

# The Disappearing Man

By Liz Kelleher - Irish Examiner 3/9/2008

**'Can you call me back in about 15 min? I'm in the field.'**

**Frank Ahearn, skip tracer and privacy consultant, isn't milking cows when I call; he's on a case. He's tracing Britney spears!**

**Britney is the latest in a long list of celebrities Ahearn has located for tabloids and paparazzi in his 24-year career as a skip tracer. He's traced Monica Lewinsky, Michael Jackson, Tom Cruise, Victoria & David Beckham, Lindsay Lohan, Phil Spector among others. He's 'constantly locating' Paris Hilton.**

**But it's not just celebrities Ahearn traces; he located OJ Simpson's assets during his trial and often traces private individuals for private investigators, lawyers and finance companies.**

**'Typically, the people I search for have done something to someone like cheated them out of money and so on,' explains the 45-year old from his home in Malibu.**

**Ahearn himself was traced and courted by the media last year, when John Darwin's 'pseudocide' hit the headlines. It wasn't Ahearn's skip tracing that attracted the media's attention, but his startling sideline as privacy consultant.**

**'Startling,' because teaching people how to disappear is the last thing you expect a skip tracer to do. But that's exactly what Ahearn does as a privacy consultant; he works with people 'who want to vanish or seek more privacy.' So, naturally, when the media needed an expert opinion on the Darwin case, it was Ahearn's opinion they sought. 'It was a fascinating case,' he says, 'Here's a guy who almost did the perfect crime, and he decides to walk into a police station,' before continuing...but I think that situation was just unravelling.'**

**Ahearn freely admits that his own life has unravelled on occasion.**

**'I've been divorced, bankrupt and audited by the IRS, but always managed to land on my feet, perhaps by the grace of some good luck or my mother praying to St. Jude.'**

**This reference to St. Jude and the familiar sounding surname prompt me to do some tracing of my own; is there any Irish blood in this Mr. Ahearn? Apparently there is.**

**"My grandparents are from Balinrobe & Ballina. I've been to a lot of places,**

**but nothing compares to Dublin or the west of Ireland. ’**

**Ahearn grew up in New York and was introduced to skip tracing while working undercover at a detective agency. 'A colleague was skip tracing and I found it seriously intriguing,' he explains. 'The day I started skip tracing I knew right off the bat it was my forte. I worked with investigators all over the world locating information and people for them. Back then, there was no internet so, if you wanted to locate information - you had to come to a person like me who picked up the phone and did some pretext (lying).'**

**The advances in technology may have made skip tracing easier, but the information superhighway isn't enough to solve every case. When background checks and Internet searches lead to nothing, Ahearn's ability to sniff out 'the fluke factor' and 'pretext' often cracks the case.**

**“The fluke factor is the thing people unknowingly do or leave behind that leads me to their whereabouts’ he explains.**

**'There was one guy, I could find nothing on a while back. My client told me, in passing, that the guy was an avid car buff. So I started calling car magazines and located his subscription, which he'd actually forwarded to his new home address.'**

**'Another time, I was searching for a guy and every lead was dead. His wife told me he travelled often and was stingy. It got me thinking that he might have a frequent flyer account. So I started searching airlines and located his account. Via pretext I had the airlines read me his flight history and worked out that he'd moved to Toronto. From there I located all the car rentals in the airport, the car company he used and what local phone number and address he gave the rental agency. The address and phone number were his new residence. As they say gotcha!'**

**'Pretexting' cracked also the 'This is your life' case'.**

**'All I knew about this guy was his name and that he was a member of a union, I called the union and got an address that was no good, But I also got an 'in case of emergency number': his mother's. I found out that his birthday was coming up in a month. So, I called his mother and told her I was a friend from the union and we were throwing a 'This is your life' birthday party for her son. She was ecstatic and spent over an hour telling me his life story. Finally, I asked if she knew, how to get to his apartment from Wall Street, where we were working. She gave me directions, his address and his new phone number.'**

Ahearn derives surprisingly little satisfaction from his successes and ingenuity as a skip tracer.

‘The skip tracing has been an awkward part of my life, a love hate relationship,’ he says, ‘When you’re skip tracing, you’re using pretext, (lying), to uncover information and locate people. It always messed with my head that I was good at something bad - lying.’

His decision to work as a privacy consultant stems from his own desire to escape from skip tracing.

‘I deal with the dirty parts of peoples lives’ he says. ‘I am at a point in my life where I just want to leave it all behind and walk off into the sunset. That’s where the ‘how to disappear’ comes into my life; a redemption - helping people in a new way.’

‘It kind of odd,’ he says, ‘I have become the Dear Abby of disappearing; people contact me with all kinds of problems. I get general emails from ordinary people asking for simple advice, one teenager wrote telling me his girlfriend dumped him he is unpopular and wants to run away. I told him, we’ve all been there, hang tight - life gets better.’

His clients fall into two broad categories; ‘Men looking to leave something behind - be it a bad marriage, bad business or just looking for a new start and women who being stalked or aggressively pursued.’

‘I work with about ten to fifteen legitimate clients a year.’ He says. This doesn’t include the women he helps. ‘I don’t actually consider them clients as I do not charge them.’

Contrary to popular opinion Ahearn refuses to work with criminals. If it’s not legal - he won’t get involved. But the requests keep coming.

‘One guy emailed me and told me he was being prosecuted for Internet fraud crimes and asked if I would get him a fake passport. I enclosed a Internet link to the FBI and said contact them.’

He vets each request thoroughly and insists on full disclosure from every client, including women in danger. ‘If the woman has children I have to make sure she has full legal custody before we move on - to avoid a kidnapping situation. Similarly, if a person tells me they are being stalked or abused, I ask to see the police report to confirm it’s legitimate.’

12 people, on average, are affected each time a person goes missing according to a recent study of 270 missing person cases. For some, the suffering can continue for years - even after the person has returned.

‘From personal experience, the "Question Mark" is the most painful element

of a Missing Person case' says Dermot Browne founder of MISS, (Missing in Ireland support services).

Inevitably, Ahearn receives requests from people who want to disappear without letting loved ones know. This is perfectly legal but puts Ahearn in a difficult position. 'I always suggest that they deal with the issues here first then I can help them. But there are times when they say, "I just want to pick up and go. I'm not interested."

I just try to convince them to get out of the situation in a reasonable fashion and then work with them to help them disappear.'

Ahearn has never been approached by anyone from Ireland instead Ireland appears to be a destination of choice for those Ahearn encounters. 'I get a lot of questions about moving to Ireland. My own long-term plan is to retire there.'