

Mystery Broward murder victim ID'd after 31 years

By **Mike Clary** Sun Sentinel

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That was in 1983.

"This makes it easier. Not the way he died, but the closure."

<http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/broward/fl-murder-victim-remains-id...>



Earl Blankenship in 1982 with niece Tiffany Renee Blankenship, 2. (Blankenship Family/Courtesy)

After several run-ins with the law in his Ohio hometown, Earl Blankenship announced one summer day that he was leaving for a fresh start in South Florida.

"He said, 'I'm going to leave this place, and I ain't never coming back,'" Macie Blankenship recalled of the last conversation she had with her 25-year-old son.

On Monday the Broward Medical Examiner's office identified Blankenship as the murder victim whose body was discovered in March 1984 by two fishermen in the area of State Road 84 and Northwest 204th Avenue, near the Everglades.

The cause of death was "multiple stab wounds," said Wendy Crane, Senior Medical Legal Investigator for the Medical Examiner.

Blankenship was identified through a DNA match by the University of North Texas Health Science Center using DNA samples recently submitted by Macie Blankenship and two of her other children, according to Crane.

The odds are 584 million to 1 that the remains were those of Blankenship, Crane said.

"I had always held out hope that he was alive, thinking all this time he was probably working, running around," said Macie Blankenship, 76, a retired bartender and factory worker who lives in Defiance, Ohio.

Identifying Blankenship's remains solves the mystery of his disappearance nearly 31 years ago, but leaves two other questions unanswered: who killed him, and why?

"We'll have to start from the beginning," Broward Sheriff's homicide detective Sgt. Scott Champagne said in an email. "Now that we have an ID, we'll have to review everything in the case file, revisit the witnesses and take it from there.

"It's difficult, but we'll put forth every effort to locate any witnesses and solve the crime."

The body now identified as Blankenship's was found March 17, 1984, in a wooded area along the 20400 block of State Road 84, according to the Operation Found & Forgotten page on the Broward Sheriff's website.

The remains were in "an advanced state of decomposition" when found, meaning he could have been killed weeks earlier, Crane said.



"I thought he'd call, but he never did," said Blankenship.

"It's nice to know what happened. It wasn't that he didn't want to be a father. He was murdered, plain and simple."

Identifying Blankenship was made possible because Blankenship's remains were preserved, Crane said. It is illegal in Florida to cremate unidentified remains.



A composite sketch and a photo of a model of the man's face is included on the website.

The man was wearing faded Viceroy jeans, tennis shoes and a black T-shirt with the words, "I have no drinking problem: I drink, I get drunk, I fall down."

Investigators said at the time that he smoked Kool cigarettes and had a white Bic lighter in his front pocket.

Blankenship said her son was "running with the wrong crowd" and had served some jail time before deciding to leave Defiance, a city of 16,000 residents tucked into the rural northwest corner of Ohio.

When Earl's father Scott died in 2001, "I thought he might come home then," she said.

Before learning several weeks ago that her son's remains had been identified, the family also learned that Earl had a child, whom Earl had never met. Now 32, Jessica Casner and her 10-year-old daughter attended a recent memorial service at the Blankenship home, where Casner met her grandmother, aunts and uncle for the first time.

Casner was a newborn when Blankenship separated from her mother. "I picture him as a kid who got in some trouble, tried to straighten himself out, but it was too late," said Casner, who lives in Danville, Ill.

Donna Blankenship described her brother, the oldest of four siblings, as "a wild child" as a teen who got involved with drugs in Defiance. She said he left for Florida with the intention "to make some fast money and probably got involved with the wrong people."

Another sister, Shelia Shoemaker, said she heard from her brother twice soon after he left home. One call came from the road in Georgia, where he said the used van he was driving broke down.

A month later he called from South Florida. "He said he was staying with some guy who was dealing drugs," Shoemaker said. "He said, 'I gotta get out of here.' That's the last I heard."

Donna Blankenship said knowing what happened to her brother brings "a lot of comfort."

But learning the way he died is wrenching. "Whoever did this is a brutal maniac," said Donna Blankenship. "But maybe now they want to make their lives right again. People might start talking. You can't ever give up."

The service that uses DNA to trace missing family members through the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) is free to the public, Crane said. DNA samples are not entered into a criminal data base, she said. For more information, go to <http://www.namus.gov>.

The Broward Sheriff's Office continues to investigate the homicide. Anyone with information about his death can contact the Homicide Unit at 954-321-4210.

Staff researcher Barbara Hijek contributed to this report.

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