type cases. Their work includes surveillance, divorce, child custody, cheating spouse, adoption and missing person cases.

"The majority of our clients are in a mentally fragile state," Michael said. "As a guy, I am less inclined to feel for their situation. I listen. I tell them what I can and cannot do for them. My goal is to get them in, see if I can help, and get them out. My wife, on the other hand, is more sympathetic. She will sit there and listen to the client drag on for hours. Not that she is wrong for doing that -- it brings in much more money -- but I cannot sit there and listen like she can." He added that she'll occasionally feel so bad for the client that she'll do a case pro bono.

PORTUGAL

For Yin and Phil Johnson's enterprise of JJ Associates International, Yin's Chinese background is an asset, especially when she has done undercover investigations for banks using her Cantonese language skills. It has also worked well in doing surveillance for insurance companies.

"I was rarely challenged, as my cover was a stereotypical Chinese tourist. Loaded up with a camera, I had a pass to almost any place without question."

The Johnsons have been in business since 1987. Phil describes himself as having "a passion for technology" and he uses as many social media platforms as possible to promote their firm. Their base is in Portugal, but they travel extensively and maintain business connections in many places, including the United Kingdom and Pacific Rim countries.



Yin and Phil Johnson

JIMMIE MESIS' FAMILY TIPS

- There can only be one boss with the final say. Usually that's the licensee.
- Have specific areas of responsibilities for each family member.
- Plan and coordinate each person's daily or weekly assignments and tasks.
- Don't micromanage family members, but properly train and guide them.
- Don't mix personal time with business issues when the business day is over.
- Always remember, family comes first!



Jimmie and Rosemarie Mesis

CONCLUSION

Rosemarie and I have been fortunate to have met many of these investigators and their families. From my own experience, I can say that having a business partner or employee who is part of your family is a plus because you understand and can count on each other.

There can also be a downside to having your working lives and personal lives closely entwined. When I think of the individuals who have "married into" investigative agencies, I wonder if they anticipated that the pledge to love, honor and cherish would also extend to willingly running out on an urgent missing persons case.

I recall having a distraught man walk into our office desperate for help. His wife had absconded with their one-year-old child six years earlier and there was an active arrest warrant for her. The FBI, state police and county prosecutor's office had not located the missing woman and child for all those years, yet

Rosemarie was able to find her within hours. The father was reunited with his child the following morning. It's cases like this that make our profession exciting and worth all our efforts.

When it comes to working with relatives, investigator Tom Gorgone put it well when he said, "The biggest advantage is that they can't walk out on you! The biggest disadvantage is that you're never without them, 24/7, and that can be quite stressful if you don't handle it with kid gloves." **PI**