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An Objective Look at Her Claims

by David Bloomberg

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I gave a presentation about Alexander a few years ago – shortly after she had again been all over the airwaves claiming to have found the body of a kidnapped and murdered boy. Her recent death has brought out a number of these claims again, so it seemed appropriate to convert it to an article now. In addition, anybody reading this should remember that Alexander was not the only person to make claims like this. While this article specifically looks at her claims, this information should be applied to all similar claims as well.

Most of the information (and all quotes unless otherwise specified) contained herein is taken from "A Product of the Media: Greta Alexander," by Ward Lucas, a chapter in the book, *Psychic Sleuths* (edited by Joe Nickell).

As the chapter title indicates, Alexander was largely a product of the media. Even the author of the State Journal-Register article extolling her powers noted, "She was no slouch at self-promotion." Indeed, contacts in the media and police departments have told me how Alexander got so much media attention – she sought it. When she "solved a crime," she made sure everybody knew about it. In the case of the kidnapped boy mentioned above, she was featured on every Central Illinois newscast that night. Why? Because she had called them all to tell them about her success, and they responded by rushing out to interview her. Lucas, a TV news reporter himself, explained well how the media tended to react to her:

"A good working definition of news is 'deviant behavior' or 'that which deviates from the norm.' A story about a psychic finding a missing homicide victim is deviant enough to please editors and readers and therefore has a greater chance of publication. But when that same reporter makes a few extra phone calls and discovers conclusive evidence that a psychic had nothing to do with the solution to a crime, the story's so-called 'sex appeal' or 'deviancy factor' decreases and the story's headline value drops. Only the reporter with an overwhelming desire to seek the truth has the ability to overcome the headline value of sensational surface facts and seek those facts buried below the surface."

Lucas cited one particular example of Alexander's newspaper coverage: "A 1991 feature-length article in the Chicago Tribune's 'Sunday Tempo' presents the more common method of covering Greta Alexander. The writer, Wes Smith, presents case after case of alleged psychic miracles wrought by Alexander, apparently based only on the claims of Alexander herself. The skeptical viewpoint is not presented at all. In fact, Smith notes that Greta refers to skeptics as 'yahoos and pipsqueaks,' and he echoes her terms in his own reference to her detractors. The Tribune writer claims, 'Alexander has made believers of hundreds of skeptics, police and pipsqueaks among them, through jaw-dropping displays of her abilities.'"

"Then, Smith discusses the Mary Cousett murder case (in which Alexander supposedly located the missing body psychically)... The writer of the Tribune article apparently didn't make a single call to anyone involved in the Cousett case to see if Alexander did, in fact, locate the body. Had he done so, he might have discovered that Alexander's success in the case was highly suspect or even nonexistent. He might have found that police officers who initially gave glowing accounts of Alexander's 'accuracy' had since decided they were probably hoodwinked by the psychic's pronouncements. In short, the Tribune article was erroneous. It was based on previous erroneous information in [Marcello] Truzzi's book [The Blue Sense], which was in turn based on even older erroneous information in regional newspapers. And the legend of Alexander psychically locating a missing murder victim continued to take form."

So what are the facts of the Mary Cousett case? Lucas examined these objectively – something often missing from mentions of Alexander and other "psychics." His results show less than stunning accuracy on her part. (This case appears to be one referred to in the State Journal-Register article, in which the Tazewell County coroner was quoted as talking about a case that sounds like this one and saying "I think there were something like 21 points she gave us and all 21 turned out to be accurate." Read the following and judge for yourself.)

Cousett disappeared, and police got her boyfriend to confess to killing her and dumping her body on Route 121, next to the Mackinaw River, but he wasn't sure where. Police narrowed it down to a 20-mile stretch, but still searched for months without luck.

A member of the Tazewell County State's Attorney's office called Alexander. She provided many images and predictions, and drew a circle on the map where she said the body would be found.

Searchers did not go to that circled area, but to the area they had planned to search before Alexander was contacted, and found the body within three hours. News articles hit the wire informing the public that the body had been found just after talking to Alexander, and giving her credit. Typical wire accounts only listed the predictions that came true – that a man "with a bad hand" would find the body, and that the initial "S" would be important.

What those reports did not mention was the long list of failed predictions that Alexander also gave — as is typical of such reports.

Soon after the case hit the wires, Lucas talked to the detective in charge of the case, William Fitzgerald, who provided him with a list of 24 psychic clues that Alexander had given. He also said that she may have made many other predictions, but he specifically recalled these, and was astonished at their accuracy at the time.

