

'Bone detective' on an identity hunt

Harris County expert will exhume 25 bodies to find DNA clues

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On a mission to name victims

Harris County will exhume 25 unidentified bodies in hopes of discovering their identities using DNA samples. Video: Jason Witmer with Lise Olsen. Photos: Mayra Beltran. 5/29/31

YOU CAN HELP

If you have information that might help resolve a case, contact the ID unit at 713-796-6774 or investigations at 713-796-9292

Information is available online at <http://www.hctx.net/ifs/UnidentifiedDecedentFliers.aspx>

Or at the national website: <https://identifyus.org/>

Over the last five decades, Harris County has quietly buried the remains of more than 400 people who lost not only their lives but also their identities in a huge paupers' cemetery on Houston's dusty industrial outskirts.

Among the forensic cases who remain nameless and unsolved: two teenaged murder victims — a boy and girl - whose ravaged bones were discovered by a dog laying side-by-side in the woods. An African-American man, wearing short braids and dressed in khakis, whose signature on his own suicide note was illegible. An apparent Salvadoran immigrant who perished next to what appeared to be his own passport application.

And a red curly-haired girl with freckles and an embroidered cowgirl shirt and matching pants - seemingly fresh from a rodeo - whose body was found hours after being strangled.

Today, there's fresh hope for recovering some of those long-lost identities.

The county's forensic anthropology director, Jennifer Love, dubbed "the Bone Detective," has won a \$180,957 grant from the National Institute of Justice that she will use to exhume 25 bodies in the next 18 months. Using money from the grant, she hired another forensic anthropologist, Deborrah Pinto, to comb through hundreds of cold case files for new clues to help decide whom to exhume.

National problem

The review centers on cases from the late 1950s to the late 1990s, decades during which Jane and John Doe bodies were buried before collecting and recording DNA samples in national databanks became standard operating procedures at the county's Institute of Forensic Sciences.

The problem of identifying the dead goes far beyond the limits of Harris County: An estimated 40,000 corpses across the United States remain nameless, which means murderers remain unquestioned,

families remain without answers and graves remain unmarked. The phenomenon has been dubbed "The Nation's Silent Mass Disaster" by the National Institute of Justice.

But in order to use any newly collected DNA samples to restore identities, forensic anthropologists also need new clues from the public.

"We want to get people to start thinking about family, friends and others who had gone missing in the mid 1990s or before," Love said.

Though some of the unidentified may have been homeless or recent immigrants lacking local relatives, Love said her research suggests that "most people go missing locally and get found locally," so clues to long lost identities could likely be provided by people living here.

A photo of a translucent white boot helped Harris County forensic anthropology staff in 2010 confirm the identity of Angela Phillips, a 20-year-old Houston woman who'd been murdered, left unidentified through a string of investigator errors and buried without a name back in 1986.

"It's a great idea to have money available to give families' closure because it's a devastating situation to have your loved one buried somewhere and not know whether it's them or not," said brother Darryl Phillips. Phillips never stopped looking for his sister, who disappeared after telling family she was going to a job interview. Her murder has never been solved.

One victim of Dean Corll

Among the many cases, officials hope someone might recognize the red, white and blue striped swimsuit found beside a teenaged boy whose body was recovered in 1973 among the corpses of those tortured to death and dumped in a boat house by Houston mass murderer Dean Corll. Or a pullover marked "Jericho Surf Shop" found on the body of another teenaged boy, whose body was found headless in a Clear Lake area drainage ditch in 1971.

Then there's the shiny golden medallion with the face of Jesus worn by a woman found stuffed in a suitcase in 1994.

And the distinctive pair of high-heeled sandals and zig-zag patterned orange, white and black miniskirt worn by an African-American teenager murdered in 1971.

In a few troubling cases, possible names were discovered long ago, but never confirmed.

The oldest known unidentified victim, found in 1957, may have been named Nolan Pruitt - but it remains unconfirmed decades later.

He wore an oversized cowboy belt buckle, had false teeth, and appeared to be under 40.

An African-American man, in his 20s or 30s, signed his suicide note sloppily before killing himself in a public park in April 1981 -his name appeared to be Kenneth Curter, Curlee or Curtis or something similar.

Bones yield secrets

The passport application found beside a Hispanic man's body back in 1987 supplied both his own possible name of Reynaldo Portello (or Portillo) Lejia as well as the names of parents: Fidelina Portillo and Jose Efrain from the town of Canto, El Salvador.

In the most complex cold cases, only skeletal remains were recovered and cause of death remains mysterious.

However, Love, who became the county's first forensic anthropologist in 2006, already has been able to restore names to several long-unidentified murder victims by examining bones. She specializes in unlocking clues from bones, teeth and other physical attributes of the long dead.

But the process goes well beyond scientific examinations.

Relatives of long-lost missing persons are needed to provide names and DNA samples - which hopefully might match DNA samples collected from corpses still buried under anonymous markers in the Harris County Cemetery, a neatly mowed patch of ground wedged between a pipe yard and a landfill.

The bodies of the teenaged boy and girl, both murdered in January 1981 and found by a dog, now lie only a few rows away from the corpse of the red haired girl, found strangled in July 1982.

The uneven burial ground carries long lines of stone in which barely-readable nameplates contain only their race and gender: "WF", "WM," "WF."

Cemetery manager Bill Hall can locate each of the 400 or more unmarked graves by tracking "Unknown" entries in a database and consulting diagrams of burial plots of all 30,000 people buried there.

He's already working on logistics for how the selected 25 bodies would be exhumed.

Then, perhaps, they might be reclaimed not by an anonymous grave, but a relative.

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Read more: <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/7586669.html#ixzz1Nx3nb9AT>