

FBI agent part of Lake Tahoe's fabric

By Kathryn Reed

"When victims and families have a really bad day, that is when our good work starts. That is one of the things that is odd about our career – some of the most challenging and interesting cases are some of the most horrific."

Chris Champion, retired FBI agent



Chris Champion spent 25 years with the FBI stationed in South Lake Tahoe. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Jaycee Lee Dugard is the one case in Chris Champion's 25-year career that stands out above all the rest. The day she was kidnapped from a Meyers bus stop and 18 years later when she was freed from captivity.

"A lot of people don't realize all the leads that went on in between ... at times we thought we had something," Champion told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Right up to the day she came back I was working a lead of a guy in New York who kidnapped five women, some as young as 14, and kept them in an underground bunker. He had ties to Lake Tahoe and Reno."

Last spring he spoke at a conference for the National Center of Missing and Exploited Children. Terry Probyn, Dugard's mom, was a speaker, too.

Champion has kept in touch with Dugard during the past five years.

"She is doing amazingly well. You stop and think about it ... her spirit and ability to adapt. She is an amazing person and constantly astounds me," Champion said.

Champion is a walking encyclopedia of crime on the South Shore for the last quarter century. But he is no longer going after the bad guys for the FBI. He retired from the agency – he was close the mandatory retirement age – two months ago.

He isn't done working, though. He has been hired by a firm to do corporate investigations. It allows him to keep living in South Lake Tahoe, while also getting his passport stamped plenty of times.

And when Champion is in Tahoe he plans to do more of the outdoor activities he never had time for when he wore a badge.

Plenty to do

He attributes the crime rate on the South Shore to the casinos, the nightlife – that they are a draw for criminals, just like they are for the average person.

"People come here to get away from things all the time. They think maybe there is not as much law enforcement and more anonymity," Champion said.

The office handled cases in five counties from Truckee to Mammoth.

South Lake Tahoe had an FBI office in the 1970s that closed in 1979. Then there was the Harveys' bombing, and the Coddington and Operation Deep Snow cases.

(Herbert James Coddington, who was in his 20s at the time, murdered two women at his residence in the Tahoe Verde Mobile Home Park on May 16, 1987, and kidnapped and sexually assaulted a 14-year-old and 12-year-old girl. He is sitting on death row. Deep Snow involved the mayor of South Lake Tahoe and about 20 others on drug and money laundering charges.)

Those cases led to the FBI reopening the office in 1989. Chick McDevitt was the sole agent until Campion joined him.

This was Campion's first assignment after graduating from the academy. While California was on his list of choices, originally he was headed for Fresno. He didn't regret his destination changed before he ever went to the Central Valley.

Campion's intention after graduating law school was to join the FBI, but the agency was in a hiring freeze. This led him to work in a large law firm doing civil work. In that time he wrote a brief for the Minnesota Supreme Court.

When the FBI called, though, he was still interested.

"I took a pay cut and never looked back," Campion said.

FBI policy used to be that agents moved every few years. That changed and allowed Campion to stay in Tahoe. While thoughts of working in a bigger office filled his head in the early days, he realized he got to do more in a smaller office.

"When the phone rings, it is for you," Campion said. "All the cases we get and worked have a big impact on the community."

At times he was the only agent, other times there were three

in the office; two from the Sacramento division, one from Las Vegas.

Memorable cases

Two cases he is glad to have gotten convictions in are Joseph Nissensohn and Richard Swanson.

The Platz case also sticks out for Campion. He was one of the hostage negotiators. What they didn't know at the time is the little girl was already dead.

(In 2003, Lisa Platz was found guilty of the 2001 murder of her 9-year-old daughter, Rebecca Aramburo. The child was found with her throat slashed inside a tent at Campground by the Lake. Platz was sentenced to life in prison. Her boyfriend James Csucsai hanged himself in jail.)

He was able to retire with all the child abduction cases in the area being closed.

But there are three missing person cases he hopes one day will be resolved even though the women involved are presumed dead. They are Donna Lass from the early 1970s who may be linked to the Zodiac killer; Bobette Ulrich who was in her 40s and went missing from South Lake Tahoe in the early 2000s; and Catherine Hatadis, a retired Stateline woman, who disappeared.

The three public corruption cases that stand out for him are Operation Clean Sheets that involved fraud with hotels in the redevelopment area; the arrest of Mary Kay McLanahan, South Lake Tahoe associate city planner, on embezzlement and grand theft charges; and the conviction of Johnny Poland, who was a South Lake Tahoe police officer.

Campion received the Shield of Bravery from the FBI after he was shot at in front of the Safeway in South Lake Tahoe.

Brian Williams, now a lieutenant with the South Lake Tahoe Police Department, was with Campion as they went after the

fugitive robber.

“There was a big bullet hole in my brand new car where I would have been sitting if I were still in the car,” Campion said.

And, still, he would not have wanted another career.

“There was never a time I wanted out. It’s a tremendous privilege to be in those situations where you are needed, where you are bringing some harmony back to the community,” Campion said. “I look at it as law enforcement people are healers in a way. They are taking the ripped fabric of society and trying to mend it.”