

Marine gets his identity back

Fingerprints, note help cousin solve case dating back to 1981

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HOUSTON CHRONICLE

June 2, 2011, 11:00PM



Eric Kayne Chronicle

Mary Williams and her family looked for her cousin Kenneth Curlee, who had served in the Marine Corps before he disappeared, off and on for decades without results.

After 30 years of uncertainty, Houstonian Mary Williams has finally discovered the fate of her long-lost cousin — a former U.S. Marine named Kenneth Curlee who disappeared without warning decades ago and has now been confirmed to be a suicide victim whose unidentified body was found in a Houston park in 1981.

The young man, who wore fatigues and his brown hair tied neatly in braids, had hastily signed his own name on a suicide note - his signature could have been Kenneth Curter, Curlee or Curtis, and investigators were unable to locate local relatives, who have different last names.

Curlee's true identity was restored - and his family's unanswered questions put to rest - after Williams read a story in the Houston Chronicle on Sunday that described several perplexing unsolved cases out of more than 400 unidentified victims in the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences' archives.

The Chronicle story ran May 29, which would have been Curlee's birthday.

Williams said she immediately recognized her

cousin's description, possible name and a drawing of his face that accompanied the Sunday story and visited the medical examiner's office Tuesday to follow up.

It took less than 24 hours after that visit for forensic anthropologists to solve the 30-year-old John Doe case. They were able to quickly obtain Curlee's old military records and confirmed his identity on Wednesday by comparing fingerprints taken when he was a U.S. Marine to prints taken after his suicide at age 24, according to Dr. Deborah Pinto, a forensic anthropologist who is working on the old cases.

Reviewing files

Pinto was hired in April under a new Institute of Justice grant program that the county is using to review files for more than 400 old unsolved cases in the hopes that even more people can finally be identified with new tips, modern technology and as many as 25 exhumations. But to make real progress, both Pinto and Dr. Jennifer Love, director of the county's forensic anthropology division, need many more families to review information about the cases online and come forward with information about missing persons.

The problem of identifying the dead goes far beyond 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.

Over the decades, Williams said relatives - including her husband, who is a retired Harris County Sheriff's Deputy - had repeatedly searched unsuccessfully for Curlee, who was only in his 20s and had been living on the streets at the time he disappeared in the early 1980s.

"He had no records, no tickets, it was just like he had left the face of the earth as far as the family was concerned," she said.

His own mother died without knowing what had happened to him. So did Williams' mother, Drucilla Williams, who was Curlee's great aunt. She had been very close to him and had received regular visits and phone calls in the years before his disappearance.

Williams said Curlee was a Houston native and Yates High School student who later served in the U.S. Marines. He'd been a smart boy and well-behaved young man, she said, but struggled to readjust after being discharged from the military. He worked at a grocery store but became homeless after his mother moved to Louisiana sometime in the late 1970s.

Stayed in communication

Yet even during the final years of his life, when he lived on the streets, Curlee had remained in touch with his Auntie Drucilla through regular calls and messages. Because he lived on the streets, Curlee had often assured his Auntie that he didn't keep family addresses and phone numbers on his person. He feared they could fall into the wrong hands, his cousin said. Instead, he had them memorized.

So though Kenneth Curlee signed his real name to a suicide note when he took his own life one month shy of his 25th birthday in a Houston park on April 4, 1981, county officials found no contact information or ID. So his body remained unidentified .

That changed this week when his cousin found him by reading the Chronicle. Now all of his relatives, including one surviving sister, Jo Ann Davis, finally have answers.

"It gives us some closure and we can move on," Williams said. "That article really helped us. I'm just sorry that he had to take his life. We know where he is and - we can live free knowing that he is deceased."

Read more about other unsolved Harris County cases and watch the video of another family who got answers at: <http://blog.chron.com/newswatch/2011/05/harris-cold-cases/>.

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