

## Nurse, 64, Charged With ‘Barbaric’ 1999 Murder of Jane Doe Found Dead in

### Wisconsin Cornfield

Victim Peggy Lynn Johnson, 23, had been living with the nurse's family for five years after her mother died when she was a teen

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Peggy Lynn Johnson

RACINE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

For 20 years, local law enforcement had no idea about the names of either the victim or the suspect in the cold case killing of a young woman whose battered body was spotted in 1999 on the edge of a Wisconsin cornfield by a dog walker.

Then came a tip seven weeks ago that a Florida woman “was telling people that she had killed a woman back when she lived in Illinois,” according to a [criminal complaint](#) in the case obtained by PEOPLE.

The sheriff's office in Racine County, Wisconsin, reached out to investigate — and after an officer talked with one of the suspect's children, who recalled her mother's alleged years-long abuse of the cognitively impaired victim, they arrested 64-year-old Linda Sue LaRoche on suspicion of murder.

“The utter barbaric brutality inflicted on this young woman is something none of us will ever forget,” Racine County Sheriff Christopher Schmaling said in a news conference Friday.

With the arrest, authorities also publicly identified the Jane Doe found in the field. She was Peggy Lynn Johnson, 23, who had moved in with the suspect's family in McHenry, Illinois, in 1994 at around age 18 after her mother died, leaving her alone when she went to a medical clinic looking for help.

LaRoche, a registered nurse at the clinic, “recognized Peggy's disability and took her into her home,” said Schmaling.

What followed was five years of “long-term and horrific abuse at the hand of Linda LaRoche,” he said.



“The arrangement was that Peggy would act as a nanny and housekeeper in exchange for living with the family,” according to the criminal complaint charging LaRoche with one count of first-degree intentional homicide and one count of hiding a corpse.

“Laroche’s children recall that Laroche was very abusive to Peggy and that it was not uncommon for Peggy to have signs of injuries from Laroche,” according to the complaint. “At times when not working for the family, Peggy would be made to sleep and stay in a crawl space under the home. Laroche was verbally and emotionally cruel to Peggy, at times screaming at her like an animal. One recalled Laroche stabbing at Peggy’s head with a pitchfork, one recalled Laroche slapping Peggy in the head and face.”

“They all recalled seeing Peggy with injuries and one even asked Peggy what had happened to her after noticing a black eye,” the complaint said. “Peggy told the child, who was then an adult, that Laroche had punched her.”

LaRoche’s former husband, identified in the complaint by his initials “RWJ,” also allegedly confirmed the abuse. He recalled that on the last day he saw the victim, he returned home from work “and found Peggy on the ground lifeless. Laroche told him Peggy had overdosed and she was going to take her away from their house so they would not be involved,” according to the complaint.

LaRoche directed her husband to take their kids out for ice cream, and when LaRoche returned more than two hours later, she was without Peggy, he said.

He never saw the young woman again, he told investigators.

The body was discovered July 21, 1999, in a cornfield off a road in Raymond, Wisconsin.

An autopsy revealed the victim was bruised, malnourished, with “suspicious marks, bumps, abrasions and lacerations” all over the body, a broken nose, trauma suggesting a blow to the head, and ribs that were broken after she died. The medical examiner gave the cause of death as “homicide by sepsis pneumonia as a result of infection from injuries sustained from chronic abuse.”

No one had reported Johnson missing, the sheriff said.

Interviewed by investigators, LaRoche, of Cape Coral, Florida, gave contradictory accounts of Johnson's last hours, including a version in which LaRoche explained that she worked as a nurse at a jail program and stored medications in the crawl space where Johnson allegedly found them and overdosed before waking. LaRoche told investigators she "couldn't handle Peggy anymore" and arranged to turn Johnson over to a relative, then revised her account to say she'd dropped off Johnson alive, but alone, on a rural roadside.

Authorities said LaRoche would be extradited from Florida to face charges. An attorney who might speak on her behalf was not named.