



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

CASES OF PERSONS LIVING WITH DEMENTIA WHO GET LOST AND GO MISSING IN CANADA

May 2025



Public Safety
Canada

Sécurité publique
Canada



10. A woman living with dementia becomes lost while walking her dog and is still missing

Personal information

Name: Susan.

Age: 79 years old when she went missing in December 2021.

Gender: Woman, pronouns are she/her.

Living situation: Single family home in rural Nova Scotia, with her long-time common-law partner.

Social support: Partner (Larry), two adult children (Jennifer in Halifax and Alan in Toronto), and sister (Nancy) and brother-in-law (Gord) who live in a small town in southern Ontario. Neighbours and community members.

Health: Dementia, rheumatoid arthritis, and sleep disruptions due to health conditions. Taking medication to manage symptoms of health conditions.

Interests: Reading, listening to music, walking outside with her dog and family.



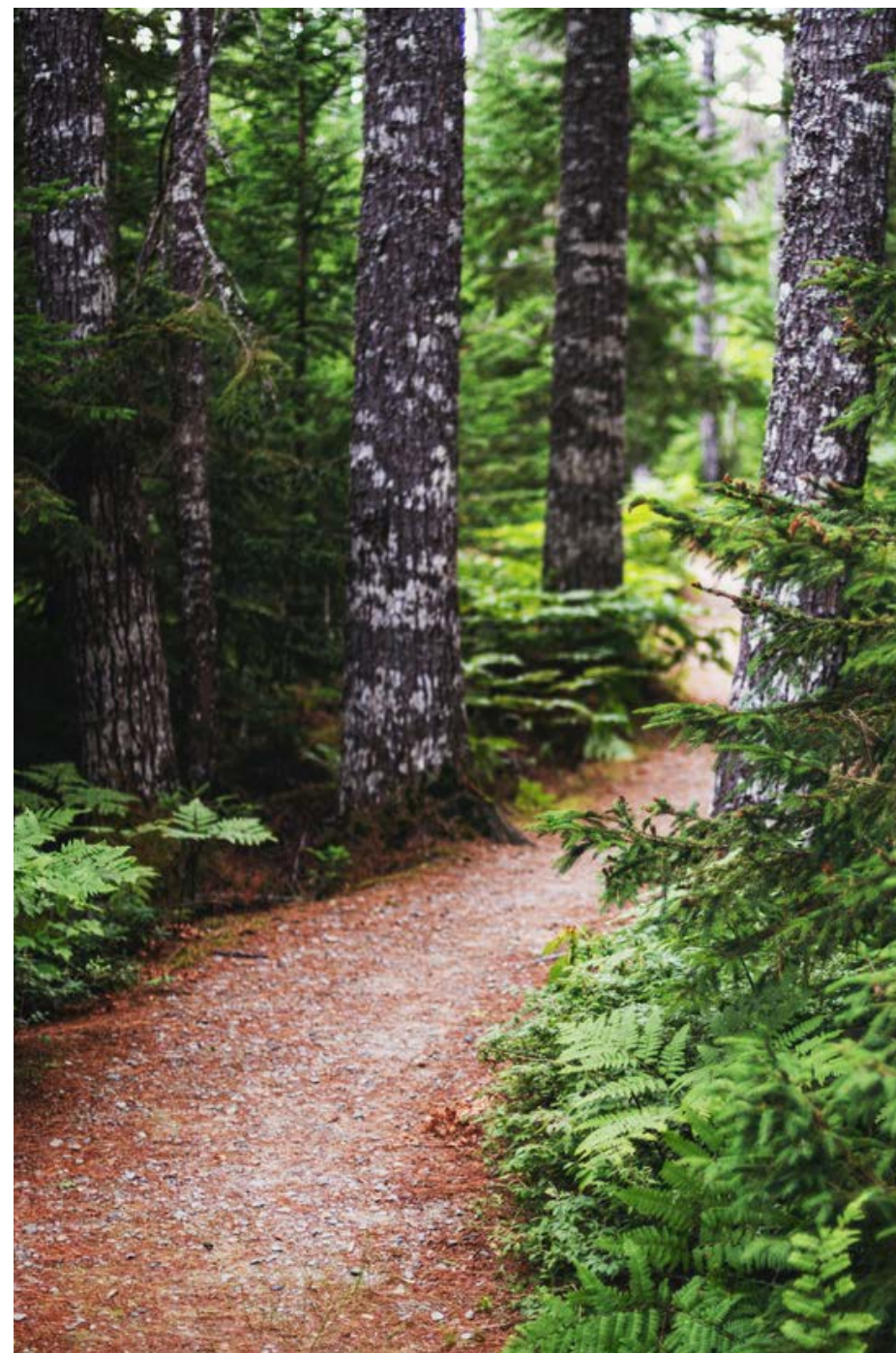
Background

Life in rural Nova Scotia

Susan was born in Toronto and lived in Toronto, Kingston and in rural Ontario at different points in her life. She worked as a daycare provider and a bank teller, then as an elementary school teacher, and in her later years as an adult English as a Second Language and literacy teacher. She and Larry were long-time partners and had lived together since 2004. She moved to Cape Breton in 2012 and enjoyed singing in a local choir and managing several websites.

Dementia diagnosis

Two years before she went missing, Susan was diagnosed with mild dementia. Her family observed it was difficult for her to remember names, dates, and recent events, and she could no longer use a computer. Others noticed that she repeated herself in conversations. Susan suspected that her memory was changing but was reluctant to get diagnosed because of the stigma of having dementia.



Independence

Susan values her independence. Even as a young person, she feared eventually having to live in a hospital or care home. Larry supports Susan at home so that she can maintain her independence, dignity, and quality of life.

Previous missing incidents

Susan walks her dog five or six times per day for 20 to 30 minutes. She is in good shape and is a fast walker. Walking helps Susan manage her rheumatoid arthritis. She follows the same route, walking up and down the same road and through a nearby field. One day, a neighbour spotted Susan walking with her dog along the highway. He asked if she needed help. Susan said she did not know how to get home, so the neighbour drove her. It comforted Susan's family to know that her neighbours and community were willing to help if needed.

Another time, Susan got lost while visiting her sister Nancy. Susan took her dog out for a walk, and got confused on her way back.

