

# Crime fighter gets chance to help heal

**Service •** Creating images of the dead as older people a painful yet uplifting task.

**By PAIGE AUSTIN**

The Orange County Register

Mike Streed struggles with other people's pain.

Streed, one of the nation's premier forensic artists, runs a side business in which he shows how a small child might look as a teen-ager or an adult.

"It gets to the point where it's all I can do to pull myself to the computer. Ten hours a day I see tragedy - people mangled in wrecks, shot or stabbed," he said.

"Then I have to sit at the computer and stare at a picture of a kid who died tragically, and people are expecting the world from me.

"You're looking at all these pictures and you get this overwhelming feeling you just want to cry."

Streed began receiving requests for the age-progressed photos in the mid-1990s from grieving families referred by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The center developed the techniques and trained Streed, who charges \$250 for each commission.

He uses photos of the deceased and of their family members, along with details about the family. He uses computer software to stretch their vitality and years.

"First, I look at a picture and decide what I'm going to

keep," Streed said.

The ears. The shape of a smile. The color of the eyes - their expressiveness.

Then he tackles the features that change - the shape of the face, the length of the nose, skin tones.

Glenn Miller, age-progression specialist at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, said the image that appears is a delicate work of art. Streed, he said, is one of the best.

"There's a lot of artistic input into it," he said.

Streed said the work provides an odd parallel to his police forensic work.

In crime fighting, he has an opportunity to solve a case, but he often stares into the stunned and tearful faces of witnesses and family members, knowing the worst of their pain is yet to come, knowing their loved one is probably dead.

With age progressions for the dead, he enters the tragedy as healing and closure begin. It's his chance to help heal some of the suffering he sees all too often.

Streed tries to avoid learning details of a person's life and death that entangle him in the families' grief.

But even when he finds himself pulled into the tragedy, he finds reasons to continue.

"Every time I think I should just stop doing it," Streed said, "I get a letter from someone thanking me for giving so many years of their life back."

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# IMAGES: Coping aid

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received one or two calls a week for age progressions for at least a decade, a small but steady demand. The aged images can lead to powerful healing, psychologists and clergy say, but they also carry a risk of emotional hazards.

Lazier, an Ohio resident, has been unable to reconcile herself with the loss of her daughter.

"I can't walk through my house without seeing her. Everything speaks of her," she said.

"I don't even know if there are words to describe the emptiness, the coldness, the brokenness. I'm so afraid people will forget her. I'm so afraid I'll forget the sound of her voice."

She commissioned 16-year-old and 25-year-old images of her daughter, portraits that disturb and comfort her.

"When I ripped open that envelope, I was looking at this stranger. ... I had missed all that time with her," she said. "Every time I see a child, I don't wonder anymore if that's what Lauren would look like."

It's natural for people to need to know exactly what they've lost, said Steven Schandler, Chapman University professor of psychology and director of psychology research.

That's why the United States is still in Vietnam trying to recover the bodies of soldiers decades after the conflict ended, he said.

"It's a process of understanding the total nature of the loss. It makes the loss real."

Similarly, these photos can help people grieve for the future they have lost. But Schandler says the photos

should be combined with bereavement counseling.

"It's tantamount to looking at gruesome pictures on the Internet. They're emotionally arousing and leave a lasting impression," he said.

The Rev. Valentin Ramon of La Purisima Catholic Church in El Modena sees no spiritual harm in the technique, but he's not sure how comforting it is.

People are like plants, he tells the bereaved families he counsels. Some are meant to grow like old majestic trees, and others are flowers meant to beautify the world for the short time they are here.

"Why remember them as anything but what they were?" he said.

Curiosity propelled Charlotte Fye of Iowa, the wife of a minister, to seek a photo of her son, John, at age 52.

John died of a brain tumor 42 years ago at age 10.

The pain eases over time, but the loss will always be with her, Fye said.

"All these years we've wondered what he would look like."

In the photo, he has salt-and-pepper hair and soft smile lines around his mouth and eyes.

"He has a gentle look about him and he seems distinguished, like my husband," Fye said. "He looks like the kind of man you could connect with."

The photo is framed on her wall.

"I see it every day when I lie down for a nap," she said.

"I think the worst thing that can happen is that people will forget that that child was here on Earth and had lived."

"A mother needs to know that people remember that child was here, even after 42 years."