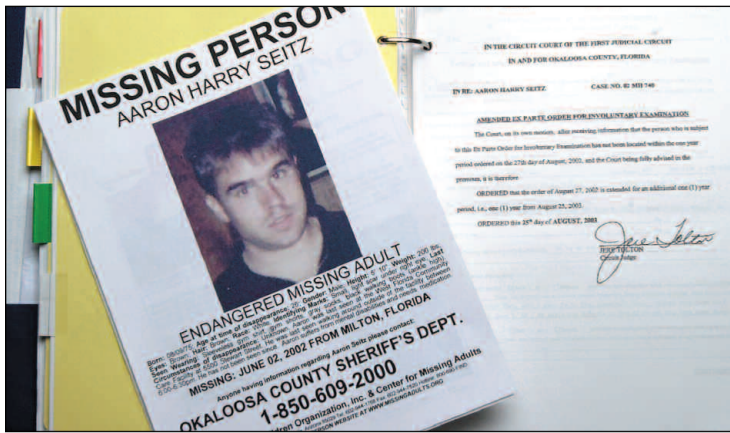


From The Front



Daily News/DEVON RAVINE

A missing-person flyer for Aaron Seitz sits next to a court order authorizing law enforcement personnel to take Aaron into custody for involuntary examination.

PARENTS

From A1

pounds," Harry says. "He might have a shaved head or he might have his hair long. He might have a beard."

What Harry and Diane do know is that the Baker Act might be their only hope for finding their son.

Under normal circumstances, if Aaron — who is listed nationally as a missing adult — were located anywhere in the country, no action would be taken to return him to his parents.

"They would let him know that we are looking for him, check his name off the list of missing persons and let him go," Diane says.



AARON SEITZ

But because the Seitzes have been able to secure an order under the Baker Act — the 32-year-old Florida law that allows people to be involuntarily taken into custody for mental evaluation — any authorities who find Aaron will be required to get him to a mental health facility.

A man apart

Aaron's first mental "break" came unexpectedly in the winter of 1993, in the middle of his senior year at Crestview High School.

He was, by all accounts, a good kid. He got good grades, held down a job, watched what he ate and worked out regularly.

He even made early loan payments on his cherished motorcycle, and often talked of becoming a game warden or some kind of wildlife officer.

Without explanation, though, 18-year-old Aaron started to grow a bit sullen. He began listening to heavy metal music and wearing dark T-shirts.

"It's just a teenage thing," Diane remembers thinking at the time. "We can certainly get through this."

One cold December day, though, things changed. Aaron did not arrive as expected to pick up his mother from work.

When his parents got home, they found his motorcycle and a handgun missing.

"It was terrifying," Diane says, remembering that she feared her son was going to commit suicide. "A living nightmare."

Aaron was missing for several days before he eventually turned up at a safe house for troubled teens.

That marked the first time the Seitzes had to have their son taken in under the Baker Act. It was an agonizing experience that they would have to endure several more times before Aaron's disappearance.

"It kills you every time you see cops taking your son into a police car," Harry says. "It's awful."

Getting better ... and worse

Aaron was diagnosed with schizophrenia and began receiving treatment for his mental illness.

"He had these really bizarre visual hallucinations and he sometimes heard voices," Diane says. "On the meds, he learned to tune them out to some extent."

The entire family realized, at some point, that life for Aaron would never go back to the way it was.

Still, he strived for a normal life. When Aaron ventured into the public, he gave almost no indication of his mental illness. He continued going to the

"The only thing we've got is the Baker Act. It's the hope that somebody sees the picture, recognizes him and calls the authorities so that they have to take him in for evaluation."

DIANE SEITZ

on the search for her son, Aaron

gym and worked to keep himself healthy.

"He really felt he was going to beat it," Harry says. "He was extremely brave."

Although the drug combinations would usually work for a period of time, doctors often tried to change his medications or drop the doses, sometimes causing Aaron to fall back into psychosis.

"He was always compliant with his meds and would try to let us know if he felt like they weren't working anymore," Harry says.

Sometimes the Seitzes could get his medication changed before symptoms grew severe. Sometimes they could not, and Aaron would have to be Baker Acted again.

In June 2001, Aaron experienced his most serious mental break. He was taken in under the Baker Act a final time and committed for at least six months to West Florida Community Care in Milton.

