

National database solves case of man found in Niagara River in 1994

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Male, white, Age Range 30 to 45, Brown hair, Brown Eyes
Height 5'10" Weight 150 to 170 LBS

An artist's rendering of a man whose body was found floating in the Niagara River in 1994. He was identified in May through a national unidentified person database.
New York State Park Police

For more than 22 years he was just John Doe.

A white male, between 30 to 45 years old, whose body was found floating, face down in the lower Niagara River near Joseph Davis State Park.

"We did everything we could to identify him," explains New York State Park Police Major Patrick Moriarty, who was the original investigator on the case.

But there was little information or evidence to point Park Police to the man's identity. He had brown eyes and brown hair, a beard and mustache and a chipped front tooth. Some investigators noted the man bore a resemblance to the TV character Grizzly Adams.

However, that description didn't match anyone in the available data bases of missing persons that state Park Police accessed.

Slowly, the white three-ringed binder that was used to organize the documents in the case began to swell in size. Yet every lead took investigators to just another dead end.

By 2001, the binder was moved to the Park Police cold case file. Some investigators wondered if John Doe would ever be identified — if his family would ever learn his fate.

But even as the case remained cold, a new program, aimed at giving names to the nation's John and Jane Does came online.

In July 2003, the United States Department of Justice introduced the National Missing and Unidentified Persons Initiative. Its nickname is NamUs.

The program was jointly developed by the National Institute of Justice and the development and evaluation bureau of the Office of Justice Programs. Its goal was to

positively identify what are believed to be as many as 40,000 unidentified human remains in the United States.

That goal is daunting. Every year, an average of 4,400 unidentified remains are found in the U.S. and over 1,000 of those remains are unidentified a year after their discovery.

At the same time, at any given moment in the U.S. there may be as many as 85,000 active missing persons cases.

Checking and cross-checking those cases and comparing the results with forensic databases was no easy task for individual investigators. But submitting a case to NamUs allows a law enforcement agent, a medical examiner or coroner or missing persons clearinghouse to automatically cross-search the nation's missing persons databases against the unidentified persons databases and then receive a side-by-side comparison of possible matches.

The program has achieved success. By December, 28,360 missing persons cases had been reported to NamUs and 11,756 of those cases have now been resolved.

At the same time, 14,336 unidentified persons cases were submitted to NamUs and 2,536 of those persons have now been identified.

By 2009, Park Police had re-opened the 1994 John Doe case. They painstakingly retraced their steps and re-examined all the evidence in the case.

In 2015, when the investigation stalled again, Park Police Detective Sgt. Brian Nisbet, who had taken over the case, enlisted the help of the FBI. He also sent the case to NamUs.

In April, Nisbet submitted the Kirk Jones disappearance to NamUs as well. When he received an email from the program in May, he assumed it was related to the Jones case.

“You get an email and the (subject line) says there’s a ‘change’ in the status of your case,” Nisbet said.

When Nisbet opened the email, he learned that John Doe did, indeed, have a name.

“I was surprised it was my 1994 case that had been identified,” Nisbet said. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

The man was from Ohio. He had a family, a wife and children. Park police officials did not release the man’s identity.

“He had been kind of a drifter and the family never reported him missing,” Moriarty said.

The lack of that missing person report had hampered the attempts to identify him. NamUs, however, matched him using a fingerprint database from the man’s military service.

There are still unanswered questions in the case, like what brought him to Western New York and how did he end up in the waters of the Niagara River. Yet, Park Police were able to locate his family, who traveled to the Falls in June to meet with investigators and find some closure.

“At least now, they know what happened to their loved one,” Moriarty said.

Knowledge they may never have gained without NamUs.