





2021 Hyundai Palisade

0%

Low APR

For 48 Months



ARAPAHOE

HYUNDAI

BigHyundai.com

*See dealer for full details WAC

NEWS

DNA match finally puts name to boy's remains — but mystery persists



1 of 7

Cristobal James Flores is seen in this undated photo.



By **KEVIN SIMPSON** | ksimpson@denverpost.com | The Denver Post

PUBLISHED: June 21, 2014 at 2:00 p.m. | UPDATED: April 27, 2016 at 5:19 a.m.

One morning early this month, a sense of purpose propelled Margaret Sanchez and her adult daughter, Veronica Ruiz Montano, haltingly up a steep hill whose footpath is a vague promise. They had dreaded this day, slept fitfully the night before, yet embraced their short trek as a necessary thing.

The soft ground shifted beneath them as they sought footholds and rose above the Silver Saddle Motel on the west edge of Boulder and headed for a ridgeline that points a more gradual upward route.

Beth Buchholtz, formerly a coroner's investigator, led the way. She had hiked this route in the late summer of 2002 to examine and catalog a set of unidentified remains.

Now, having reviewed old Global Positioning System readings and scouted the area two days earlier, she led the two women back to the site of an investigation that, for more than a decade, had led nowhere.

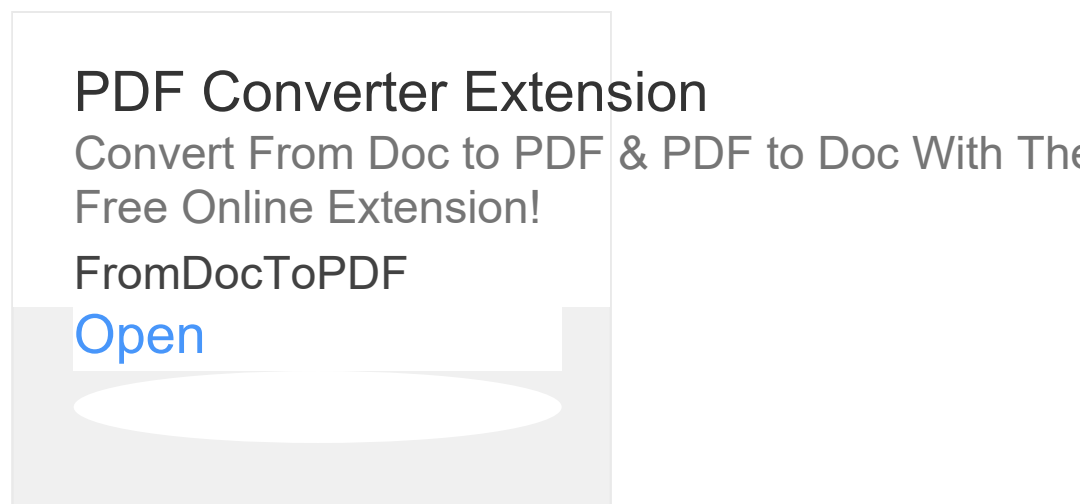
She pointed toward the brown tip of a dead Douglas fir that poked above the ridgeline as a reference point. Moments later, the group descended into a narrow drainage.

The previous year's floodwaters had raged through a small meadow, washing much of it away and leaving a rocky stream bed where water now trickled downhill. Though transformed by nature, this was the place. And on a perfect morning beneath a near-cloudless sky, Margaret first marveled at its beauty before its meaning settled upon her.

Her shoulders shook. "My baby," she softly cried.

* * *

Nearly 12 years earlier, two University of Colorado freshmen — Minnesota transplants Tim Moret and Nathan Bengali — decided to explore their new surroundings.



They biked to Boulder Creek, went for a swim, then hiked up a steep path on the west edge of town. Finding that the trail wasn't circling back to their starting point, they made a beeline down the slope, bushwhacking toward the place they had left their bikes, near Arapahoe Avenue.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, Moret noticed something odd lying in the grass at the base of the drainage. Stopping to look more closely, he noticed what appeared to be a skull among other bones overgrown by wild grass.

Moret told his buddy he thought they had stumbled across a human skeleton.

"It sounded ridiculous coming out of my mouth," he says now. "We looked at each other like, 'Is this possible?' You almost didn't know what to do."

