

Who were they? Harris County team hopes to ID 3 bodies

Through technology and outreach, a forensic team hopes to discover details about 3 remaining unidentified bodies

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The man died face-down on the floor of a derelict apartment in Sunnyside, wearing nothing but a pair of black flip-flops.

By the time a neighbor called police to report a foul odor on Oct. 15, the body had been lying on the dingy beige carpet in the south Houston neighborhood so long it had partially mummified. The remains were too deteriorated to determine cause of death. With no name and no clues, the case stalled.

For the next 2½ months, the man's body sat in cold storage at the Harris County Medical Examiner's Office, where he's known only by his case number: 3343. He's one of an estimated 40,000 nameless people whose remains languish in morgues and evidence rooms throughout the country, according to the National Institute of Justice.

In Harris County, the Medical Examiner's Office typically ends every year with 10 to 12 unidentified bodies. In 2008, thanks to a new outreach effort targeting homeless shelters and immigrant communities, there were only three, including Case No. 3343.

Each of the dead was found badly decomposed with no personal belongings beyond a few scraps of clothing.

They could be destined for anonymous pauper's graves — but not if the medical examiner's identification unit can help it.

Using modern forensic technology and computer databases and now reaching out to the area's transient communities, the four-person ID unit strives to put names to the dead and provide closure to families or friends who may be searching for them.

"There's certainly an element of sadness, because you're telling someone their loved one is gone. But I think that it's worse to lose a loved one and not know it," said Dr. Jennifer Love, a forensic anthropologist who heads the unit. "I would think that you'd constantly be searching, and that's got to be exhausting."

Forensic anthropologists like Love work with the most damaged human remains — bodies that have been burnt, dismembered, skeletonized or decomposed. With very little to go on, they painstakingly piece together clues like archaeologists unearthing ancient tombs.

"Sometimes we don't even know where to start,"

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Love said.

Collecting evidence

In the case of No. 3343, morgue staff rehydrated the man's shriveled fingertips to retrieve prints that the ID unit sent to law enforcement agencies and missing person databases. No luck. His prints weren't on record. Attempts to find a DNA match also came up negative. An autopsy even failed to determine cause of death.

Love's colleague, Dr. Sharon Derrick, took charge of the case. She analyzed the body to determine sex, age, stature, race, and any signs of past or recent trauma. Derrick then put together a description of the man: a black male, 40 to 60 years old, about 5 feet 5 inches tall, with long, curly black hair.

Sometimes, such descriptions include images of clothing or personal items, such as a watch or piece of jewelry. If the skeleton reveals a medical history of broken bones, missing teeth, arthritis or chronic back pain, the ID unit includes that information as well.

So far, there are no leads on Case No. 3343. But as part of this year's new outreach effort, the flier with his description is being circulated to Spanish-language media outlets, homeless shelters and immigrant advocacy groups.

One case solved

One such flier distributed last year featured a young Hispanic man whose body was found in

Braes Bayou in September 2007, cause of death undetermined.

Months later, members of a local church recognized his picture broadcast on Spanish-language TV and contacted the Medical Examiner's Office to identify the young man as 18-year-old Pascual Paulino Ixmata Guarchaj, a recent immigrant from Guatemala with no family in the United States.

DNA testing confirmed his identity, and the ID unit was able to return Guarchaj's body to his mother in Guatemala.

"Those are the moments that you really embrace, that keep you going, knowing that you're doing some good for these people, that the work is important," Love said.

Eventually, if no one comes forward to claim Case No. 3343, he will be sent to the county for burial. But the ID unit will keep detailed reports as well as DNA test results on file for years.

The oldest unidentified body in the unit's records is a white man found floating in Buffalo Bayou in July 1957. Like with every case they handle, Love and her colleagues assume someone is still out there, wondering what happened to him.

"It's just really very rewarding to provide some type of closure for a family, whether it's been 35 years or six months," said Ruth Mathis, an identification specialist with the unit.

Derrick remembers a woman who called the ID unit in search of her brother. She hadn't seen him

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in years, and the uncertainty tortured her every day.

"I just can't stop looking for him in crowds," the woman told Derrick.

In a way, Derrick said, it was harder to break the news that the woman's long-lost brother wasn't in the morgue than it would have been to confirm her fear that he had died.

"When you've been waiting that long, you want somebody to just tell you," Love said. "You need that sense of peace."

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