

Breakthrough in cold case after investigators compare notes



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Priciliano Ontiveros' remains—discovered by hikers in 1992 near the Salt River bottom in southwest Phoenix—weren't identified until recently when Phoenix detective and a county death investigator matched a missing person report with an unidentified person case. (Photo: Maricopa County Office of the Medical Examiner)

Story Highlights

- Priciliano Ontiveros disappeared in October 1987.
- His truck was found a week later in the Salt River bottom in southwest Phoenix.
- Hikers found his skull in July 1992 in the same area where his truck was found.
- Investigators compared notes at a Republic photo shoot, which led to positively identify him.

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Priciliano Ontiveros left a relative's home in south Phoenix the morning of Oct. 29, 1987, and his family has not heard from him since.

His 1975 Ford pickup was found days later abandoned in a stretch of the Salt River in southwest Phoenix. There was blood inside.

Police suspected foul play, but they lacked a body and a solid lead.

That was until last month, when a Phoenix detective and a county death investigator began comparing notes while waiting for an *Arizona Republic* photographer to arrive for [a story on unidentified human remains](#).

It turned out that hikers had found Ontiveros' remains almost five years after he disappeared, but the remains weren't positively identified until Detective Stuart Somershoe and death investigator Christen Eggers matched one of Somershoe's missing-person reports with one of Eggers' unidentified-person cases.

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The breakthrough gave cold-case investigators new leads in a homicide case more than 25 years old and has finally brought closure for Ontiveros' family.

"It was excitement," Esperanza Ontiveros said about the identification of her best friend and brother-in-law. "It was relief. It was shock. It was an ending to something we had been waiting for for a very long time."

There are nearly 1,300 unidentified human remains in Arizona and about 40,000 nationwide — an epidemic that has been dubbed "the nation's silent mass disaster."

Because missing- and unidentified-person cases often cross jurisdictional, county and state lines, "it takes teamwork to resolve these cases," Somershoe said.

Teamwork is why Somershoe regularly shares information and brainstorms with Eggers, a medicolegal death investigator and unidentified-decedent coordinator at the Maricopa County Office of the Medical Examiner.

Somershoe and Eggers were reviewing cases prior to a June meeting with *The Republic* when they noticed the time frame for Priciliano Ontiveros' disappearance overlapped with when hikers found an unidentified person's skull in 1992.

They also noticed that Ontiveros' truck was found in the same area — the Salt River bottom near 91st Avenue — as the remains of medical examiner's Case 92-1463.

Finally, a composite sketch drawn by Stephen Missal, a certified forensic artist, bore an eerie resemblance to Ontiveros' picture in the missing-person report.

A sample from the skull had already been submitted to the Arizona Department of Public Safety for DNA analysis, but the results were not yet available. Eggers and Somershoe asked DPS to do a rush comparison with DNA samples submitted by Ontiveros' family when his truck was found.

The comparison resulted in a match.

"When it was confirmed, I couldn't believe it," Eggers said. "It was just because we were sitting there discussing cases."

Somershoe's homicide investigation has new legs now that he has proof Ontiveros is dead. He is following up on investigative leads and asking people who knew Ontiveros to come forward and share information with authorities.

Ontiveros' two children plan to take his remains back to Mexico.

<http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/phoenix/2014/07/27/phoenix-cold-case-breakthrough/13235087/>