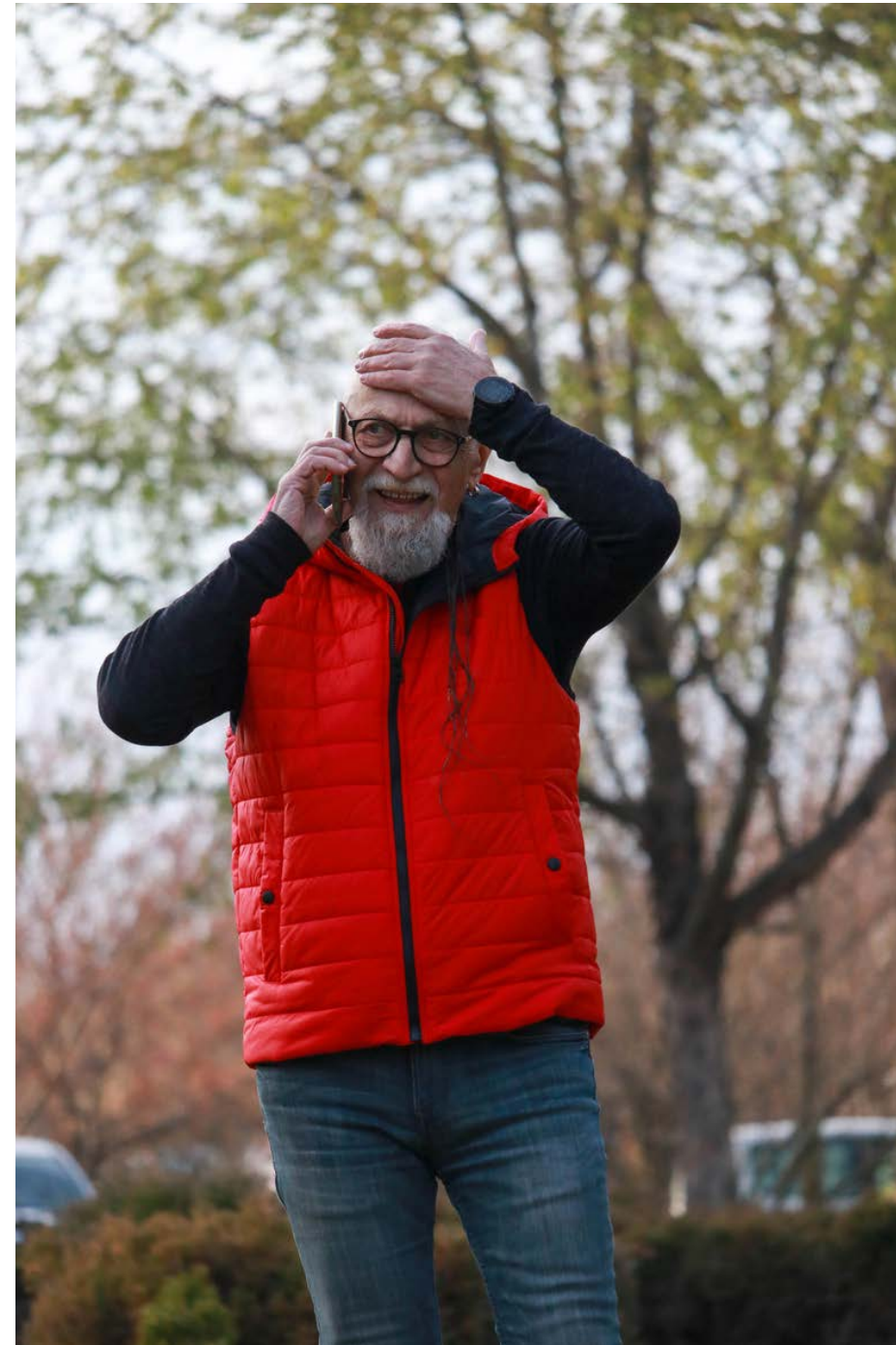


She realized that she was lost and asked a person for help. The person called the police. When Susan didn't return home, Nancy also called the police to report her sister missing. The police connected the two reports, and Susan was reunited with her family. Each time Susan was returned home by first responders, she and her partner would downplay her cognitive decline.

On a third occasion, Susan and Larry stayed with friends in a town well known to Susan. She took her dog for a walk and became lost. Susan went to the fire station for help. Staff drove her home using the address on her identification card. When Larry realized that Susan had not returned to their friend's home, he checked their own home and found her there.

Adopting new family dog

In summer 2021, Susan's beloved dog passed away. The loss was devastating. The dog was Susan's faithful companion. Larry adopted another dog for Susan later in the summer. The new dog barked frequently and this disturbed Susan. Still, she spent a lot of time with the new dog, but their relationship was different than with her previous dog.



The day of the incident

– Getting lost

A vehicle change and flooding cause distress

It is an unseasonably warm day in early December 2021. Bridges and roads near Susan and Larry's home are damaged due to flooding. Susan is distressed each time she sees or hears about the damage. A week before, Larry was in a car accident with a deer. Larry's truck was damaged, so he rented a different vehicle while his truck was being repaired. The car rental company told Larry that he shouldn't have the dog in the car, so Larry, Susan and the dog can't go out together for afternoon drives or errands as they normally would. Susan's emotions are heightened.

Susan stays home by herself while Larry goes shopping

On Friday mornings, Larry always goes on his own to grocery shop in a nearby town and then skates for an hour at a local arena. Susan is at home by herself.



Larry realizes Susan is missing

When Larry returns home from shopping, Susan is not there. He thinks that she is walking with the dog. When she does not return a short time later, he gets worried and starts looking for her. He drives down the roads near their home and asks neighbours if they saw her. Then, the dog returns to the house. It is muddy and its leash is broken. Larry is extremely worried. It is now midafternoon and becoming dark and cold. He calls the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to report Susan missing.



The search

RCMP search for Susan

The RCMP arrive to interview Larry and search the property. They organize a search using dogs, local search and rescue teams, and a helicopter.

Change in weather conditions

The weather has changed drastically. It is cold and snowing. Susan was not suitably dressed as the weather was unseasonably warm when she left the house. The teams search the field and the forest near Susan's home. It is an old logging area with overgrown paths, hills, and dense forest. The search goes on until midnight. Larry searches past 3:00 AM, stopping only because of heavy snow.



