

A father who never gave up



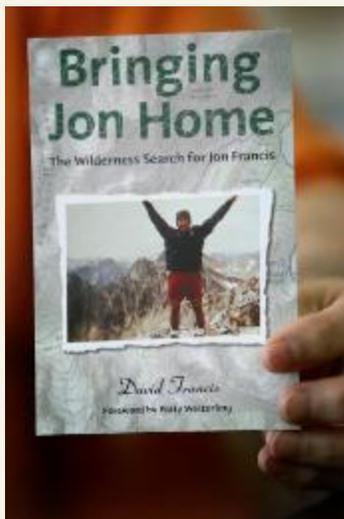
Elizabeth Flores, Star Tribune

David Francis visited his son's gravesite at the Rutherford Cemetery near Stillwater. "I come here often to speak with Jon," he said last week. "It's often like a mantra: I miss you, I love you. It's a place of peace and connection. It's hard, but he assures me that he's fine."

David Francis of Stillwater fought to find his son Jon, and now he's helping other families of missing adults.

By [KEVIN GILES](#), Star Tribune

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Postcard

Elizabeth Flores, Star Tribune

It was after a "long cruel winter" of fading hope that David Francis buried his face in his lost son's clothing to find his aroma. Anything, David thought, to bring him closer to his little boy.

A few months later, a wilderness searcher found the remains of 24-year-old Jon Francis in the Sawtooth Mountains in Idaho. That was July 24, 2007. Jon had fallen to his death off the north face of a mountain known as the Grand Mogul.

"How strange to find solace in knowing he died immediately," his father said last week, remembering the unanswered questions and the search for his son that lasted more than a year after Jon's disappearance.

Through that heart-breaking search and nearly four years of grief, David Francis has emerged as Minnesota's best-known advocate for missing adults. He has written a book, released this week, about the experience.

The Stillwater man, a retired Navy submarine captain, began the Jon Francis Foundation to promote wilderness searches and safety and to help other families of lost adult children.

He also was pivotal in the passage last year of "Brandon's Law," named after 19-year-old Brandon Swanson who disappeared in southwestern Minnesota in May 2008. The law, which Francis backed, requires law enforcement agencies statewide to file missing persons' reports and begin investigations when an adult disappears.

The foundation now is expanding its reach, hoping to persuade 40 states to enact a similar law.

Francis didn't want this responsibility. He never imagined that someday he would visit his son -- a champion high school cross country runner in Stillwater -- at Rutherford Cemetery, a little plot of land not far from the townhouse where he and his wife, Linda, live on the city's west edge.

"I come here often to speak with Jon," he said at his son's gravesite last week. "It's often like a mantra: I miss you, I love you. It's a place of peace and connection. It's hard, but he assures me that he's fine.

David said he's careful not to idolize Jon, but calls him a "seeker" who tore after life with gusto and had planned to become a Lutheran minister. Jon was an athlete, a Bible camp counselor, a friend to legions of people and an inspiration to his family, including Linda and sisters Robin, Jocelyn and Melissa.

"When a child dies, you not only lose them but their future," said David, a trim and athletic man who looks younger than his 66 years. A self-described "Kennedy-Wellstone Democrat -- that's Kennedy as in John Kennedy," he campaigned for the state Legislature during the search but regrets doing so. He still has political ambitions but sees now that it's his job to carry on his son's legacy.

The father began writing about his son's life and death on the day of his funeral. That outpouring of sadness became "Bringing Jon Home," his book.

The book talks about Jon's "brief remarkable life" and the relentless family search to find him after a sheriff in Idaho gave up within days of Jon's disappearance.

"I was mentally debilitated by grief and confusion and could barely hold a thought," David remembers of those first days after Jon disappeared. "The incident commander came to me and said, 'You need to think about giving your son up to the mountain.' I was so helpless and hopeless and in shock and disbelief that I didn't utter a word."

What came next is what David explains in detail in the book. His entire family went to work to find Jon. They found qualified searchers, they found dogs, and they never gave up.

"He kept pushing himself," Robin Francis said of her father. David taught her persistence, how to succeed in business, and how to shake off disappointment. He put all of those skills to use to find Jon.

Jon was working at the Luther Heights Bible Camp when he decided to climb Grand Mogul. When he arrived at the summit, he signed a logbook that had been kept in a rusty ammunition box since 1965. Soon after signing in, Jon fell to his death.

"It was a religious experience," David said of his son's climb to the mountaintop. "He felt close to God at the summit. He believed that God was in nature and it was all good."

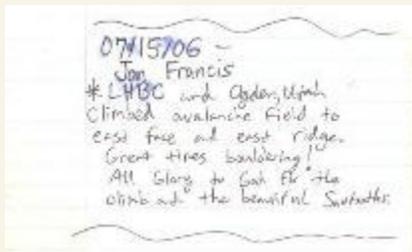


Jon Francis

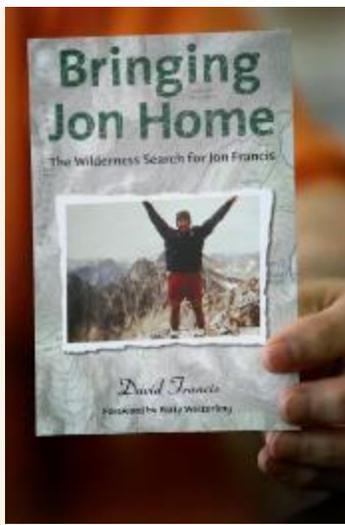


David Francis

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Jon's note



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"BRINGING JON HOME"

By David Francis, 224 pages, Beaver's Pond Press, 2010, \$22.