




- ANGOLA JANE DOE IDENTIFIED AS TINA LEN CABANAW 
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  Our thoughts are with her family  

 20-year mystery of unidentified body solved 

ANGOLA Indiana — When Jessica Gallegos started receiving messages from a Chris Emerick in Angola, Indiana, she thought it was some sort of a scam, so she didn't return the calls from the detective from the Steuben County Sheriff's Department.

But Emerick would not let up. After his phone messages went unreturned, Emerick turned to Facebook and found Gallegos, who lives in Colorado, and he messaged her. Emerick wanted to tell her that he thought he found her mother, whose body had been found in rural Angola in 1999.

"I was pretty confident it was who I was looking for but I could not get her to call me back," Emerick said of the conclusion of his search for the identity of Tina Len Cabanaw, who was from the Detroit area.

Gallegos started looking into who this Emerick guy was and found out it wasn't a scam.

"I just had this gut feeling. I Googled his name and found out he was a real police officer," Gallegos said. So, she answered Emerick's May 23 Facebook message and they finally connected by phone.

"I got this call at 5 o'clock in the morning and I just dropped to my knees. I had to have my husband take the call because I just could not talk," Gallegos said.

"Through that conversation, everything was matching up, through everything I learned from Detroit and what we knew about the body," Emerick said, then he arranged for DNA testing of Gallegos for final determination that the woman known as Jane Doe could be identified.

The search is over

Finally, after nearly 20 years, Gallegos found her mother, Tina Len Cabanaw — whose body was discovered in a field in rural Angola — thanks in large part to the police work of Emerick, with the support of Steuben County Coroner Bill Harter, the Steuben County Council and two sheriff's administrations, Tim Troyer and R.J. Robinson.

After that initial call, Gallegos would end up talking to Emerick a few other times then come to Steuben County to visit her mother's gravesite at Carter Cemetery near Pleasant Lake.

"I think I talked to him about three times (that) week because I had to keep processing it," Gallegos said.

Twenty years of searching, wondering, were finally over.

Police in Colorado conducted a DNA test of Gallegos, but even before the results came back as a 99.99% match, she decided to come to Steuben County to visit her mother for the first time in more than 20 years. Emerick accompanied Gallegos and one of her sons and family members from Detroit to Carter Cemetery where Cabanaw's remains are interred. Cabanaw was 36 when she was found. That's the same age as Gallegos today.

Carter Cemetery is owned by Steuben County and is used to bury the indigent. The public may also purchase plots in the cemetery, and the current president of the Steuben County Board of Commissioners, Ron Smith, has his burial plot near that of Cabanaw, which currently reads "Jane Doe 1999."

"I thought it was so beautiful," Gallegos said. "There was a peace, I thought, when I was there."

Mom staying in Steuben

Gallegos has decided she will leave her mom at Carter Cemetery. A gravestone from a family plot elsewhere might be brought to the cemetery. When Gallegos visits family in the Detroit area, she can swing by Steuben County and visit Mom.

Gallegos brought an angel's wing and a decorative stone to the gravesite when she visited in early June. The stone reads: "If Tears Could Build A Stairway, And Memories A Lane, I'd Walk Right Up To Heaven And Bring You Home Again."

Gallegos will end up bringing part of her mother home again. The Pleasant Township Trustee's Office, run by Trustee Lawnie "Mike" McClelland, has agreed to use township funds to pay for the cremation of the few remains of Cabanaw — a few bones — that the Sheriff's Department has in evidence. McClelland is also going to pay to ship Cabanaw's ashes to Gallegos. McClelland had only been out of office as sheriff for 21 months due to term limits when Cabanaw's body was found. Joel Working was sheriff at the time.

Weicht Funeral Home in Angola, which has worked on arrangements since the case's inception, last week was working with authorities to get Cabanaw's death certificate changed.

So ends what has been a 20-year search for her mother. For the sheriff's department, however, the investigation into this suspicious death continues. And it is at the very beginning stages.

"We've only identified her. We can't lose sight of that," Robinson said.

"It took 20 years to take the first step (of the investigation)," said Mike Meeks, chief deputy.

Police have yet to determine the manner of death or the time of death.

What is the beginning for the Sheriff's Department marks an end for Gallegos.

"I was starting to lose the hope. It was 20 years later when I got the call. It was over," Gallegos said. All of these years, Gallegos wondered why her mother never came for her. Now she knows why; she was dead, quite possibly at the hands of a for now unknown murderer, Robinson speculates.

For Gallegos, there's both pain and relief knowing that her mother has been found.

It hurts just because I may not have closure. I have searched for her every year," Gallegos said, "but my hopes of finding her (alive) are crushed. There is some good from the closure; I don't have to search for her anymore."

Years of searching

Gallegos joined Facebook years ago in hopes of being able to use that online platform as a way to find her mom. She also employed a variety of online missing persons sites, and family in Michigan also searched in vein, employing the services of a private investigator.

“I always wondered why, when she was just one state over, they didn’t connect, they didn’t put things together,” Gallegos said.

Steuben County police share that feeling. But to put things into perspective, Emerick said, in July 1999 Cabanaw was the 258th person who was reported missing in the Detroit police precinct — just a part of the city — where she lived. For unknown reasons, Cabanaw was never put in a national database for missing persons from Detroit. She was listed by Steuben County on the database as Jane Doe, the name she’s gone by ever since, until May.

Police determined that Cabanaw probably was dead in a farm field at Dr. M.G. Headley’s property on C.R. 200N for about three months. It is believed she met her demise — her passing is still listed as a suspicious death — around the Fourth of July and she was found Labor Day weekend by Headley, who has since passed.

The land where Cabanaw was found is now part of Glendarin Hills Golf Club. The body was found near a fencerow that’s a part of the club off the main entrance, near a parking area where trash receptacles are kept. When found, Cabanaw was nude except for a bra she was wearing.

On duty late the Saturday afternoon of Sept. 6, 1999, was sheriff’s reserve officer Jeff Sine, who worked with the detective bureau. Headley came to the jail, he didn’t call, to report he had found a body while out inspecting his corn.

Sine asked Headley if he was certain it was a body and not, perhaps, a deer. Headley responded that deer aren’t known for wearing wristwatches. And the investigation began.

After securing the area for the night, Sine said, the investigation began in earnest the next day. A couple of teams of renowned forensics investigations groups were brought in. Robinson and Meeks were both starting their careers in law enforcement and pulled guard duty at the scene.

Investigators comb scene

Over the course of about 72 hours, scientists and students meticulously combed the area, searching for every item possible.

They found 97%, 98% of her in this field," Sine said of the operation that resembled an archeological dig.

Gallegos was 16 when her mom went missing. But this was not the first time.

When she was 14, Gallegos was staying with a neighbor one night and her mom didn't return home. It was two days later that she would show up and would be found in her car, suffering from an overdose of drugs.

"One night, she just didn't come home," Gallegos said.

At that time, Gallegos was put into foster care and she finished out the school year. From there, she was moved to live with her father in Colorado.

"I don't want to say anything bad about her. She was my mom. But she was having problems. She relapsed back into drugs," Gallegos said. Also, her mother got in with the wrong crowd.

She would learn later that her mother had gone missing from her aunt, Patricia McCarty, Cabanaw's sister.

It was McCarty who started searching for her sister in Michigan. She also informed Gallegos that her mom could not be found.

Gallegos is now married with two children, boys, ages 16 and 11. She praises the work of the sheriff's department and the kindness people of Steuben County have shown her.

"I appreciate every single one of them," she said. "They might think they're just doing their jobs but they're not. They're changing lives."

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