

Breakthrough in 1999 Sampson case: Human remains identified

Sheriff, various agencies team for 'significant development'

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Victoria Delores Mejia Paredes



Vayardo Meza

Human remains discovered 24 years ago in Sampson County have now been identified, the breakthrough in the long-standing cold case announced Thursday afternoon by Sampson County Sheriff's officials. They detailed the significant development, citing "years of meticulous investigation and the use of newly available resources" in successfully identifying the remains to be that of Victoria Dolores Mejia Paredes, who was 21 at the time of her death.

It was back on July 20, 1999 that Sampson County 911 received a call reporting the discovery of human remains in a wooded area on Easy Street in northern Sampson. Deputies and investigators, along with the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation, initiated the probe, one that more than two decades later would take them to Paredes' daughter on the West Coast in an attempt to link DNA samples.

"Regrettably, the remains were in an advanced state of decomposition, impeding immediate identification efforts, and no forms of identification were found," a Sheriff's Office statement said, detailing what local and state investigators encountered in July 1999.

The unidentified remains were described as that of a Caucasian or Hispanic female, aged between 17 and 24 years, standing approximately 5-foot-4 to 5-foot-7, and with long red hair. Investigators employed fingerprint and DNA analysis to determine the identity, but there were no positive matches.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) also extended their assistance in attempting to identify the remains.

“Over the course of the past 23 years, investigators pursued hundreds of leads, including comparing missing persons’ reports to the description of the unidentified remains. Unfortunately, all leads were found to be unrelated,” the Sheriff’s Office statement detailed.

In June 2021, the NCEMC reached out to the Sampson County Sheriff’s Office and made investigators aware of a federal grant that could aid in analyzing the unidentified remains’ DNA through genealogy databases, with the aim of locating family members. Sheriff’s officials contacted The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, who agreed to support the testing process. The Kin Finder Group was then entrusted with the analysis of genealogy information, sheriff’s officials said.

DNA analysis took place in August 2021, with hair samples sent to Astrea Forensics, which extracted DNA for entry into genealogy databases. In January 2022, the DNA samples were sent to The Kin Finder Group for inclusion in the genealogy databases, followed by successful submission to the Family Tree DNA (FTDNA) database in March 2022.

“In June 2022, a significant lead emerged when the Sheriff’s Office received information from an individual who had come across an NCMEC Facebook post about the unidentified remains in Sampson County in 1999,” the press release stated. “The individual expressed the belief that the remains could belong to Victoria Dolores Mejia Paredes, known to have a daughter residing in California. Subsequent contact with Victoria’s daughter led to her willingly providing a DNA sample for kinship testing.”

Approximately a week later, The Kin Finder Group shared information from FTDNA, indicating a link between the unidentified remains’ DNA and individuals with the surname Paredes. The Kin Finder Group added that the Paredes family originally hails from Honduras, with several members currently residing in the United States. The ethnic results from FTDNA further supported the possibility of Hispanic/Honduran heritage, aligning with the information related to Victoria Paredes.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children assisted in coordinating with the San Jose Police Department to collect Victoria’s daughter’s DNA. In December 2022, the sample was submitted to FTDNA for comparison, and in January 2023, The Kin Finder Group received confirmation of a parent/child relationship between Victoria’s daughter and the unknown DNA.

In 1999, Victoria Paredes was 21 years old and living in Honduras with her family, sheriff’s officials said. She was reportedly in a relationship with Vayardo Meza, with whom she had a daughter.

Meza resided with his family in Rose Hill, and arranged for Victoria Paredes to join him in the United States. However, Victoria’s family lost contact with her after she left Honduras around January-February 1999, according to sheriff’s officials.

“Vayardo eventually returned to Honduras around April 2000 and informed Victoria’s family that she had left him and not returned,” the sheriff’s statement read. “At no time was Victoria reported missing to law enforcement, which made solving this case even more difficult.”

Meza passed away in Honduras around 2000-2001. Throughout the investigation, interviews were conducted with family members of Paredes and Meza. The investigation remains ongoing.

“The Sampson County Sheriff’s Office extends its gratitude to the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Astrea Forensics, The Kin Finder Group, and the San Jose Police Department for their invaluable contributions,” Sheriff Jimmy Thornton said in a prepared statement. “This collaborative effort has brought the investigation closer to providing closure to the Paredes family. I would like to further thank my investigative staff and Captain Dixon for their unwavering efforts in this cold case.”

Anyone with information regarding Victoria Paredes or Vayardo Meza is urged to contact investigators at the Sampson County Sheriff’s Office at 910-592-4141.