

'We want to show who they are': How age-enhanced photos of missing children are created

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It happens everyday on Facebook, Instagram and in real life—that moment when you see someone you haven't seen in years. Maybe they've gone gray or gained a few pounds, but there's no doubt you're looking at that friend from high school or the cousin who moved away when you were both 10 years old. You see the boy you once rode bikes with in the face of the man or the girl who taught you how to French-braid your hair in the eyes of the woman.

Those moments can be both exhilarating and nostalgic. You're happy to see a person who played an important role in your life but wistful over the time together that's been lost.

For parents of missing [children](#), a photo of their child as he or she might look today can call up multiple emotions—sadness, anguish, frustration and anger to name a few. But for many, they also bring hope.

Colin McNally, supervisor of the Forensic Imaging Unit at The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Alexandria, Va., and three [forensic artists](#) on staff, have been tasked with creating age-enhanced photos of missing children. The photos can provide essential information in finding missing individuals.

"It's a way to bridge a gap in time," says McNally. "The missing child isn't going to be just the 4-year-old boy in the photo. He's going to be 10

years old—maybe 16 years old. He's going to age and we do everything we can to make that aging appear as authentic as possible."

Once a parent agrees to the process, McNally's team tries to gather as many photos and as much information as possible before creating the age-enhanced image.

"Photos and videos of relatives when they were the current age of the missing child are really helpful," McNally says. "They can help us determine what someone might look like today—the shape of the nose, the skin tone, the hairline. We don't necessarily take all the traits from the mother or the father and incorporate them into the image. Instead, we try to be as logical as possible. If there are brothers or sisters, who do they look like? If there's an aunt or uncle who looked like the child when they were young, we take that into account. We try to be as thorough as possible."

In some cases, though, the source material is limited.

"We may only have one or two photos to use, maybe just of the child, so we have to work with what we have," says McNally. "We'll use what we know about general growth principles—wrinkles, sagging eyelids—to age them so it can be more difficult but it's still possible."

Once the source material is collected, the forensic artists use a high-resolution photo of the missing child as the base of their image or start from scratch. McNally's team works on drawing tablets and iMacs, using Adobe Photoshop to create and enhance their work.

"We do color corrections and a few other Photoshop tasks but the majority of our work is actual drawing and digital painting," says McNally. "It's a very hands-on process."

That process—nearly a pencil-to-paper approach—helps humanize the subjects and can keep the artists grounded in their work. "We have an amazing staff who put so much of their own selves into these images," McNally says. "These are artists with a deep connection to their subjects."

Before the images are finalized, the forensic artists show them to the child's parents for their approval.

"They're the experts on their child," he says. "They may point something out that we missed, like a small scar or attached earlobes, or they'll say something about a hairstyle or clothing."

Once the photo is approved, it's distributed to the FBI, thousands of [law enforcement agencies](#) and numerous private agencies. Since the program's inception in 1989, NCMEC's forensic artists have used age-enhancement techniques on more than 6,500 images of missing children and created more than 500 facial reconstructions for unidentified deceased children. Photos of the missing children are updated every two years until the child turns 18, then every five years. McNally says that some of the missing children have had their [photos](#) age-enhanced 12 times.

That commitment to the program is reflective of the importance McNally and others place on their profession. "It's a huge responsibility," says McNally.

And one that's essential to NCMEC's mission. "Any given day staff at the Missing Children Division are working on 5,000 to 6,000 active missing children reports—many of these are considered long-term cases—and the work our Forensic Imaging Team does to age progress long-term missing children is invaluable to our ability in finding these children," says Robert Lowery, vice president of the NCMEC's Missing

Children's Division. "It allows us to continually place in front of the public renderings of what we believe the child looks like in a present day setting and ask for their help in reporting any sightings. These images also serve as a reminder to the public that we are still looking for these children and will not stop until they are found."

Given the difficult nature of searching for missing children, McNally says the challenge in aging someone isn't just a matter of gray hair and added weight.

"We want to make sure that we're really capturing the unique characteristics of the child, those little things that might make them recognizable to someone, like the way they smile—do they show their teeth? - or how they position their head—is their face at a slight angle when they speak?" he says. "If we're right, someone will be able to look at someone who's in 40s or 50s and see the person they knew when they were in their teens. We're not just trying to capture what they look like; we want to show who they are. It's not always possible but sometimes, we can find a small trait that can make all the difference."

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