



**CORONERS COURT
OF NEW SOUTH WALES**

Inquest:	Inquest into the death of Alexander Stetz
Hearing dates:	9 February 2023
Date of findings:	9 February 2023
Place of findings:	Lidcombe
Findings of:	Magistrate Kennedy Deputy State Coroner
Catchwords:	CORONIAL LAW – Cause and manner of death, missing person, police search, dementia
File number:	2019/00343820
Representation:	Mr Howard Mullen, Coronial Advocate

Findings:***The identity of the deceased***

The deceased person was Alexander Stetz

Date of death

Between 14 July 2014 and 31 July 2014

Place of death

Within the area of Sackville North and Sackville, New South Wales

Cause of death

Unable to be determined

Manner of death

Unable to be determined

Recommendations

NIL

1. Introduction

1.1. Mr Alexander Stetz was reported missing on 14 July 2014 and has not been seen since that date. He was suffering with significant illnesses and dementia at the time. Extensive search failed to locate him, he has not accessed any accounts since that time and the passage of time now has been considerable since he was last seen.

1.2. His long-term friend and carer Mr Steven Aradi was the last person to see Mr Stetz at their home at

1.3. This inquest is to determine whether Mr Stetz was the person who disappeared and to determine whether he is deceased, and if so attempt to answer the questions required pursuant to section 81 of the Coroners Act 2009 as to date, place, cause and manner of death. I will refer to him as Alexander for the purposes of these findings.

2. The life of Mr Alexander Stetz

2.1. Mr Alexander Stetz was born on 4 January 1942, in Czechoslovakia, where he remained until he migrated to Australia in 1969. While in Czechoslovakia he was an artist/painter and held other various occupations. In 1989, after some political conflict ended, he returned to Czechoslovakia for a period of approximately 4 years, before returning to Australia where he ultimately remained.

2.2. Alexander had been involved in an accident, sometime in the early 1970's, in which he suffered injuries that resulted in him not being able to work. In 1975 Alexander met Mr Steven Aradi, who had migrated to Australia from Hungary in 1974. At this time, Alexander and Mr Aradi were both living in Bondi, NSW.

2.3. The two resided together and purchased some land and a house near Cooma, NSW, where they stayed until about 1989. During their time at Cooma, Mr Aradi married Alexander's niece, whom he had previously met in Slovakia, before the two moved to Glebe in Sydney, leaving Alexander at the property.

2.4. Around 1989, Alexander sold the property at Cooma and sometime later, purchased a property at Aylmerton. Around this time, Mr Aradi's relationship broke down and he returned to live with Alexander.

2.5. Mr Aradi viewed Alexander as a brother, whom he had the responsibility of caring for. Alexander had been described as difficult to care for at times given his diagnoses and there had been some discussion about placing him in a care home setting.

2.6. In 2009, Mr Aradi officially became Alexander's carer, due to his decline in mental health. This application was supported by Dr Barnett, a specialist geriatrician.

2.7. In 2014, Mr Aradi began working at a property in Sackville North. The property could be described as remote acreage, set amongst bushland, hills and valleys.

2.8. While working at the property, Alexander and Mr Aradi lived in a demountable building set up on the land, which contained two beds, a kitchen table and chairs and television. At the time of Alexander's disappearance, the pair were residing in this demountable.

3. Medical History

3.1. Alexander did not enjoy good health generally. As mentioned previously, In 1974, Alexander was involved in a motor vehicle accident, where he suffered an injury to his right knee. This injury had long term effects with regards to his mobility and hindered him from employment.

3.2. In 1995, Alexander was diagnosed with cervical spondylosis. In 1996 he was diagnosed with hypertension. In 1999 he suffered a myocardial infarction. In 2006 he had a number of operations, including coronary artery bypass graft, coronary artery stent, left inguinal hernia repair, and he was diagnosed with osteoarthritis in his right knee. In 2009, Alexander suffered a stroke.

3.3. In November of 2009, Alexander was involved in another motor vehicle accident, in which he claimed to have fallen asleep at the wheel. He had no memory of the accident, and Mr Aradi advised the treating emergency department that Alexander's cognition had progressively deteriorated since the stroke.