Weather impacts the search

The search resumes on the next two days, Saturday and Sunday. There is heavy rain on Monday and Tuesday, and searching is suspended. The search resumes on Wednesday, but the rain has washed away traces. There are few clues that searchers can use. The dense forest and terrain make the search challenging. They find Susan's glove in the forest but no other traces of her. The search is called off on Thursday due to a blizzard and it doesn't resume.

No traces of Susan

Susan is never found. She continues to be greatly missed by family and friends.

We thank and acknowledge Susan's family for giving permission to share their story.

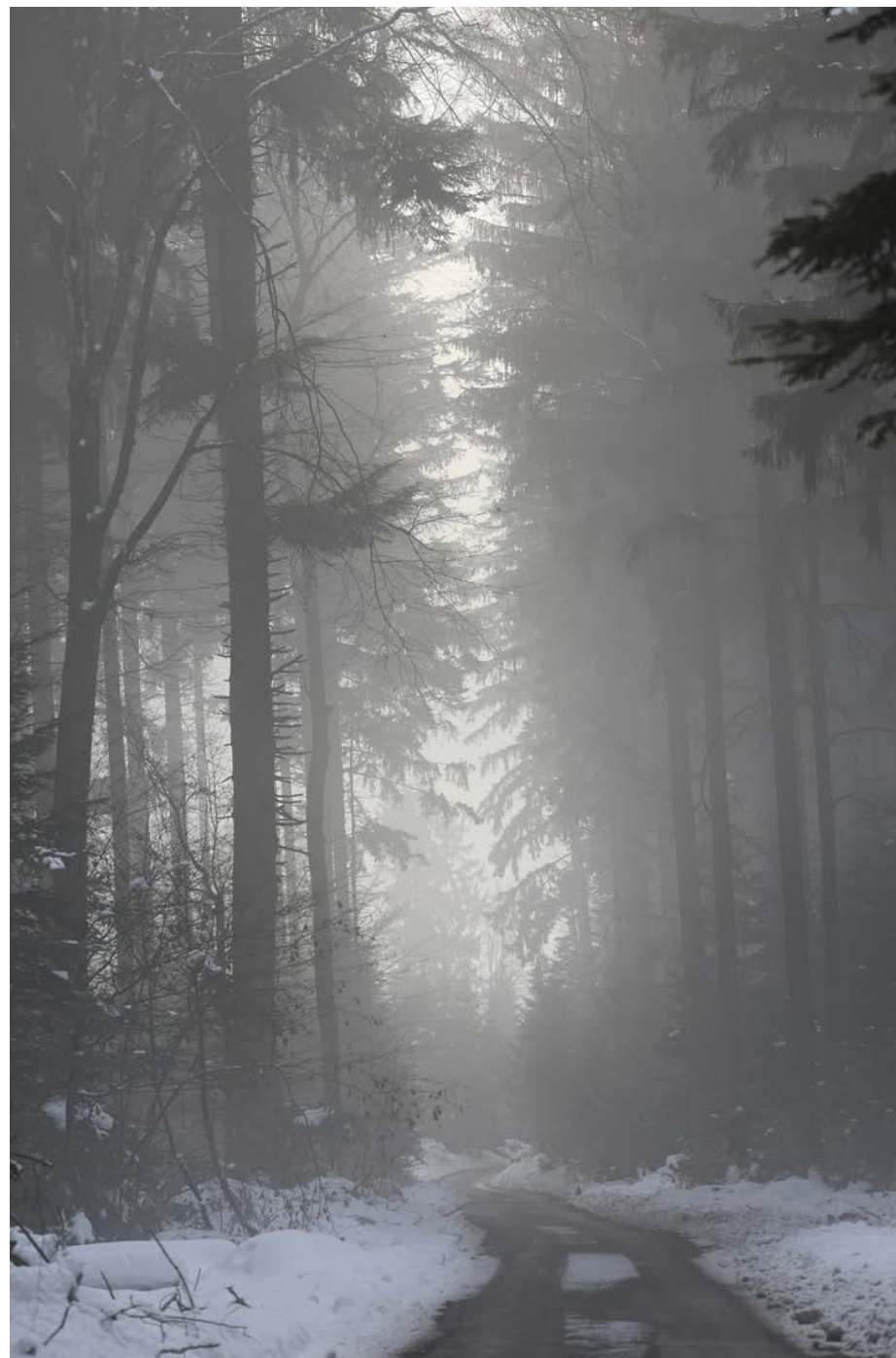


Resources

People living with dementia can experience stigma in different ways. Internalized stigma can result in a person living with dementia downplaying symptoms and prevent someone from reporting declining cognitive function. The Alzheimer Society of Canada has developed a resource about stigma: <https://alzheimer.ca/en/about-dementia/stigma-against-dementia/what-does-stigma-against-dementia-look>

