

DNA Doe Project identifies 1984 homicide victim as missing 14-year-old girl

Remains found in a dumpster in Phoenix identified as Renee Nilsson

Phoenix, AZ – More than 40 years after her remains were found in a dumpster in Phoenix, the DNA Doe Project has identified Del Rey Jane Doe as Renee Isabel Nilsson. Nilsson, who was only 14 years old at the time of her murder, was reported missing two weeks before her body was found. Her family reported that she left her house to go swimming and never returned.



Renee Nilsson

On June 10, 1984, the partial remains of an adolescent girl were found in a dumpster in an industrial area of Phoenix, Arizona. She was believed to be Caucasian and approximately 5'4" tall with brown hair. Though she was initially thought to be older, it was later estimated that she was likely 16-18 years old. It was quickly established that she was a victim of homicide, but investigators were not able to uncover her identity at the time.

In 2023, the Maricopa County Medical Examiner's Office brought this case to the DNA Doe Project, whose expert investigative genetic genealogists work pro bono to identify Jane and John Does. The lab work for this case was fully funded thanks to generous support from a family foundation, and by May 2024, a DNA profile had been developed for the unidentified girl. Unusually, the Jane Doe had some relatively close DNA matches, while it was also clear that she had ancestors from both Sweden and Canada. The team got to work and quickly identified two families who the unidentified girl was related to. They then found a marriage record which showed that

a man from one of those families had married a woman from the other family in Los Angeles, California in 1968.

But this couple had only had one daughter, and it appeared that she had married in 1987 – three years after Del Rey Jane Doe was found. However, the team continued looking into her and eventually realized that there was more to the story. She had not gotten married in 1987; someone else had done so using her identity. In fact, the girl in question – Renee Isabel Nilsson – had been missing since May 1984.

“When her remains were found in 1984, Del Rey Jane Doe was believed to be substantially older than 14,” said team leader Trish Bird. “But science has now caught up, with modern forensic anthropology and investigative genetic genealogy finally leading us to Renee.”

Further DNA testing later confirmed that Del Rey Jane Doe was in fact Renee Isabel Nilsson. The investigation into her murder is ongoing, and the public is encouraged to contact the Maricopa County Medical Examiner’s Office if they have any relevant information.

The DNA Doe Project is grateful to the groups and individuals who helped solve this case: the Maricopa County Medical Examiner’s Office, who entrusted the case to the DNA Doe Project; Astrea Forensics for extraction of DNA, sample prep, and whole-genome sequencing; Kevin Lord for bioinformatics; GEDmatch Pro and FTDNA for providing their databases; our generous donors who joined our mission and contributed to this case; and the DNA Doe Project’s dedicated teams of volunteer investigative genetic genealogists who work tirelessly to bring all our Jane and John Does home.

Description:

On June 10, 1984, the partial remains of an adolescent girl were found in a dumpster in the area of 21st Avenue in Phoenix, AZ. The Caucasian girl was estimated to be between 16-18 years old and approximately 5'4" tall with brown hair.

NamUs ID:

UP1903

Date Body Found:

June 10, 1984

Race:

White/Caucasian

Sex:

Female

Estimated Age:

16-18

Estimated PMI:

less than 1 year

Agency of Jurisdiction:

Maricopa County Medical Examiner's Office

Christen Eggers

602-506-2083

christen.eggars@maricopa.gov

More Information:

<https://www.namus.gov/UnidentifiedPersons/Case#/1903>

<https://www.websleuths.com/forums/threads/az-phoenix-whtfem-up1903-16-18-found-in-dumpster-near-21st-avenue-jun84.515435/#post-18394159>

<https://uncovered.com/cases/1984-maricopa-county-jane-doe>

<https://www.doenetwork.org/cases/1128ufaz.html>

Status:

Identified

Last Updated: July 30, 2025

Posted on

December 15, 2023