

The long search for Bagel the beagle, Richmond's most famous lost dog

By NED OLIVER Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Saturday, November 26, 2016 9:00 pm

Jocelyn Senn started posting the lost-dog fliers a few hours after Bagel ran away.

And for months, she kept posting them, gluing them to thousands of telephone poles and utility boxes throughout Richmond.

Through her persistence, Senn elevated what would have been a mundane and lonely search for her small, spotted beagle into a kind of citywide phenomenon, mounting what is probably the most vigorous hunt for a missing dog Richmond has ever seen.

Her posters became iconic for their simplicity and sheer numbers. She also shared frequent and increasingly emotional updates for a growing audience on social media.

In the process, she enlisted hundreds of volunteers — most of whom she'd never met — to help her search. Some describe spending a dozen or more hours a week looking for him. Strangers put up thousands of dollars in reward money.

By October, Bagel was so well-known that at least half a dozen people dressed up as him for Halloween. There were knock-off posters for bands and theater shows. Online memes popped up and spread. He was even a topic of discussion in grief counseling groups. Students from the VCU Brandcenter, a marketing and advertising school, are working on a documentary.

But Bagel was never found. And all the effort only netted one positive sighting — a few blocks from Senn's house the day he ran away.

Senn ended her search at the beginning of the month, saying in a Facebook post that was viewed by more than 125,000 people that she realized Bagel had died, probably hit by a car the day he escaped.

She came to the conclusion after consulting with a pet psychic who seemed to know things about her and her pets.

"I thought, now it's time to move forward," she said. "To honor him, I had a little memorial service for him with friends. We lit candles, had dinner."



Jocelyn Senn, Bagel the beagle's owner

Jocelyn Senn began removing signs she had pasted on the front of her business to advertise her escaped dog. She ended the search for Bagel the beagle after consulting with a pet psychic and deciding he was probably hit by a car.

Senn said Bagel seemed nervous the morning he ran.

It was June 18, his first time in a new house in Richmond on Monument Avenue and the day after a powerful thunderstorm.

Bagel hated loud noises and was used to his country home in Varina.

He already had tried to run out the front door, so Senn said she was careful only to crack the back gate when she went out to meet a friend.

But the 30-pound dog saw the opening and went for it, pushing hard past her, bolting through the alley, around the corner and away.

“That was the very last time I saw him,” Senn said.

Senn, a 57-year-old small-business owner, already had two dogs when Bagel came into her yard as a stray five years ago. She jokes that he adopted her rather than vice versa.

“He was a rascal,” she said. “He got in the trash, chewed things up. But he had an endearing personality.”

Senn said Bagel’s escape came at a hard time: It was two weeks after her 16-year-old bulldog, Maddy, died of old age. On top of that, a close friend’s dog had died at around the same time.

She said she was determined not to lose another dog.

After a few hours of searching the neighborhood that first morning went nowhere, she printed her first run of fliers.

“I really felt at first that I could find him with help,” she said. “And I think one of the things I did early on is ask for help. I think the first flier I made, I said, ‘Please help’ on it, and people did.”

Terrie Buczek, a psychologist who practices in Chesterfield and lives in Bon Air, had never met Senn, but estimates she has spent at least 40 hours searching for Bagel.

Buczek got involved just before the Fourth of July, when Senn organized mass search parties because she worried the holiday would be terrifying for Bagel with all the fireworks.

The next day, Buczek was wandering the Fan District with a group of strangers looking for Bagel.

“She was sincere, so heartbroken about that dog, and she had a way of expressing it that just made you want to get involved and help her and help that dog,” Buczek said.

“Her determination was very impressive. I had my friend from Florida help me. My daughter put up posters in North Side. I started thinking about ideas about where this dog would have gone. One of my clients, who’s a hunter, said this is what a beagle would do and gave me ideas about where to look.”

The hunter’s advice led her all the way to Ashland on a hunch that never panned out.

The director of Richmond's Department of Animal Care and Control, Christie Chipps Peters, said she'd never seen such an involved search for a lost dog in the city.

More typically, she said, people put little to no effort into finding their dogs: Of about 1,800 stray dogs the city animal shelter has taken in this year, only about 400 were claimed by their owners.

"The stray dogs we pick up, we never even know they have an owner, because no one calls us, no one's looking for them," she said. "Then you have the people who will check the shelter and look for their pet. And then we have people like Bagel the Beagle's owner, who take it to a completely different level.