They headed back to CU to report what they had found to the campus police, who summoned sheriff's deputies to accompany them back to the location.

"I remember being unsure if we could find this random spot on the hillside," recalls Moret, now 30 and living in Columbus, Ohio. "The thought of foul play, or this being anything but a missing person from a long time ago, never crossed my mind."

The remains seemed so old, so scattered. The surroundings, an apparent stopover for transients, evoked no sense of criminal urgency.

Moret and his friend checked in once or twice in the following weeks to see whether there had been any developments, but authorities didn't seem optimistic.

And so the story of their Boulder hike endured as a novelty, a can-you-believe-this anecdote that made their first year away from home all the more memorable.

More recently, that conversation piece has assumed new form and contour, molded by DNA science into a more concrete tragedy. Although many details remain unresolved, there is a name attached to those remains — Cristobal James Flores.

He was only 15, maybe 16, when he died and his identity dissolved into the landscape.

Moret wonders now how this stranger whose path he crossed — a kid just a couple years younger — came to be there, how he died. Identity changes everything.

“You think about the mystery behind what I found walking down that hill, and how much more significant it becomes when there’s context like this surrounding it,” Moret says. “This had a whole story behind it, a whole momentum from years earlier and all the happenstance that brought him to this spot.”

* * *

His family knew him so well: handsome and outgoing, generous and strong-willed, with a keen love of music and a flair for dance that inspired talk of a performance career.

And yet, they sometimes regarded him as a stranger: gregarious but secretive, evasive about his personal life and at times detached from even close relatives.

Most people called him Christopher — Chris, for short.

On a warm weekend two months ago in a Wheat Ridge park, where dozens marked his passing with comforting words from a pastor followed by a potluck, family members grieved a vivid but distant memory.

The memorial for Flores came 28 years after his birth and roughly a dozen after his estimated time of death. When DNA tests finally connected his name to remains discovered by the two hikers, it offered the family only faint comfort.

He died less than a year after walking out of his mother’s apartment over the Labor Day weekend in 2001, although for many more years, family members clung to the idea that Chris must be somewhere, alive and well.

“We didn’t want to accept the fact that he was gone,” says Margaret. “It’s torture.”

Relatives say his sudden departure could have stemmed from a conflict over his desire to leave home and pursue a career in show business or modeling. Another key factor, they add, could have been his sexual orientation. Family members believed he was gay but say he seemed to struggle with his

identity.

Meanwhile, the investigation moved slowly across the years, hampered by scant physical evidence, the still-evolving science of DNA identification and, until more recently, the absence of national databases to connect information on unidentified remains with missing-persons cases.

Nationwide, experts estimate that as many as 40,000 sets of unidentified human remains are stored in coroners' and medical examiners' offices or have been cremated before they could be identified. A government report put the annual number of new cases at about 1,000.

After the April memorial, several of Chris' relatives took home small glass vials of his ashes. More have been saved in two larger containers, to be scattered later at some yet-to-be-determined location.

"People say, 'At least you have closure,' " says his aunt, Gloria Sanchez. "But we still don't know what happened to him."

* * *

On the last night that his immediate family would see him alive, 15-year-old Chris Flores displayed his familiar headstrong disdain for authority.

He argued with his mother over wanting to leave home and seek his fortune in New York or California. Meeting her resistance, he announced he would go anyway.

Robert Flores, his older brother by four years, confronted him over his rude and disrespectful attitude.

"Our last encounter was not a good encounter," Robert says. "I was trying to sit down with him as an older brother and talk to him. He was very angry at the time. He didn't like authority, anybody telling him what to do. It escalated, and we got into a fight. It was minor, just pushing and shoving.

"He left the next morning."

It wasn't unusual for Chris to leave for days at a time with no explanation. But when he hadn't returned after a week, the family filed a missing-persons report with Denver police on Sept. 10, 2001.

In a space asking about the missing juvenile's relationship with parents, the report reads: "Poor. Argued over child's sexual orientation."

Family members largely assumed that Chris was gay, although he never confirmed it, even when asked point-blank by his mother. Relatives say they were accepting of him — that, in fact, Chris wouldn't have been the first family member to come out.