3.4. In 2012, Alexander was reviewed by Dr John Barnett who was a Staff Specialist in geriatric medicine at Bowral Hospital. Dr Barnett noted that Alexander suffered significant cognitive impairment, he had poor short-term memory and was able to do very little at home. Dr Barnett further noted that Alexander was reasonably stable, but that he expected any cognitive decline in his situation, albeit a gradual one.

3.5. At the time of his disappearance, Alexander was on a number of different medications which he was required to take in the morning and evening.

3.6. It is clear that Alexander was an unwell man and had a number of medical conditions that required daily treatment.

4. Circumstances of disappearance

4.1. On the morning of 14 July 2014, Alexander rose at 8:00am and had breakfast with Mr Aradi. Shortly after breakfast, the two went to the area in which Mr Aradi had been working on the property. Mr Aradi had been building a ramp to assist with the loading of vehicles. The two remained at the ramp for the majority of the day, with Alexander sitting on a chair at the end of the ramp, while Mr Aradi worked.

4.2. Mr Aradi informed police that at about 4:30pm he was finishing up working on the ramp. He said that for a period of about 2 minutes he had become focused on his work, when he walked down the ramp to return to the area in which Alexander had been sitting, and found that he was missing. As soon as he realised that Alexander was missing, he began calling out to him and did a quick search of the

property, including the buildings. Mr Aradi estimates that it took . 5-10 minutes to search the property before he went see Mr Jerry Gordon, the owner of the property, who came to assist with the search.

4.3. Mr Aradi travelled out onto the roadway and drove the length of Sackville Ferry Rd. Mr Aradi told police that he had done this because Alexander had gone missing twice before in recent months, both times having been ultimately found a short distance away.

4.4. At about 5:06pm, Mr Aradi contacted Police who subsequently attended at about 6:18pm. Police spoke with both Mr Aradi and Mr Gordon and at this time police were informed that Alexander suffered from dementia which had a significant impact on his awareness and rationality.

4.5. The attending police conducted a cursory search of the caravan and the second unoccupied dwelling on the property. Shortly thereafter, further police resources were requested in order to mount a search for Alexander. The supervisor of the Windsor Police Station was also informed, and they contacted the Blue Mountains police rescue squad.

4.6. At about 7:20pm, NSW ambulance helicopter Rescue 22 attended the location and conducted a search for approximately 40 minutes, with the use of night vision goggles. Police Dog Handler Senior Constable Ryan Paget attended the location, with his dog, at about 7:30pm and spent about an hour searching the property. Unfortunately, this search did not locate anything of assistance in the location of Alexander.

4.7. Sergeant Dallas Atkinson, a qualified Land Search and Rescue Coordinator, and supervisor of the Blue Mountain Police Rescue Squad, determined that due to the location being a somewhat isolated bush location, Alexander being elderly and suffering dementia, in conjunction with the prevailing weather conditions, that a coordinated search should be commenced immediately. Sergeant Atkinson arrived at about 8:30pm and took control of the forward command.

4.8. Hawkesbury SES were contacted to request the assistance of search volunteers and at about 8:45pm a briefing took place with the following tasks allocated:

4.9. At 8:50pm, twelve members were tasked to conduct a thorough search of the property, including outbuilding and vehicles and 50-100m into the surrounding bushland. This task was completed at 10:00pm.

4.10. At 9:15pm, six members were tasked to search either side of Sackville Ferry Road from Pages Wharf Rd to Dargle Ridge Trail and the cemetery near Dargle Ridge Rd. As other teams completed their assigned tasks, they were redeployed to assist with this task, which was completed at 11:20pm.

4.11. At 9:15pm, six members were tasked to search 208 Sackville Ferry Rd. This task was completed at 10:50pm.

4.12. At 9:15pm, two members in a four-wheel drive searched two fire-trails to the South of Sackville Ferry Road and Dargle Ridge Trail.

4.13. At 10:00pm, twelve members were tasked to search the property on the Northern side of 258 Sackville Ferry Rd. This task was completed at 11:00pm.

4.14. About 10:55pm the police media unit arranged for a media release to be completed, seeking information from the public in relation to Alexander's disappearance. A media release was issued at 11:30pm.

4.15. At 11:30pm, all search personnel returned and were debriefed. Sergeant Atkinson conducted a handover brief with Sgt Barlow, the Hawksbury shift supervisor. The shift supervisor at the Rescue & Bomb Disposal Unit was contacted. The forward command was shut down at midnight and the search disbanded for the night.

