

Skull, eyeglasses help St. Tammany coroner identify body in 30-year-old cold case

DNA helps track down Minnesota man's family

- [By ALEX LUBBEN | Staff writer](#)
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Doris Hoffpaur, a Forensic DNA Analyst, works in the DNA lab at the St. Tammany Parish Coroner's Office in Lacombe on Wednesday, June 28, 2023. (Photo by Brett Duke, [NOLA.com](#) | The Times-Picayune)

- STAFF PHOTO BY BRETT DUKE



The St. Tammany Parish coroner's office north of Lacombe.

In October of 1993, squirrel hunters found a dismembered human body in the woods off Interstate 59, near the Mississippi border. The cause of death was clear — a gunshot wound to the back of the head — but the identity of the victim was not known until this month.

Using DNA technology, the St. Tammany Parish Coroner's Office identified the body as Joseph **Lee Muniz of Burnsville**, Minnesota. Muniz was 21 when his body was found in rural St. Tammany Parish.

St. Tammany Parish Coroner Charles Preston said putting a name to an unidentified body took hours upon hours of meticulous work.

“Cold case identifications are the result of determination, collaboration, and expertise of scores of people in the exhaustive pursuit of justice,” Preston said. The hard work is all in service of “bringing at least some closure and clarity to members of the victim’s family,” he added.

When investigators found Muniz’s body nearly 30 years ago, animals had already torn it apart.

At the time, investigators didn't have much to go on.

“The remains were scavenged considerably by carnivores,” said Chris Knoblauch, a forensic death investigator with the Coroner’s Office. But, he said, “We were able to recover a complete human skull,” as well as a distinctive pair of eyeglasses and tattered clothing.

That skull and those eyeglasses would become key factors in making an identification decades later.

With access to state-of-the-art technology, and in collaboration with various agencies across the state and country, the Coroner’s Office was able to extract DNA from the skeleton, a process that involves grinding the bone into a fine white powder to pull strands of DNA from it.

The DNA analysis led investigators to two potential living relatives, who were able to confirm that Muniz had been in Louisiana when he disappeared in 1993. They also provided old photos that show Muniz wearing glasses similar to those found near his remains.

While the Coroner's Office declined to provide additional details about a suspected killer, they said that he is believed to be deceased.

This investigation marks the first time that the St. Tammany coroner used a method called forensic genetic genealogy to identify the remains. It's the same methodology that authorities used to catch the Golden State Killer in California, and relies in part on consumer databases that millions use to trace their ancestry — services like 23andMe.

The main database used in this case, GEDmatch, allows its customers to opt in to having their DNA used by law enforcement investigators.

The Coroner's Office worked with a private DNA lab company called Othram Inc., with funding from Season of Justice, a nonprofit organization that funds investigating agencies to help solve cold cases. Ashley Flowers, host of popular true crime podcast Crime

Junkie, started the nonprofit three years ago to help solve the types of cases that she covers on her show.

Accessing commercial DNA databases proved controversial in the wake of the Golden State Killer's conviction, [raising questions](#) about private genealogical DNA testing companies' responsibilities to their customers when disclosing information to law enforcement. In 2021, two states, Maryland and Montana, [passed laws](#) restricting law enforcement's use of genetic genealogy.

This is the second time in recent months that investigators with the St. Tammany Coroner's Office have been able to help [identify a body](#) found decades ago in rural St. Tammany.

In April, they announced that DNA analysis had helped identify the body of Paula Ann Boudreaux, a woman whose body was found in 1988 by hunters off Bayou Paquet Road near Slidell. Boudreaux was last seen by her family in Golden Meadow in 1986, two years before her body was found. How she died, and how her remains came to be scattered in the woods some 100 miles away from her home, remain a mystery.