

Humboldt County Sheriff's Office & California DOJ Partner with Othram to Identify 1980 Jane Doe

The remains of an unidentified woman discovered in Trinidad, CA are now identified as **Denise Gail Cruz**, born in 1953.

Solved

Summary



In February 1980, the remains of an unidentified individual were discovered near Trinidad, California. The Humboldt County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) receive a call regarding possible human remains located in the brush off Stagecoach Road. A HCSO Detective responded to the scene and an investigation was launched. It was determined that the remains were that of an unidentified female, described as being between the ages of 20 and 30 years. She had reddish-brown hair, was 5'9" tall, and weighed 170 pounds. The woman's remains were located in a sleeping bag.

During the initial investigation, the California Department of Justice (DOJ) recovered a latent fingerprint which was ran through the Automated Latent Print System with no reported matches. A forensic Dental examination was completed by a local dentist. An autopsy was completed, and the cause of death was listed as an overdose. A DNA sample was obtained and entered into both the California Missing Persons DNA Database and the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System

(NamUs) as UP55390. The DNA profile was routinely searched against profiles from both missing persons and other human remains in the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS).

Missing Persons cases stay open until solved. In December of 2022 the HCSO and the CA DOJ partnered with Othram Inc to determine if advanced forensic DNA testing could help establish an identity for the unidentified woman or a close relative. CA DOJ sent Othram a DNA extract from the unknown woman's remains. Othram scientists used Forensic-Grade Genome Sequencing® to build a comprehensive DNA profile for the woman. Once the profile was built, Othram's in-house genealogy team used forensic genetic genealogy to produce investigative leads. Funding for advanced DNA testing was provided by the Roads to Justice (RTJ) program.

In August of 2023, the HCSO received investigative leads from Othram indicating that the DNA profile may be that of Denise Gail Cruz, born in 1953. The report included several genetic relatives, including a possible brother named Mark from Colorado. HCSO Investigators were able to contact Mark, who confirmed he had a sister named Denise Gail Cruz. A DNA sample was obtained from Mark and sent to CA DOJ for comparison to the unknown female. CA DOJ was able to confirm that Mark and Denise were genetic relatives. Mark told investigators that, for unknown reasons, Denise stopped communicating with family members. Their last contact with her was in September of 1979. As the family was not sure whether the loss of contact was intentional, Denise was never reported as missing.

HCSO thanks the California Department of Justice DNA lab and Othram for their outstanding work and assistance in solving this case and providing the Cruz family with some closure for their missing loved one. The HCSO is continuing its partnership with the CA DOJ and Othram and is reviewing several of our missing persons investigations for the use of this latest DNA technology.

Anyone with information regarding Denise Cruz and her last known activities or whereabouts prior to her death, or information that may assist in the investigation of any open missing persons cases, is asked to contact HCSO Cold Case Investigator Mike Fridley at [707-441-3024](tel:707-441-3024).