4.16. Extensive searches continued over the next few days, involving SES volunteers, officers from the public order and riot squad, mounted police, and trail bike police. A police launch, attached to Hawkesbury LAC, was also deployed to the operation to conduct searches of the Hawkesbury River.

4.17. Unfortunately, nothing of interest was located during the search operation.

4.18. On 23 July 2014, Detective Senior Constable Angie Hardy attended the property and conducted a walk-through video with Mr Aradi retracing what happened and where Alexander was last seen.

4.19. On 24 July 2014, Detective Senior Constable Angie Hardy again attended the location, at this time she was accompanied by three NSWPF dog handlers along with their cadaver dogs. They conducted a search of Page-Wharf Rd, River Rd, Northern end of Sackville Ferry Rd, Wiseman's Ferry Road and at 2pm, the search was concluded again, nothing was located.

4.20. On Saturday 2 August 2014, Detective Senior Constable Angie Hardy conducted a door knock to the neighbours along Sackville Ferry Rd and also left pamphlets in letter boxes.. Detective Senior Constable Angie Hardy also contacted a shelter for men in the city, along with a soup kitchen that circulates around Parramatta and forwarded copies of the pamphlet.

4.21. On about 10 August 2014, flyer and pamphlets were sent through the public and private health system in the form of a medical alert. The pamphlet included a photo of Alexander and a brief description of what he was wearing on that particular day of his disappearance.

4.22. As a result of these efforts, an administrative officer with the Health Education and Training Institute located in the Department of Health grounds, in Gladesville, contacted police and advised that they had spoken to a male, who they believed match the description of Alexander.

4.23. Unfortunately, the male was sighted just once, at Gladesville and there were no other recorded sightings. The conversation described does not match the cognitive ability reflected in the brief of Alexander. After investigation, given the distance and time since his initial disappearance, it appears highly unlikely that this male was Alexander.

4.24. There have been no confirmed sightings of Alexander since his disappearance. His disappearance has been subject of public pleas and has been highlighted in the media and on national missing person websites.

4.25. Throughout the police investigation, Alexander's bank account at IMB has showed no activity. Detective Senior Constable Hardy completed signs of life and there has been no activity on any of his government accounts, which one would expect to have been used if Alexander was still alive.

4.26. The NSW Missing Person's Unit checked for unidentified bodies listed on the Missing Persons data base for males from July 2014 that would potentially have matched Alexanders, but there has been no identified persons.

5. Summary

5.1. Alexander was carefully and kindly cared for by his long-term friend, who did not want to send Alexander into full time care. His last days were spent outdoors with Mr Aradi being carefully supervised even while Mr Aradi undertook physical work on the property. He set him up with a chair very close to where he was working. Alexander had wandered off twice in the past, and Mr Aradi was only distracted for a few minutes on this occasion.

5.2. Medical evidence supports that he suffered significantly with Dementia, and so would easily become disoriented and lost.

5.3. In circumstances where he was medically unwell, required medication twice daily and suffered from dementia it appears that he wandered into isolated bush land and was not able to be located.

5.4. The behaviour of Mr Aradi was to immediately search for Alexander and notify authorities. The police search was extensive and comprehensive. The police acted very quickly in those important first few days, and expended significant resources into locating Alexander, but could not.

5.5. He has not accessed any accounts, nor made any contact with Mr Aradi which is so unlikely given their close friendship spanning decades. If he were still alive it is highly improbable that he would not have been in contact.

FINDING

5.6. Mr Alexander Stetz is deceased.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

5.7. I acknowledge the assistance of the Officer in Charge Detective Senior Constable Angie Hardy for her careful and hard work, and to NSW police for responding so promptly to attempt to locate Alexander.

5.8. Thank you also to Mr Mullen for preparing the matter for Inquest and presenting it in a very thorough and helpful manner.

Findings required by s81(1)

As a result of considering all of the documentary evidence and the oral evidence heard at the inquest, I am able to confirm that the death occurred and make the following findings in relation to it.

The identity of the deceased

The deceased person was Alexander Stetz

Date of death

Between 14 July 2014 and 31 July 2014

Place of death

Within the area of Sackville North and Sackville, New South Wales

Cause of death

Unable to be determined

Manner of death

Unable to be determined

I extend my condolences to Mr Aradi for the loss of Alexander.

I close this Inquest