

'Jane Doe' identified after 20 years; Effort to solve more Collin County cases underway

A new partnership with a forensic lab near Houston aims to reunite families with unidentified and unclaimed bodies in Collin County

By [Maria Guerrero](#) • Published September 19, 2024 • Updated on September 19, 2024 at 8:17 pm

The Collin County Medical Examiner's Office 'Unidentified Project' has solved a 20-year-old mystery surrounding the identity of a 'Jane Doe,' replacing her gravesite headstone.

Highland Cemetery in Melissa has been her final resting place for years. Her granite headstone, generously provided by the owners of the small cemetery, is weathered and barely legible.

It read: "Jane Doe, unidentified female, died Jan. 11, 2004 in Melissa, Texas, approximate age 50"



On Thursday morning, three employees from Turrentine Jackson Morrow Funeral Home carefully dug around the grassy plot, removing the tombstone.

After 20 years, this Jane Doe is getting her real name back.

Collin County Medical Examiner's Office death investigator Valerie Alvarez is making good on a promise she made in 2022.

"It's a sad moment of course but it's also a very happy moment to know we were able to give her her name and dignity and provide a place for the family to come visit," said Alvarez.

The weight of the years-long search for answers hit Alvarez who wiped away tears recalling the call that confirmed this Jane Doe's real name was **Lisa Jaqueline Mellay**, 47, of California.



"When the initial call came in I remember sitting at my desk and breaking down crying out of nowhere and I remember my boss saying 'Are you OK?' I was like 'We found her,'" she said with a smile.

Moments like this are why she has dedicated herself to this field, she said.

"Being able to give them a name and have a place for their families to come visit them is kind of what we do this for," she said.

[NBC 5 profiled Mellay's cold case in 2022](#) when the CCME's office launched its Unidentified Project, aimed at bringing attention to eight cases of unidentified men and women who died in the county cases involving murder or undetermined deaths.

Mellay was killed while walking in Melissa in 2004.

Confirming her identity had long been a challenge because she was known as a 'drifter' who crisscrossed the country using multiple aliases and jailed on multiple occasions.

The case was initially designated an 'unclaimed person' case, because she had an identification on her person, explained Alvarez.

She was then designated as an 'unidentified person' because it was evident this victim had been using someone else's identity.

Alvarez poured over each name and city linked to her 'Jane Doe,' finding a pattern in name often used by the mysterious woman.

She discovered this 'Jane' was once been wed and used her married name in multiple combinations over the years.

Alvarez took to the Internet to seek out the last name and managed to locate a yearbook picture and potential familial ties in California.

In 2023, she spoke with a woman on the phone.

"She said, 'I think that's my late husband's daughter. We haven't seen her since I think she said 1988,'" recalled Alvarez. "She goes, 'I don't recognize her from that photo, but I would recognize those blue eyes anywhere.'"

By the end of the year, DNA tests on multiple family members confirmed Melley's true identity.

The family said she was the daughter of a well-known Hollywood composer who was last seen around the age of 18, said Alvarez.

The family spent 'thousands of dollars' searching for her over the years to no avail.

At last, her loved ones have some closure.

It is a sense of relief and gratitude Alvarez hopes to bring the rest of the families on her list of unidentified bodies.

A new partnership, with Othram, aims at doing just that. The forensic lab is located in The Woodlands, near Houston.

According to the company's website, "Othram is revolutionizing how forensic cases are solved, justice is served, and families are mended."

"We've worked on thousands of cases at this point," said Othram Chief of Staff Colby Lasyone. "Every case that we work, there's an unidentified individual, be that individual, unidentified human remains, someone who dies without their identity or the suspects of a crime, and so it's important for us to bring answers to victims and their families."

Othram develops forensic grade genome sequencing to create 'ultra-sensitive profiles,' Lasyone explained, using evidence provided by law enforcement partners such as bone, blood, or saliva.

"These DNA profiles can be uploaded into genealogy databases, where folks have given permission to allow law enforcement to use their information to help solve crimes and identifications," he said. "Once these profiles are uploaded into genealogy databases, we build family trees, and those family trees result in leads, and those leads are provided back to investigators to help further an investigation and ultimately close a case."

Lasyone urges anyone with a missing loved one to ensure DNA samples are provided to law enforcement.

A number of genetic genealogy providers partner with law enforcement agencies to help solve cases.

Forensic science has cracked open decades-old murder or unidentified persons cases across the country, he said.

Alvarez approached a company representative at a forum for missing people in North Texas and explained the county's project.

To her surprise, Othram joined the effort "at no cost to the county," said Alvarez.

DNA samples of the still-unidentified victims in Collin County's possession have been submitted for testing, she added.

"It's very promising. This company is very successful in what they do and I'm very confident we'll more names to people," said Alvarez.

A second unidentified person, who had previously been positively identified, also received his permanent granite headstone on Thursday, courtesy of Highland Cemetery.

The cemetery opted to place the 'Jane Doe' and 'John Doe' headstones at the bottom of the plot, like a footstone.



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