A group of Canadian researchers produced an interactive tool called Dementia in New Light: A Digital Learning Experience. It explores stigma and how to challenge it to support people living with dementia. It can be found here: <https://dementiainnewlight.com/>

The Alzheimer Society of Canada has a video about the benefits of pets for people with dementia. It can be found here: <https://alzheimer.ca/en/help-support/dementia-resources/dementia-talks-canada/video-animal-therapy-service-dogs-pets-and-dementia-care>





Resources

Toolkit to manage the risk of getting lost and going missing for people living with dementia.

This toolkit contains strategies to help with the common concerns of people living with dementia and their care partners regarding the risks of becoming lost.

Emergency card

People living with dementia can carry an “In Case of Emergency” card. It has important information to help them if they go missing. This card was made by the [Calgary Missing Older adult Resource Network](#), see page 16.

The Herbert Protocol

Important details about the person at risk can be gathered in The Herbert Protocol. This information can help first responders when someone is missing. Keep this information at home on your fridge and give it to care partners. Click this link to access the [‘Resource Guide for Older Adults at Risk of Going Missing’](#); fill out the form on pages 15-20.

Safety and leisure activities

Balancing leisure time with safety can be challenging. [The Canadian Guideline for Safe Wandering](#) provides strategies to promote safe wandering and manage the risk of getting lost when doing leisure activities.

Driving with dementia

It can be challenging to drive a car when the driver has a hard time remembering, navigating, and attending to the environment. This [Driving and Dementia Roadmap](#) includes safety considerations related to driving with dementia.

In Case of Emergency	
Full Name	_____
Date of Birth	_____ Blood type _____
Address	_____
Cell	_____ Work _____ Home _____
Current Meds	_____
Conditions	_____
Physician	_____ Phone _____
Allergy/additional info	_____
In Case of Emergency	
Emergency Contact #1	_____
Relationship	_____ Work Phone _____
Cell Phone	_____ Work Phone _____
Emergency Contact #1	_____
Relationship	_____ Work Phone _____
Cell Phone	_____ Work Phone _____
Additional Info	_____
_____ Last updated _____	

Locator devices

Locator devices help people living with dementia share their location with family in case they are lost. They may also help the police find people should they go missing. The [Alzheimer Society of Canada](#) shares more information about the purposes of locator devices. The [University of Waterloo Aging and Innovation Research Program](#) outlines features of locator devices, including cost and battery life.

What to do if you find a missing person

A missing incident is an emergency. Call police and ask the operator or service how you can help. [A video from Dementia Network Calgary](#) outlines a missing incident involving a person living with dementia and how to help.

Links

- **Toolkit** to manage the risk of getting lost and going missing for people living with dementia, made by the University of Waterloo. <https://uwaterloo.ca/managing-risks-of-disappearance-in-persons-living-with-dementia/toolkit-0>
- **“In Case of Emergency” card** made by Calgary Missing Older Adult Resource Network. See page 14. <https://missingseniors.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Resource-guide-for-people-at-risk-of-going-missing.pdf>
- **The Herbert Protocol** described by Calgary Missing Older Adult Resource Network. See pages 15-20. <https://missingseniors.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Resource-guide-for-people-at-risk-of-going-missing.pdf>
- **The Canadian Guideline for Safe Wandering.** https://canadiansafewandering.ca/#more_information
- **The Driving and Dementia Roadmap.** <https://www.drivinganddementia.ca/>
- **Locator device overview**, as described by the Alzheimer Society of Canada. <https://alzheimer.ca/en/help-support/im-caring-person-living-dementia/ensuring-safety-security/tracking-devices>
- **Locator device features**, as described by the University of Waterloo Aging and Innovation Research Program. <https://uwaterloo.ca/aging-innovation-research-program/locator-devices>
- **What to do if you find a missing person.** Dementia Network Calgary’s video dementianetworkcalgary.ca/



For more information

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