The predictions were:

The area where the body is has already been searched.

A man with funny-looking boots walked right past the body during a previous search.

The man with the boots had a dog.

A man with a crippled hand will find the body.

There are three roads.

The initial "S" will play an important role.

The initial "B" is around the victim's body.

The body would not be found in the state where she was born.

Grabner's farm would play a part.

There would be tree cuttings near the body.

The road splits near the body.

The road near the body is bumpy.

The body will be off the main highway.

A leg or foot on the body will be missing.

The head will not be with the body.

The body will be near a bridge.

The body was dragged from the place where the victim was killed.

Only part of the body will be showing.

Cars stopping nearby will be important.

The body will be down an embankment.

A faded sign will be important.

The body will be across a road, down from the river.

Mountains or hills are nearby.

A church will play an important part.

There are a host of problems with these "clues." For example:

The name Grabner didn't correspond with any known people in that part of Illinois.

Along this stretch of highway, there are a number of churches, bridges, and road conjunctions, meaning her clues relating to these structures are meaningless.

All the other predictions are so vague they could apply to virtually any portion of the 20-mile stretch of Route 121.

Because of these and other problems, "the searchers, rather than spend precious time trying to study the psychic's predictions, convened their search at a previously chosen location. It turned out to be the right location, not because of Alexander's help, but because of an apparent coincidence."

Even though Alexander had been no help in finding the body, searchers began reviewing Alexander's predictions after the fact.

Officer Steve Trew, who found the body, had an injured finger and his first initial was "S." The bones of the victim were, indeed, scattered. There was a bridge off in the distance. There wasn't a church nearby, but there was a church camp about a half-mile to a mile down the road. There were piles of salt on the highway about 1/4 mile away, which they took as matching the "mountains or hills" prediction.

As usual, the psychic's predictions were fit to match the situation only after the search was over. And she was given credit where none was due. And besides those, many of Alexander's predictions were completely wrong.

There was no Grabner's Farm. There were no tree cuttings. The road nearby was not bumpy. The only cars that traveled nearby were on a highway and did not stop there. The only signs nearby were not faded.

Most importantly, the circle Alexander drew on the map missed Cousett's body by a good distance! (Initial interviews indicated the circle was approximately 20 miles away from where the body was found; in later interviews, Fitzgerald said he couldn't recall how far away it was.)

As we so often see in cases with "psychics," the misses were ignored and the supposed hits amplified by the media.

From this example, we can see how "psychic" predictions generally fall into five different categories:

- Extremely general statements with a wide application

- Self-fulfilling prophecies

- An occasional wild guess with very specific characteristics

- Those that are false but contain enough flexibility that they can be modified or "corrected" when confronted with an objection

- Unverifiable statements

General Statements

"The initial 'B' is around the victim's body."

"B" could be brown soil, blue water, branches, blood, brush, the first initial of a county, or any other "B" word you can find in a dictionary.

Wild Guess

Wild guesses, when used in the right proportion, can build credibility. If it is wrong, then it is considered "an occasional failure," and explained away (such as occurred in a letter to the editor of the State Journal-Register in response to an article quoting Steve Egger and me when Alexander had her most recent media rush – the letter claimed that the reason she missed some predictions was that it was a problem with the interaction between the physical and non-physical worlds). If the wild prediction is right, it can make the psychic famous.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Involves the suspension of disbelief of the average person. Thus, the person searches for ways to make the prediction come true, rather than noticing that it was false. The "three roads," the "bridge," and the "church" were all examples of this type of situation. The "church" case was the worst, since the people involved had to settle on a church camp, which fulfilled the prophecy in their minds.

It should be noted especially here that none of these predictions have any significance prior to the discovery of the body.

Rapidly Altered Prophecies

Alexander made frequent use of this type of prediction. In 1986, this type of prophecy was recorded by the Chicago

Tribune when she appeared at the State Fair. She asked a woman in the audience if she had back problems (many people over 30 do suffer some sort of back pain, so it's a good cold-read guess). The woman replied that she did not, so Alexander shifted gears and said, "Well, my back hurts with you, so watch for kidney and bladder infections."

Alexander did something similar with the most recent case of the kidnapped boy. She originally said the body would be found "near water." Now, that prediction is vague enough in and of itself (it was in Kankakee River State Park), but the body wasn't really found all that close to water, so things shifted in her later statements to the press. Alexander said that she heard a "whooshing" noise, which turned out to be a highway. When pressed, she said that the "water" part referred to the start of the crime. This is true, but one hardly needed to be psychic to figure it out, since the boy was abducted while fishing!

