

NJ-Based Aunt, Cops Help ID Remains of Child in Decades-Old Cold Case

Judy Gifford's aunt hadn't changed her phone number in decades -- holding on to the hope her missing niece would call

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What to Know

- New Jersey State Police used newly gathered DNA evidence from a hopeful aunt to help investigators in San Francisco identify the remains of a murdered teen girl found in 1976

- The story began to unravel when a man walking his dog on Oct. 1, 1976, “discovered a hand protruding from the sand” in Lake Merced, San Francisco
- Years later, a man named William Shin told police in San Francisco that he remembered having a sister when he was a child who went missing at the age of 14

After nearly half a century, New Jersey State Police used newly gathered DNA evidence from a hopeful aunt to help investigators in San Francisco identify the remains of a murdered 14-year-old girl.

It was Oct. 1, 1976, when a man walking his dog “discovered a hand protruding from the sand behind a pumping station in Lake Merced, San Francisco,” according to New Jersey State Police.

California detectives subsequently determined that the victim was a young Asian girl whose body was found with distinctive jewelry, including a gold chain and owl necklace found in her pocket.

The young girl’s death was ruled a homicide.

Years later, a man named William Shin told police in San Francisco that he remembered having a sister when he was a child who went missing at the age of 14 and that nobody in his family had “seen or heard from her since 1976,” according to NJSP.

As a result, San Francisco police began to think that the remains discovered in 1976 were Judy Gifford’s, so they tracked down a paternal aunt of Judy’s, Ogee Gifford, in Southamton, New Jersey. That’s when they contacted New Jersey State Police for help.

It turned out Ogee Gifford never changed her phone number, as she held on for decades to the hope that her missing niece would call, NJSP said.

It was June when New Jersey State Police Det. Sgt. Erin Micciulla and Det. Jeff Greco from the New Jersey State Police Missing Persons Unit met with Ogee Gifford and collected a DNA sample, dental records and photographs, including some photos in which a young Judy Gifford is pictured wearing a gold chain and an owl pendant necklace – the same as the jewelry found on the unidentified teen girl decades ago.

After 43 years of not having a name, on Nov. 14, the California Department of Justice announced that the remains of the Jane Doe found in 1976 were positively identified as that of Judy Gifford.

Days later, on Nov. 22, Ogee Gifford was personally notified that her niece was indeed the young girl found almost half a century ago.

The case remains an active investigation led by the San Francisco Police Department.

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