Laguna Beach Jane Doe 1982

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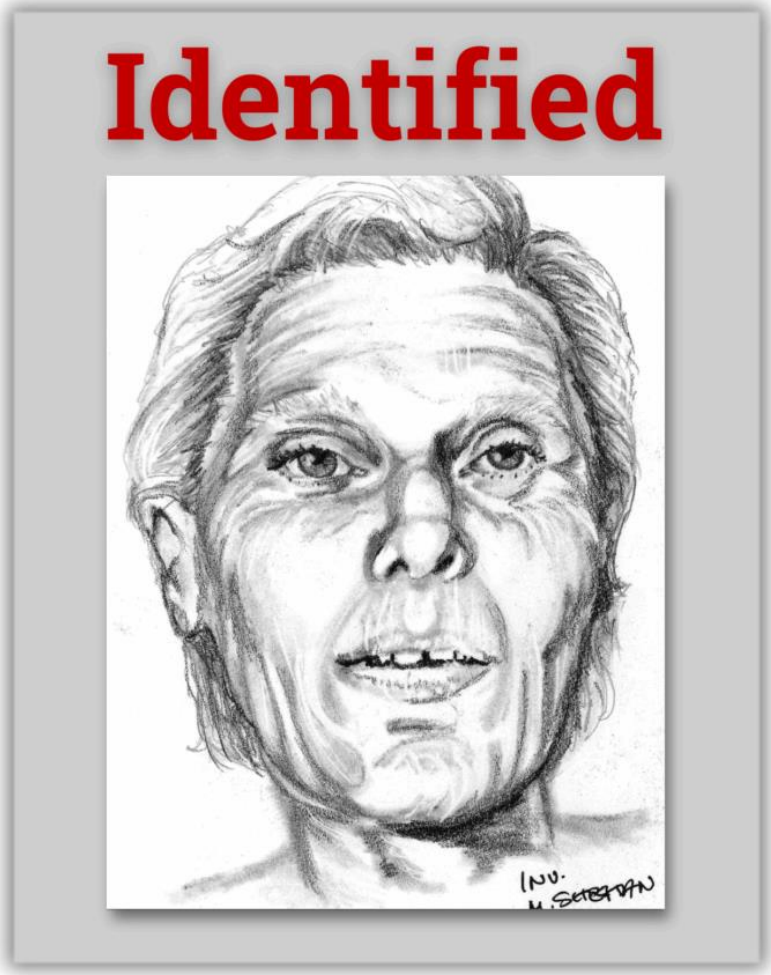

DNA Doe Project identifies Jane Doe killed in 1982 hit and run

Woman found dead in Laguna Beach identified as Virginia Nelson

Laguna Beach, CA – More than 40 years after she was killed in a hit and run on the Pacific Coast Highway, Laguna Beach Jane Doe has been identified as Virginia Irene Nelson. Known as 'Ginny' to her family, Nelson was 46

years old at the time of her death. Although she was from Yonkers, New York, she was last known to be living in Fresno prior to her death.

On January 30, 1982, a passing motorist spotted the body of a woman on the side of the Pacific Coast Highway in Laguna Beach, California. When investigators arrived at the scene, they found that she had died just hours beforehand, having been the victim of a hit and run. She was Caucasian and investigators estimated that she was between 50 and 65 years old.

The DNA Doe Project regularly takes on cases that have been long cold, and this case is a great example of how the techniques used in investigative genetic genealogy can create leads that investigators have been waiting for, sometimes for their entire careers. In the case of Laguna Beach Jane Doe, investigators had a good deal of information about the unidentified woman. She had a recognizable face, dental work, fingerprints, and surgical scars. But as she had no documentation of her identity, the investigation went cold and would remain so for more than four decades.

In November 2023, the Orange County Sheriff's Office brought the case to the DNA Doe Project. A team of volunteer investigative genetic genealogists then worked on her case at a retreat in Texas and, over the course of a single weekend, they were able to uncover the true identity of Laguna Beach Jane Doe.

A relative of the unidentified woman had uploaded his DNA profile to a database that permits the upload of law enforcement cases. His profile, along with other DNA matches, led DNA Doe Project researchers straight to the correct family, where the team first came across Virginia Irene Nelson.

"Close matches do not always guarantee a quick or easy resolution," said Jeana Feehery, team co-leader. "But in this case, we were fortunate to not only have high matches on both sides of her family, but family members who also publicly shared family trees that helped us make those connections."

Nelson was born in 1935 in Jacksonville, Florida, but she grew up just outside of New York City in Yonkers. She later moved to California as she was living in Fresno by 1967, though this discovery was only made thanks

to a newspaper article which reported her being mugged while living in Fresno that year. After that, she seemed to disappear from public records. The team also noticed that Nelson's paternal grandparents were both Scandinavian immigrants to the US – the DNA results for Laguna Beach Jane Doe had suggested substantial heritage from this region.

"Based on the estimated ancestry, we knew that Virginia had significant Scandinavian ancestry," said Taed Wynnell, who worked on this case. "We were able to quickly identify a few matches which also had Swedish ancestry, but finding the connection between them proved difficult." With multiple DNA matches now tied to Nelson's family, she was presented to the Orange County Sheriff's Office as a potential candidate. Investigators then contacted a living family member of hers, whose DNA profile was compared to that of the unidentified woman. This comparison confirmed that the woman formerly known only as Laguna Beach Jane Doe was indeed Virginia Nelson.

The DNA Doe Project is grateful to the groups and individuals who helped solve this case: the Orange County Sheriff's Office, who entrusted the case to the DNA Doe Project; Genologue for sample prep and whole-genome sequencing; Kevin Lord for bioinformatics; GEDmatch Pro and FamilyTreeDNA for providing their databases; and our dedicated teams of volunteer investigative genetic genealogists who work tirelessly to bring all our Jane and John Does home.