

Cold case breakthrough: Woman arrested in death of newborn 'Baby Angel'

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by CHRIS ROGERS and GABRIEL HATHAWAY

Winona County Sheriff's Office deputies arrested **Jennifer Nichole Baechle**, 43, of Winona, on Thursday morning on charges of manslaughter in the 2011 death of a newborn infant known as **Baby Angel**. The Winona County Attorney's Office charged Baechle with two counts of second-degree manslaughter.

On September 5, 2011, boaters found a deceased newborn girl in a bag in the Mississippi River roughly seven miles south of Winona along with porcelain angel figurines. Despite investigators' best efforts and dozens of DNA tests of potential parents, Baby Angel's death remained a cold case until March 2023, when the sheriff's office turned to a forensics nonprofit, Firebird Forensics Group, that uses genetic genealogy data to help identify human remains and potential suspects. The organization alerted the sheriff's office to a Winona woman who was a possible relative of Baby Angel, based on DNA evidence. In the charges against her, prosecutors said that woman was Baechle.

"For more than 13 years, Baby Angel's tragic death has weighed heavily on the hearts of the Winona community," Winona County Sheriff Ron Ganrude said. "She deserved better than a watery grave. She deserved more than a life cut short. And while her birth mother remained hidden, this community wrapped its arms around this little girl." Ganrude said investigators don't yet have all the answers, but they know who is responsible for Baby Angel's death. "Today's charges are the first step in holding [Baechle] accountable."

Minnesota Department of Public Safety Bureau of Criminal Apprehension (BCA) Deputy Superintendent of Forensic Science Services Catherine Knutson said BCA special agents, analysts, and forensic scientists have been working with Winona County Sheriff's Office investigators since day one. While investigators never found a match for Baby Angel among the many DNA samples collected nor state and federal databases, Knutson said that forensic investigative genetic genealogy (FIGG) was the key for finally identifying a suspect. FIGG utilizes data from genetic genealogy services, such as 23andMe or FamilyTreeDNA, to help solve criminal cases.

To follow-up on Firebird's tip, detectives said they searched through trash from Baechle's residence and obtained a DNA sample they believed to be hers, which was found to be a possible match for a relative of Baby Angel. That information led to a search warrant to collect a DNA sample directly from Baechle in March 2024. A BCA test of that sample concluded "the genetic results obtained from the unidentified female infant are 570,000 times more likely to occur in a biological child of [the] defendant than in someone unrelated to [the] defendant," and prosecutors said that this represented "very strong evidence" that Baby Angel was Baechle's daughter.

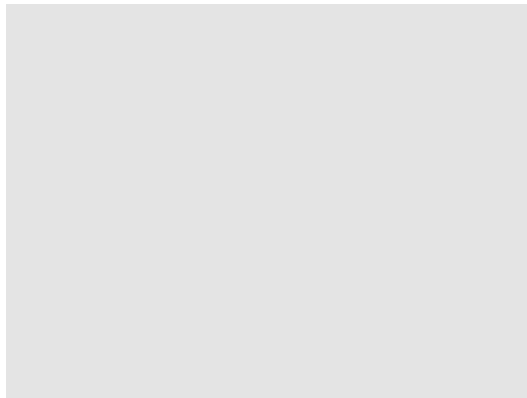


Photo by Gabriel Hathaway

Winona County Attorney Karin Sonneman speaks at a press conference Thursday afternoon. In the background are Sheriff Ron Ganrude (far right) and former sheriff Dave Brand (far left).

Prosecutors shared additional evidence about the condition in which Baby Angel was found. In addition to the angel figurines, the bag contained a blue pendant and a stick of incense, and an autopsy showed that Baby Angel appeared to be a full-term baby born a day or two before, her umbilical cord appeared to have been cut by someone who was not a medical professional, and she had suffered several fractures to her skull while alive, according to the criminal complaint. Other family members reportedly told investigators that Baechle was living in her van at the time, that they recognized the blue pendant as hers, and that she collected angels, according to prosecutors. Additionally, they wrote, "... The BCA concluded the DNA on the incense stick matches the DNA sample taken from the defendant."

The charges against her allege that Baechle “caused the death of another by committing or attempting to commit ... neglect or endangerment of a child” and that she caused the death of another person “by her culpable negligence, whereby she created an unreasonable risk and consciously took a chance of causing death or great bodily harm.” “As the biological mother of the infant, [the] defendant had a duty to seek medical care on behalf of the infant during pregnancy, birth, and immediately after birth,” prosecutors wrote.

“This is yet another example where advancements in investigative technique and in forensic testing allow previously unsolvable cases a chance for answers,” Knutson said. “In this case, FIGG helped to develop the break that allowed investigators to identify Baby Angel’s [mother] and provide answers to the community. That is why it is so important to never give up on any unsolved case because every child, such as in this case, deserves to be known and remembered no matter how long it takes.”

“I began my service as county attorney in January of 2011, so I have had the opportunity from the beginning of this case to observe investigators from both the Winona County Sheriff's Office and the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension work tenaciously for over 13 years to gather the sufficient evidence for my office to file this criminal complaint this morning,” Winona County Attorney Karin Sonneman said at a press conference. “I want to thank all the law enforcement officials, many of whom are here today, both current and retired, who worked on this case since its beginning, and those who joined those efforts throughout the years to seek the answers to the suspicious death of the infant named Baby Angel in 2011 by then Winona County Sheriff Dave Brand.”

Ganrude said Baechle turned herself in this morning, accompanied by her attorney, after a judge signed an arrest warrant for her.

At a hearing late this morning, Baechle's unconditional bail was set at \$200,000 with her conditional bail set at \$20,000 provided that she doesn't leave the state and is monitored via a GPS. Sonneman said that while Baechle poses no public safety risk, she does pose a flight risk. She added that, if found guilty of the two counts of second-degree manslaughter, Baechle could serve 48 months in prison. The next court hearing is scheduled for July 7.