Unverifiable Statements

Several of the predictions she gave in the Cousett case are good examples of this category. For example, "A man with funny-looking boots walked right past the body during a previous search" and "The man with the boots had a dog." How can that "prediction" be verified? It can't. It might later be retrofit as a rapidly-altered or self-fulfilling prophecy, but standing alone it is meaningless.

In some cases, combinations of these categories are used. For example, if circumstances were right, "Grabner" could have been seen to actually mean "Wagner" or "Abner" or some other similar name. Similarly, if the man who found the body had a gimpy leg instead of a "crippled hand," she would have likely taken credit as only being slightly off. So a wild guess becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Detective Fitzgerald, though originally impressed by Alexander, thought more about it and investigated the situation further. He found that, prior to his talking with Alexander, other investigators had given her precise information about where they thought the body might be.

When he talked to Lucas in 1991, he had the following observations:

"You know, when she talked about water, well there's always water somewhere. And when she talked about the head being removed from the body, you know, when a body's been there for a period of time an animal always drags the bones off."

"The circle on the map, see that's the point I'm trying to get at. In the suspect's statement, he said he had dropped the body right along that area, so Greta Alexander already had that previous information to my understanding. You know, that's the thing that frosted me, I'll never forget it. She had that previous information that we didn't know she had."

So what about the prediction regarding the man with the crippled hand?

Yes, that one was a hit. But was it meaningful?

As discussed earlier, a few wild guesses might work out. In this case, what does "crippled" mean? For example, would she have taken credit if he had scraped it?

As I and Lucas have said, "Erroneous predictions are quickly forgotten. But the rare coincidental 'hit' often turns into media coverage and a skyrocketing income for the psychic."

Of course, the more readings a psychic does, the better the odds of coincidentally getting a hit. Alexander did numerous readings for police, and if she only scored a few hits, she got free media coverage forevermore.

Another one of her cases that Lucas examined in detail was the Carpenter disappearance case. 74-year-old Rex Carpenter, who had Parkinson's disease (degenerative muscle disease causing tremors and loss of motor control), went herb hunting and failed to meet his wife at the appointed time. The police searched for 2 days and then called Alexander. The trooper in the case listed the following predictions she gave (from his memory):

Carpenter was still alive.

Carpenter was near a road which came to a dead end.

A horse with four white feet that had a foal was important.

There were gold flowers around him.

Carpenter was in a waterway.

Carpenter was in a ravine, and had trouble getting up the slippery bank.

She could see woods.

She saw fresh choppings of wood, like a beaver would cut.

Along the edge of the woods, there were prairie flowers or short weeds.

Way off in the distance there was a tower of some kind, with high-tension lines.

She heard a "click, click, click" sound.

She could see his leg jumping, like he had suffered a stroke.

She could see a handkerchief or a piece of clothing that would be found.

There was a secondary road that ran right past him.

The road stops, but if you went through, you'd have to go around.

She said the trooper would have to "go around to where the draw goes through."

Carpenter had walked farther than everyone thought.

Carpenter's family is panicking more than he is himself.

Carpenter has something on his head.

He was getting tired and physically exhausted.

She saw a man of about 6'3" or 6'4", with a full head of white hair, and a square chin.

She again mentioned the ravine and said, "Go down that ravine, and you'll find him."

"She said, "If you don't find him by Sunday, it'll be too late."

Later, the trooper hooked Alexander into a call with a searcher in a pickup truck, who was keeping in touch with a plane circling the area (Alexander repeatedly called it a "helicopter.")

During this conversation, she tried to psychically direct the aircraft to Carpenter. She repeatedly mentioned the ravine, but the driver kept telling her there was no ravine. So she modified it to be a depressed area. She also added that Carpenter was between two towers, there was "green stuff" all around, there were yellow flowers, and there was some green in the low spots.

This effort failed to find Carpenter, and nobody mentioned Alexander's specific predictions to the other searchers, though some of them found out about the vague predictions such as "yellow flowers."

The next day, a different searcher following a set of footprints found Carpenter alive in a bean field, over a mile from the spot Alexander was psychically trying to direct the plane.

Some of the other searchers and the media started the process of self-fulfilling Alexander's predictions. The leaves in the bean field were gold and ready for harvest, so they must have been the "gold flowers" (the man who found Carpenter said that in a farm community like that one, real gold flowers are everywhere anyway). Carpenter was found lying in a 3-inch-deep furrow between the rows of bean plants, so that must have been the "depression" or "ravine." One of the 300 searchers realized he had a white-footed horse at home with a foal. The clicking sound was interpreted to mean one of the many oil wells in the area. The power lines and towers were never located, but a distant church steeple sufficed.