Because Aaron's doctors weren't sure he could mentally handle going home again, the facility agreed to keep him beyond those six months on a voluntary basis, until the Seitzes could arrange to get him an apartment.

The longer he stayed, though, the more depressed the Seitzes say their son became.

"The last time we saw him he looked like the public perception of a mental case," Diane says. "He became very motley looking and sullen."

On Sunday, June 2, 2002, the Seitzes got a call from the facility. It was 8:25 p.m., and officials from the center informed them that no one had seen Aaron in almost two hours.

He had gone for a walk, and because he was a voluntary patient, he was permitted to do so. He simply walked off the grounds.

The search

Initially, everyone suspected that Aaron might have been walking home along U.S. Highway 90. The Seitzes made several trips back and forth across the highway looking for their son, but to no avail.

The Seitzes broadened their search.

"We looked everywhere we could think of," Harry says. "We went looking for him under bridges and at homeless camps and all the places the police told me not to go."

Since then, it's been more of the same. A few random sightings that never panned out and lots of wondering.

"Every time we leave the house, we have the calls forwarded to my cell phone, just in case someone calls," Diane says.

"Sometimes I'll see someone from behind and for a split second, I'm sure it's Aaron," Harry says. "And your heart kind of stops before you're let down again."

"The only thing we've got is the Baker Act," Diane says. "It's the hope that somebody sees the picture, recognizes him and calls the authorities so that they have to take him in for evaluation."

"That's what we're praying for."

QUAKE

From A1

Alavi, the governor of Kerman, the provincial capital. "As more bodies are pulled out, we fear that the death toll may reach as high as 40,000."

But other officials said later Saturday the number of dead would be lower.

"The figures are not correct; no precise statistics on the number of casualties are available yet but it seems that number of the victims is less," Deputy Governor Mohammad Farshad told the official Islamic Republic News Agency.

The Interior Ministry estimated the number of injured at 30,000.

One American was killed and another injured as they visited the city's 2,000-year-old citadel, a U.S. State Department official said in Washington. The injured American was hospitalized in Tehran, State Department

spokesman Lou Fintor said. The victims' names were not released.

Bam, in southeast Iran about 630 miles from Tehran, suffered such extreme damage because most of the buildings are made of unreinforced mud brick and the quake was centered only about 10 miles outside the city, said Harley Benz, a USGS seismologist.

"The communities in this part of Iran are really not resilient to earthquakes," said Benz, head of the National Earthquake Information Center in Golden, Colo. "It's very sad and unfortunate."

Aftershocks registered as high as 5.3, according to the geophysics institute of Tehran University.

Searchers carried the injured in their arms, on stretchers and in the backs of trucks, seeking help outside Bam's ruined hospitals or at the airport while awaiting evacuation to Kerman, the provincial capital about 120 miles away, or other cities.

A provincial government official, Saeed Iranmanesh, told The Associated Press that 3,000 bodies have been recovered and buried, and more than 9,000 of the injured were sent to hospitals throughout the country.

About 150 people, including an infant, were pulled alive from the rubble, Revolutionary Guards officer Masoud Amiri said. The baby was buried more than 24 hours but was listed in stable condition at a hospital, he said.

By late afternoon, a 1½-mile line of vehicles waited to enter Bam as Iranians rushed to find relatives or to bring emergency supplies.

Iran opened its airspace to all planes carrying emergency supplies and waived visa requirements for foreign relief personnel.

"The disaster is far too huge for us to meet all of our needs," President Mohammad Khatami said as he declared three days of mourning.

Governments and relief

organizations mobilized around the globe, with rescue workers, search dogs and supplies arriving from a long list of countries.

The United States, which has no diplomatic relations with Iran, will send 150,000 pounds of medical supplies and dispatch teams of about 200 search-and-rescue and medical experts from Fairfax County, Va.; Los Angeles; and Boston, U.S. officials said.

"We greatly welcome any assistance from the United States. We welcome assistance from all countries except Israel," Alavi said.

Israel and Iran are adversaries.

The U.S. airlift could help thaw relations with Iran, which President Bush branded part of an "axis of evil" last year with prewar Iraq and North Korea.

The leader of an Iranian relief team, Ahmad Najafi, said he also feared the toll could reach 40,000. On one street alone, 200 bodies were extracted from the rubble in a single hour, he said.

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