

# Yakima Police Department Teams with Othram to Identify a 1977 Homicide Victim

After nearly five decades, a woman whose remains were found hidden in an abandoned van in Yakima, Washington, has been identified as 25-year-old **Vereta "Joni" Gates**.

Solved



## Summary

In July 1977, the remains of an unidentified individual were discovered in Yakima, Washington. Yakima is situated approximately 140 miles southeast of Seattle. An employee who worked at a hardware store contacted police after noticing a distinct odor coming from a parked vehicle in a parking lot adjacent to the hardware store. Officers with the Yakima Police Department responded to the scene where they found the remains of an individual hidden inside of an abandoned vehicle. Two days later, an autopsy was performed, which determined that the remains were that of a young female, who was approximately 18 to 25 years old, approximately 5'8" tall, and estimated to be 130 pounds. The autopsy concluded that the unidentified woman had sustained several injuries. The woman's cause of death was determined to be strangulation and her manner of death was homicide.

Clothing was found near the woman's body, including a yellow handmade dress, white underwear stenciled with "Scott Lillie-2H", blue corduroy "Farrah" brand jeans,

a green sweater, and a blue shirt. Attempts to identify the woman through dental and FBI fingerprint records were unsuccessful. Dental records were created from the remains and compared to a number of missing women from jurisdictions around the country, but there were no matches. Numerous individuals were interviewed and several tips regarding the woman's identity were received from all over the country; however, no leads materialized into an identification for the woman or her killer. The woman, who became known as Yakima Jane Doe, was buried in a Washington cemetery.

In 2004, with advancements in forensic science, further attempts to identify the woman were made. At the request of the Yakima Police Department, the Yakima County Coroner's Office exhumed the remains of the unidentified woman, which were provided to the King County Medical Examiner's Office for further forensic evaluation. The remains were then submitted to the University of North Texas for the development of an STR profile. The STR profile was uploaded into CODIS in 2005. No matches were found, and the identity of Yakima Jane Doe remained a mystery despite the extensive efforts of law enforcement. In April 2016, details of the case were entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) as UP14989.

In 2022, the Yakima Police Department submitted forensic evidence to Othram in The Woodlands, Texas in hopes that advanced DNA testing could assist in the identification of Yakima Jane Doe. Othram scientists used Forensic-Grade Genome Sequencing® to build a comprehensive genealogical profile for the murdered woman. Othram's in-house forensic genetic genealogy team then used this profile to conduct extensive genetic genealogy research, ultimately providing new investigative leads to law enforcement.

Using this new information, a follow-up investigation was conducted. Following many interviews and conversations, investigators identified potential relatives of the woman. A reference DNA sample was collected from a potential relative and compared to the DNA profile of the woman. This comparison confirmed the identity of Yakima Jane Doe as Vereta "Joni" Gates, born October 21, 1952. If alive today, Joni would be 71 years old.

Joni was described by her family as a wanderer. She was known to hitchhike between Vermont and New York, where she was from, as well as to the west coast. In early July 1977, less than two weeks before her remains were discovered in Yakima, Joni was known to be in a hospital near Chicago. Joni's family spent decades searching for her, not knowing, until now, what happened to her.

Immediate family surviving Joni are her sister, Meri Lee, and her two brothers, Geoffrey and David, who remarked that the identification of their sister has brought

closure to their family after a 45 year search for her and for a wound that never healed. In their remarks, Joni's siblings stated, "This case is significant in that it highlights the effective teamwork of the Yakima Police Department and their willingness to embrace promising new technology in the service of their community. They partnered with Othram Inc., a lab devoted to DNA analysis and identification. We wish to thank Othram for all their work devoted to this identification case. Your methodology brings a new approach of stunning transformation in helping to solve difficult criminal justice cases. You have made immeasurable differences and improvements by cutting straight through a billion data points, covering millions of miles in geographical locations and compressing 47 years into just a few weeks. Thank you for your contribution in adding to the integrity, reliability, and efficiency of our criminal justice system."

The identification of Vereta "Joni" Gates represents the 30th case in the State of Washington where officials have publicly identified an individual using technology developed by Othram. Most recently in Benton County, Washington, [Patricia Kay Ereth](#) was identified after 37 years.