

Victim from Washtenaw County homicide positively identified after nearly 40 years

The Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office has identified the victim of a cold case murder dating back nearly 40 years. On Friday, deputies said that Jane Doe was positively identified as Cheryl Coates.



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(WXYZ) — The Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office has identified the victim of a cold case murder dating back nearly 40 years.

According to deputies, the body of a Jane Doe was found in a shallow grave the area of MacArthur Boulevard and Stamford Road in Superior Township back in January of 1985. At the time, it was a wooded area

near the Woolman Oval Apartments, which were abandoned in the 1970s and have since been torn down.

On Friday, deputies said that Jane Doe was positively identified as Cheryl Coates.

They say the incident is believed to have occurred between January 1984 and January 1985.

Coates was known to frequent or live in the Southfield and Detroit area.

In 2014 using the woman's skull, police were able to develop a 3D image of what she possibly looked like and released it to the public for but got no answers. Finally in 2021, advancements in DNA allowed them to identify possible relatives.

“For years, we've been really working to try and locate someone who might identify and know this person,” said Derrick Jackson, director with the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office. "Although we identified people through DNA who were related, they did not know a relative who had gone missing, so we could not confirm who Cheryl was until recently.”

Much of Coates' family has died, including her mother, Meta Waller. Waller had worked for the U.S. Army at the Pentagon and was killed in the 9/11 attacks.

Finally, after two years of searching, a living cousin was found in Washtenaw County who provided Coates' name and photo. DNA confirmed the two were cousins, giving investigators a major breakthrough in a 40-year case.

“Some of those retired and since-deceased investigators are no longer here, but the work they did back in 1985 allowed us to do some of the stuff we were able to do more recently,” Jackson said. “We don't give up on these cases.”

With this new information, investigators are spreading Coates' name and photo hoping to give her family and friends more answers after four decades of waiting.

“Right now, any information hopefully allows us to find out who did this, why they did this and the full backstory,” Jackson said. “Although many in Cheryl's family are no longer with us, are not around, we still want to bring justice for Cheryl.”

The sheriff's office is seeking any information regarding the circumstances of her death.

Anyone with any information is asked to contact Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office Detective Roberts at robertsb@washtenaw.org or the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office Tip Line at 734-973-7711