Months after his disappearance, Margaret found makeup and women's clothing, plus a video of Chris dancing in both male and female outfits, as she packed his belongings for a move.

But well before that, she had worried about a variety of behaviors that surfaced with his adolescence, and she had taken him for counseling.

"I wanted him to come to grips and find out why he was the way he was," she says. "He was such a good little boy, smart, energetic. But once he turned to that teenage time, it was so different. He was quiet, introverted, didn't want us to know anything about his lifestyle."

Robert, now 32, says he used to tease Chris and often called him "gay" as a generic insult. And while he says he didn't mean the term in a literal sense, he now recognizes the damage he may have caused and regrets that his words might have made his brother's life that much more difficult.

"As I grew older and started to see things, I felt bad saying the things I said," Robert says. "It made him think I wouldn't accept him for who he was."

Home life had always been erratic. Margaret struggled with depression, bipolar disorder and drinking, and moved frequently among subsidized housing units. Chris' father had sporadic involvement in his life.

Chris spent some time living with his half-sister Veronica, 15 years his senior. But when she learned that he had been continually skipping school, she sent him back to live with their mother.

Although Chris never seemed to be at a loss for friends, his family rarely met any of them.

"I was able to talk to him, but his friends were important to him and he was secretive about them," Veronica says. "I thought I was close to him, but I wasn't close enough."

* * *

Shortly after the discovery of unidentified human remains by the two college students, Beth Conour hiked up the steep terrain southwest of the Silver Saddle Motel with deputies and detectives from the Boulder County Sheriff's Office.

Conour, who would later take the married name Buchholtz, represented the coroner's office as a medical investigator, just two months into the job. But with a master's degree in biological anthropology, she had a keen interest in unraveling mysteries such as this — and the short, steep climb up the hillside on Aug. 30, 2002, marked her first John Doe case.

There were few useful clues to either the victim's identity or how he died. Scavenging animals had long since ravaged the site. A pink blanket lay nearby, and although some clothing was found among trash and drug paraphernalia strewn along a 100-foot ravine, there was no evidence that it belonged to the victim.

Conour could tell from her initial look at the remains — the way the ends of certain long bones hadn't yet fused, indicating they were still growing — that this was probably someone under 25.

A thorough mapping of the area revealed no weapons, projectiles or "metallic foreign bodies" that might suggest a violent end. The bones showed no unnatural defects from either cuts or blunt-force trauma. There wasn't enough tissue to test for drugs.

While workers fanned out to search the vicinity, Conour sifted through the soil near the primary concentration of remains and found another strand of evidence: dark hair that appeared to have had the tips dyed blond.

Gradually, a rough profile emerged: a 17- to 20-year-old male of European or possibly Latino background, with height anywhere from 5-foot-3 to 5-foot-9.

Conour sent a bone sample to a DNA lab in Baltimore. At the time, few labs tested for mitochondrial DNA, which is passed on only through the mother and provides for a broad search range. But the Baltimore lab did provide a full nuclear DNA profile, which contains genetic information of both parents, and offers a narrower range of possible matches.

At that time, however, the lab had no access to the Combined DNA Index System, the FBI-facilitated database commonly called CODIS. The DNA profile had nowhere to go to look for a match.

Meanwhile, investigators also took a more conventional tack.

They checked the victim's general profile — including estimates of physical description and the time frame of disappearance — against Colorado Crime Information Center records. The search for males between 15 and 23 with brown hair who had been missing for anywhere from one to five years produced a 3-inch-thick report of more than 700 possibilities.

Filtering the information proved a time-consuming process that stretched over years.

"It just made me more determined — I never gave up on this case," says Buchholtz, now a community service officer for the detective division of the Longmont police. "It's important in any death investigation to have a balance between the science and the emotional part of it. But it's always a person to me. I don't think anyone should die without having a name."

In 2007, five years after the remains were discovered, she and a few others gathered at Sacred Heart of Mary Cemetery in Boulder to bury the still-unidentified bones. For her, the small ceremony represented an emotional setback.

“I didn’t want to give up on this at that point,” she recalls. “It felt like we’d resigned ourselves to the fact that his family may not be found or identified.”

But she also recognized certain practical considerations.