"We were joking that if we ever went missing, we'd want her as a mom."

Senn can't say exactly how many fliers she eventually put up, but it was easily several thousand. She said she spent at least \$2,500 having them printed.

They went through several designs, but all featured a cut-out of Bagel on a white background with Senn's cellphone number and a few bits of text, usually along the lines of: "Pet Amber Alert: Missing Beagle. Do not chase."

Senn's business, PopMounts, sells commemorative plaques to people and businesses featured in newspapers and magazines, and she brought her expertise in marketing and printing to her lost-dog flier design.

"A lot of times these dog posters, they're these horrible black and white pictures and they're really small and you can't distinguish the animal when you're driving by," she said. "When I was doing my fliers, I was thinking, how would this look if I was driving by in a car, which is why it evolved over time."

Whenever she got a call about a possible sighting in a neighborhood, she'd post more fliers there as she searched. During the first six weeks, Senn said she spent 12 hours a day driving around in her red pickup truck with supplies such as binoculars, pet food and motion-activated wildlife cameras, which she deployed strategically hoping to catch a glimpse of Bagel.

Along the way, Senn picked up more and more help from strangers who found themselves captivated by the growing search. When Senn posted about a new lead on her Facebook page, she said she'd usually find others in the neighborhood already searching by the time she got there.

She took to posting near daily status updates on her Facebook page; each began with a count of how many days it had been since Bagel went missing. As the number grew, she pleaded with Bagel's followers not to give up:

"D A Y 7 5 : this is my special boy Bagel. I love his long soft ears and expressive eyes. He loved me unconditionally and I adore his loving beautiful playful soul. He is deeply missed. There isn't a moment that goes by that I don't think about him and wonder where he is. PLEASE keep sharing his story so more people are aware."

Alane Miles doesn't know Senn and never met Bagel, but he nonetheless became a frequent topic of conversation after the signs started appearing.

She's a minister and grief counselor, which to a certain extent made her a magnet for people wondering about the dog, its fate, and why the search felt so oddly fascinating.

She has lots of thoughts, but her primary takeaway is that our culture doesn't offer many outlets for people to express their grief, particularly for people who experience a sudden loss of a loved one and never get the chance to say goodbye or see them one last time.

Miles said Senn responded by doing the only thing she could do: Looking for him, and not giving up through a long, improbable search.

"So there's something so beautiful about Bagel being all over town," she said. "In that sense, we all saw him, we all saw her grief. We all saw the dog."

Andrew Jones, a student at VCU's Brandcenter, decided to make a documentary with classmates about Senn's search after he noticed the signs popping up around the city over the summer.

"There were a lot of people who were weirdly into it," he said. "Like an inside joke. But at the end of the day it's really sad, but we identify with the questions it raises: How long would you look if you lost your child, your baby. So, it kind of makes us all ask that question: Why was she still looking?"

Not everyone was charmed by Senn's tactics. Alongside pictures of Bagel the Beagle, couples' Halloween costumes and lighthearted memes that went around Twitter, some groused about vandalism and how difficult it was to remove the posters.

The posters Senn had printed were essentially giant stickers backed with an unusually strong adhesive. One Facebook user commented on every post Senn made on Facebook pleading with her supporters to use regular tape.

Others just expressed a general sense that it was pathetic that someone would search so long and so hard for a missing dog.

Miles said her impression was that those kinds of reactions say less about Senn and more about the people voicing them.

"Our whole town got covered in her grief, and I think that made some people profoundly uncomfortable," Miles said. "But to me, it's honest. It's completely honest. And honesty in grief is not pretty. They call it the valley of the shadow of death for a reason."

Senn is now in the process of trying to harness the vast online network of dog lovers she brought together to help find more pets and raise money for dog rescue organizations.

She's launched a website, Bagelbeagle.com, that tells the story of her search and includes games, including one called "Where's Bagel," which is like "Where's Waldo," but with Bagel.

She announced in a Facebook post she was ending her search on Nov. 3, the 139th day. She posted the message the same day she consulted with the pet psychic, whose description of Bagel and his escape just “felt like the truth.”

“R I P my beautiful Bagel. I have really suffered through this experience. I feel like I was led to a truth, one that makes sense but hurts like hell. So many details to share when you have time and I am not so broken. Long and short Bagel was killed, on impact, not long after he left my home. I do believe this is the reality. He is complete. I need to find my peace. One day I really want to share what I learned. Thank you for all your help and support.”