

Missing 30 years, victim was right here

- Kimberly Matas Arizona Daily Star
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Unidentified remains stored in ME's office for decades.

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Jeanne Overstreet disappeared nearly 30 years ago.

The 19-year-old hotel maid was planning to meet a friend downtown for lunch on Sept. 3, 1982, but she never showed up.

With no leads, her case turned cold.

A DNA sample given by her sister in 2004 was run through a national missing-person database but came to nothing.

This week, however, Overstreet's family got word that their daughter's remains had been found. They'd been in storage at the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office for the last 29 years.

"It's a complete miracle. It's just amazing," said Overstreet's sister, Jackie Dugan, of Benson.

"The remains were found in 1983, but we didn't have the DNA back then and because her records had been lost, they didn't know who she was," she said. "The medical examiner in Tucson had her remains all this time."

At the time Dugan submitted her DNA sample to law enforcement, her sister's DNA hadn't yet been collected.

In August 2010, using grant money, Bruce Anderson, forensic anthropologist for the ME's office, began submitting DNA samples for testing from unidentified skeletal remains found in Southern Arizona.

Most of the 800 or so samples submitted to date are from remains found in the last decade, which coincided with a major influx of undocumented border crossers. Almost 100 other individuals discovered in the 1970s, '80s and early '90s are more likely unidentified U.S. citizens, said Chief Medical Examiner Dr. Gregory Hess.

Last September, a little more than a year after Anderson submitted the sample that would turn out to be from Overstreet, her parents, Barbara Pike and John Overstreet, had their DNA samples collected for a national missing-persons database. The family got a telephone call Tuesday telling them a match was found.

"Jeanne was the first success story, if you can call it that, taking a very old case and using new technologies to figure out who she was," Anderson said.

"It is the best part of my job. Any time we're successful in finding out who a Jane Doe is, I can feel good about what I do," he said, noting that his elation is always tempered by the knowledge that his discovery will be the worst news the family of a missing loved one can receive.

In 1983, 14 months after Overstreet disappeared, a Pinal County sheriff's deputy found skeletal remains just off the shoulder of Florence Highway about five miles north of Oracle Junction 14. They were given to Walter Birkby, Pima County's forensic anthropologist at the time. His analysis of the remains were thorough, but he could not determine a cause of death. Included in Birkby's report was a detailed dental chart he'd drawn up based on the remains.

This week Anderson re-examined the remains before giving them to the family for cremation, and confirmed Birkby's findings.

Though Dugan is relieved her sister's remains have been identified, she harbors bitterness that the connection wasn't made decades earlier. Soon after Overstreet's disappearance, Dugan said she gave Tucson Police Department investigators her sister's dental records to use as comparison if remains were found. Those records never got to the Medical Examiner's Office, and Overstreet's missing-persons file seems to have disappeared altogether, said Dugan. After the family was told of the DNA match this week, a TPD representative asked Dugan for copies of any police records they may have retained.

"I didn't know not to give originals back then," Dugan said. "I couldn't get her dental records replaced, and if the dental records hadn't been lost they might have identified her in '83."

"There's some anger that they had her this long. All this time we've looked."

TPD did not respond to several calls and emails Thursday and Friday about the Overstreet case.

On the day she disappeared, the petite Overstreet, a 1981 graduate of Santa Rita High School, left her midtown home around noon to hitchhike downtown and meet her boyfriend for lunch. She never made it to the restaurant.

Overstreet still had a paycheck waiting for her at the hotel where she worked. She had planned to use the money to make a final payment on a car she was buying so she wouldn't have to hitchhike anymore, Dugan said.

"My mom never gave up hope that she was alive," Dugan said. "This hit my mom so hard. She was in complete denial. We all, after some time, said, 'Something happened to her. She's not with us anymore.' But we always had that little bit of hope. We'd see somebody who looked like her, a blond girl, and just couldn't help but look."

"Right now the emotions are very up and down. We now at least know where she is. That's going to be very helpful, but there's still always going to be the question of what happened," Dugan said.

"I don't know that we'll ever get an answer to that, but I'm relieved - and I think my family is, too - that we now know where she is and we can put her to rest."

Memorial is planned for Monday

A memorial for Jeanne Overstreet is planned for 10:30 a.m. Monday at Pantano Riding Stables, 4450 S. Houghton Road.

"My sister loved horses. While she was growing up she had a collection of different types of (toy) horses," her sister, Jackie Dugan, said.

After learning earlier this week that her sister's remains had been identified after 30 years, she drove past the stables and decided it was the perfect setting at which to honor her sister.

"It's in remembrance of her, for her to be at peace. She's home now," Dugan said.

The family asks that in lieu of flowers donations be made to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (www.missingkids.com).

Central resource center is at your disposal

The National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) is a centralized repository and resource center for the records of missing persons and unidentified human remains.

NamUs, a program run by the U.S. Department of Justice, is a free, online system that can be searched by medical examiners, coroners, law enforcement officials and the general public from all over the country in hopes of resolving these cases. For family members of the missing, that means the ability to print missing-persons posters, receive free DNA testing for comparison to unidentified remains in the FBI's CODIS (Combined DNA Index System) database, and access links to the offices of law enforcement agencies and medical examiners as well as victims assistance groups.

Go to www.namus.gov for more information.

Contact reporter Kimberly Matas at kmatas@azstarnet.com or at 573-4191.

Source: http://tucson.com/news/local/crime/missing-years-victim-was-right-here/article_2d600531-b603-5119-9823-eb08f7fb72cd.html#ixzz1sM2LkulF