

**RESTORING NAMES, RESTORING DIGNITY: THE  
IGG CENTER HELPS ARIZONA OFFICIALS IDENTIFY  
MEN IN TWO COLD CASES**



Jon Gradel (top, right) with his family. Image furnished by a relative.

MAHWAH, NJ– Across Arizona, people die without a name. Sometimes it can take authorities years to identify decedents, and sometimes not at all. It can be even more challenging when the decedents are unhoused.

For two cold cases in Maricopa and Yavapai Counties from 2006 and 2018, that was the challenge for county officials. With help of students and staff in the [Ramapo College of New Jersey Investigative Genetic Genealogy Center](#) (IGG), some 2,500 miles across the country in Mahwah, NJ, the identities of John Does have been confirmed.

## **Maricopa County**

On May 24, 2006, a man was struck by a vehicle near Dunlap Road and the I-17 frontage road in Phoenix, AZ. He later died at the hospital, but not before providing a possible name, **John Gradel**. The spelling could not be verified before his death, leaving his possible name unconfirmed. He was estimated to be 50-70 years old at the time of his death.

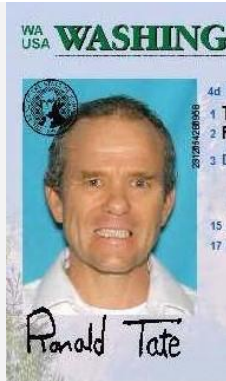
The case was referred to the Ramapo College IGG Center in September of 2024 by the **Maricopa County Medical Examiner's Office** (MCOME) after traditional means of identification did not yield a confirmed name.

A blood card for Gradel was received by **Genologue** who then sent completed data to **Parabon Nanolabs** for bioinformatics on September 30. In October, a genotype profile was successfully created and uploaded to **GEDmatch** and **FamilyTreeDNA**. The Maricopa Attorney's Office was also able to provide a potential date of birth for John Gradel, who was known to frequent homeless shelters in the area where he was struck.

A team of volunteer investigative genetic genealogists, all graduates of the **Ramapo College IGG Certificate Program**, built a family tree with all available data. The IGG team was able to identify a niece of the candidate Jon Grادل, who said Grادل had not been in contact with the family for years. The niece agreed to provide a reference sample, and her DNA led to Grادل's identity being confirmed by MCOME in June of 2025, bringing closure to this 19-year old cold case.

## **Yavapai County**

The remains of Verde River John Doe were found March 22, 2018 in Yavapai County, AZ. The man was found inside of a sleeping bag after a flood. He was believed to be an unhoused transient person based on the items found with him.



This photo of Tate was taken in 2012 for his official ID card.

The case was referred to the IGG Center by the **Yavapai County Sheriff's Office** and the **Yavapai County Medical Examiner's Office** in August of 2023 after traditional means of identification did not yield a candidate.

In October of 2023, Doe's femur was sent to **Intermountain Forensics** for DNA extraction, whole genome sequencing, and bioinformatics. In May of 2024, the genotype profile was uploaded to **GEDmatch** and **FamilyTreeDNA**. In June, students in the **IGG Center Bootcamp Program** developed a potential candidate, Ronald Raymond Tate, born in San Bernardino, CA.

Tate's sister, his only living full sibling, was also an unhoused individual. Yavapai County Sheriff's Office worked with community resources to connect with the woman. She agreed to a DNA test that confirmed Tate's identity one year later in June of 2025.

Identifying the deceased who were homeless can be difficult. Finding reliable public records and information for people who do not have identification on their persons, who cannot be connected to an address or phone number, who are not in touch with their families or on social media, make developing leads even more challenging. This is where IGG technology, which combines traditional and genetic genealogy and relies on informed consent and publicly available data to provide investigative leads, can help make unknown decedents known again.

“Only the DNA brought us to what we know about these individuals today,” said Cairenn Binder, assistant director of the Ramapo College IGG Center and director of the IGG Certificate Program.

To learn more about Ramapo College and the IGG Center, please visit [ramapo.edu](https://www.ramapo.edu).