The man who found Carpenter said he might have heard rumors of Alexander's predictions, but all he remembers was the steep bluff. Had he investigated that "prediction," he never would have found the footprints that he followed to Carpenter.

Carpenter's son scoffed at the idea that Alexander had anything to do with finding his father. "As far as I'm concerned, psychics are of no use whatsoever. Everything written about my father was exaggerated beyond belief. ... The general consensus here is that the newspapers were full of baloney."

The pickup truck driver said, "She was of very little value." He added, "We don't feel like she helped us at all. The good publicity Greta Alexander got, it didn't come from us. It had to have come from her." (Note how this last statement coincides with what I'd heard from other sources about how she promoted herself to the media.)

Still, Alexander was credited by the media with a rock-solid success – a success which may continue to be cited as "proof" that psychics help solve crimes.

The searchers did say that, even though Alexander didn't help, her prediction that he was still alive "perked them up." But what would have happened if she had predicted the person in question was already dead?

That happened two months earlier, with Robert Lucas, who vanished in the same area. The only clue was his car found in a cemetery, and the thought that he might have gone to fish in a local stream.

A trooper contacted Alexander, who said the man was already dead and in the Embarras River. She gave numerous other predictions, as usual. At one point, she said there was a pole leaning over the water. When the trooper said there wasn't, she changed it to a "tree stripped of bark." She "saw" a carcass, like a deer or cow. When told there was none, she said, "If it's not there now, it will be in a day or so."

Members of the Sheriff's department spent many hours looking for Lucas's body in the river. They were impressed after self-fulfilling several of the prophecies while searching, but couldn't find the specific location to which Alexander was pointing them.

That search never turned up the body, but several months later, his body was found, 1/2 mile away from his abandoned car, and 3 1/2 miles away from the Embarrass River – nowhere near a significant body of water.

The question remains: If the police department hadn't listened to Alexander, and had, as logic would dictate, searched near his car first, might he have been found alive?

Also, where were the reporters? Why didn't they report her patently failed predictions here? Because failed predictions aren't newsworthy – at least in their eyes.

One more point that deserves mentioning is the tendency for reporters to note that Alexander (and other "psychics") never took money to work on police cases – as if this was some gracious charitable gesture. In fact, however, it was

those "free" services that got her the most news coverage – free advertising!

In my experience, I have only met two kinds of "psychics" – those who are fooling others, and those who are fooling themselves. The ones that are fooling others know full well that they have no powers, but manipulate people to get their money. Those who are fooling themselves do fully believe in their abilities, though those abilities have never, to date, stood up to the test of an objective review. I never met Greta Alexander and have no basis to decide which group she fell into. Accounts from many people, both skeptics and believers, say she appeared to be a kind person. She started at least one charitable organization (though it failed 10 years later due to lack of funding). At the same time, I have heard from people who have gotten readings from her that she set them up in such a way to maximize her opportunities to do cold reading. When doing individual readings, the clients were expected to bring a list of questions for her to answer. When doing group readings, she wanted a meal to be served first, meaning she would hear all the table-talk before she had to go in and give the readings.

So, all in all, I cannot conclude whether she was fooling others or fooling herself. Certainly many people across Central Illinois believe she had paranormal powers, despite even her most spectacular failures. (For example, she supported Ellen Schanzle-Haskins in the 1994 race for Illinois State Senate against Karen Hasara, being featured at a fundraiser. Schanzle-Haskins lost by a large margin. Yet Alexander hadn't foreseen this disturbing result. I would view that as a spectacular failure, but it brought not a hint of a mention in the media.) Alexander continued to be featured at fairs and First Night Springfield (Springfield's New Year's Eve celebration). People continued to go to her for readings, to the point that she was often booked for weeks or months in advance.

Greta Alexander is gone now. Does it matter whether she was fooling others or fooling herself? Not now, for the objective viewer who just wants to know if her "psychic" powers were provable. But there will be others who make the same claims; others who manage to convince journalists that they have remarkable powers. Like Alexander's claims, they must be scrutinized; unlike Alexander's ever really were, they must be exposed if they are found to be wrong.

[David Bloomberg is the Chairman of REALL. "Psychic" detectives are one of his main interests in the vast field of topics REALL covers. He recommends that you buy the book *Psychic Sleuths* if you have a similar interest, as it is one of the best covering that topic.]