

# Audrey Desjarlais ID'd through DNA test, police reopen cold case

Winnipeg police announce 'open investigation' in case of indigenous woman, prompted by CBC report

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The Winnipeg Police Service say there is now an "open investigation" into the death of Audrey Desjarlais, 52.

That includes reviewing why police were told she was seen alive when her body was, in fact, stored away in a morgue and left unidentified as a "Jane Doe."

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DNA tests confirmed the remains of Desjarlais this week — three years after her extremely decomposed body was found in the Red River. Her daughter, Barb Desjarlais, long suspected the unidentified woman was her mother.

It wasn't until a CBC investigation in April that police were moved to honour Barb's pleas.

"The Winnipeg Police Service would like to acknowledge Ms. Desjarlais' daughter, Barb Desjarlais, and Donna Carreiro of the CBC, who were instrumental in the eventual identification of Audrey Desjarlais through a DNA match," police Supt. Danny Smyth told reporters on Friday.

On Thursday, police contacted Barb at her Regina home and gave her the news.

## Believed she was alive

In September 2012, police put out a sketch of what they believed "Jane Doe" looked like. They also released photos of jewelry found with the body.



Desjarlais wants DNA testing done to confirm or reject her theory that the unidentified human remains of a woman pulled from the Red River in 2012 is in fact her mother, Audrey. (Manitoba Chiefs of Police and Desjarlais family)

Police received over 20 tips that required follow-up investigation. That included comparing the information with more than 300 profiles of women.

"Certainly [the name of] Ms. Desjarlais was one of the 20 tips that came [but] there were a variety of people that contacted the police with the belief that the composite sketch resembled someone they knew that was missing," Smyth said.

But by early October 2012, the Desjarlais angle to the "Jane Doe" investigation had cooled off as police had been led to believe the body was not that of Audrey Desjarlais.

Investigators received information from two witnesses who claimed to have seen Desjarlais in late September or early October. One witness said they saw her in late September shopping in Steinbach, and the other said she was seen in early October shopping in Grunthal.

"In the fall of 2012, certainly we looked to establish a DNA profile that would assist us. However, quite frankly, the focus of the investigation changed when those witnesses came forward because they were acting on the belief Ms. Desjarlais was still alive," Smyth said.

"Simply put, the witnesses, the info they provided, was assessed and believed to be very credible. [So] we we're running on the assumption Ms. Desjarlais was still alive at that point."

There was also no missing persons report to suggest it could have been Desjarlais, Smyth said.

On Thursday, when CBC News first broke the story about the DNA match for Desjarlais, police said they wished a DNA test had been performed years earlier, but they made their decision based on "well-intentioned" information, though in hindsight, they realize the decision was "mistaken."

## 'Long, complex investigation'

The next step for police is to determine how Audrey Desjarlais ended up in the river and why.

While her remains had no visible signs of foul play, police haven't ruled that out as a possible factor in Desjarlais's death. Now that investigators know who she was, they'll try to retrace her final steps.

"This has been a long, complex investigation. Based on the autopsy report, it is believed that Ms. Desjarlais had been in the Red River for weeks, and possibly months," Smyth said.

Originally from the Saddle Lake community in Alberta, Desjarlais was believed to be living in Winnipeg prior to her death. She was also known to have lived in the area of Selkirk and Grunthal in Manitoba, police said on Friday.

Until there is some resolution to bring closure, Desjarlais's family said they will try to cope with the new information and determine whether they can finally bring her home to where they live in Saskatchewan.

Anyone with information about Audrey Desjarlais is asked to contact members of the Winnipeg Police Service's Missing Persons Unit at 204-986-6250.

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*CBC continues to investigate the stories of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. If you know anything about this case, or any other unsolved MMIW case, email us at [MMIW@cbc.ca](mailto:MMIW@cbc.ca).*

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Doe Network Case 1199UFMB