With a second round of DNA testing in 2005 at the FBI lab, a more extensive regimen that included mitochondrial DNA as well as nuclear DNA, there was little more to be done on the scientific front. And the coroner’s office didn’t have enough storage space to keep the remains indefinitely.

So, amid a small gathering at the cemetery and with a few solemn words, they were placed in a cedar box and buried in a shallow grave.

* * *

In 2011, the stalled investigation finally regained some traction.

The Virginia-based National Center for Missing & Exploited Children started tracking the unidentified remains after receiving data from the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System — known as NamUs — that keeps a database of both unidentified remains and missing persons.

NCMEC got in touch with local authorities. Boulder County Coroner Emma Hall made sure the case file was updated to include dental records and other pertinent data. Steve Ainsworth, the Boulder County sheriff’s detective on the case, then arranged for exhumation of the remains so a CT scan could be done on the skull.

With that imagery, NCMEC would obtain a facial reconstruction, an image that could be produced and distributed in hope of spurring identification.

On Sept. 12 of that year, an overcast, drizzly day, the exhumation began with workers stabbing the unmarked ground to one side of a headstone, where records indicated the remains had been buried.

But as the excavators found the ground unyielding after just a few inches, they concluded that the spot hadn’t been disturbed for many years. They tried the other side of the headstone and found looser soil.

Less than 3 feet down, their shovels probed the edge of a rectangular box cobbled together from

cedar-fence slats. Within the deteriorating wood, the remains were wrapped in cloth.

Later, Ainsworth turned the skull over to Longmont United Hospital, which performed the CT scan from which the facial reconstruction would be made.

Although the portrait bore little resemblance to Chris Flores, it wouldn't matter. A decade after the remains had first been discovered and tested, the DNA inquiry was about to make a giant leap forward.

* * *

As weeks, months and years passed, with no word from Chris, Robert Flores chose to believe that his little brother had simply followed his passion in the single-minded way that was his trademark.

Chris had said that his big ambition was to become a backup dancer for Janet Jackson.

"I thought he was in California," Robert says. "I thought he was working on his dream. At times, I'd sit and wonder where my brother is, and all I'd say is I hope he's OK, and I'd picture him dancing in a studio, working on his craft with a big smile on his face."

For 10 years, the family dealt with Chris' absence with a combination of sadness, denial and hope. The juvenile-runaway case that was opened in September 2001 automatically closed in November 2003, when Chris would have turned 18.

"It seemed like a dead end," recalls Veronica, Chris' older half-sister. "My mother wasn't capable of moving forward anymore. She was just lost. She had a lot of health issues. She was depressed because Chris was gone and didn't know how to pursue any of it."

But in 2008, Margaret Sanchez called the NCMEC, which opened a missing-persons case with the information she had available. Then the organization lost contact with her.

Three years later, NCMEC reconnected with the family through Veronica and, in the process of updating biometric information, put her in touch with Denver police so the family could submit DNA samples.

The organization, which already was pursuing an identity for the Boulder remains, now independently was trying to determine what had happened to Chris Flores.

Veronica, Robert and Margaret submitted swabs from the inside of their cheeks to Denver police. The DNA profiles were uploaded to CODIS, the FBI database, in December 2012.

None of them had any idea at the time that they had wiggled the final piece of the scientific puzzle into place.

A month later, the family's DNA profiles produced two "cold hits" — unexpected matches that finally connected the dots between the remains found above Boulder and the young man who had gone missing.

Ainsworth, the Boulder County sheriff's detective, delivered the news to Veronica, who passed it along to the rest of the family. They wondered how the case could be reopened to solve the lingering mystery of how Chris died.

Ainsworth told them he would need a reason, something compelling to suggest that there may have been foul play involved.

So far, no such evidence has emerged.

* * *

Sadness mingled with curiosity as Margaret and Veronica stood where Chris' remains had been found, absorbing the moment and intermittently tossing questions at Buchholtz.

How far had the remains been spread? Could he have fallen? Could a sleeping bag found near the site have been his?

She answered them as best she could, recalling an investigation that had little more to work with than bone.

For Margaret and Veronica, the hike helped fill a void, but it also shifted the women's focus to all they still don't know. How did Chris get here? Who was with him? How did he die?

"He was adventurous, but he wasn't a loner," Veronica says. "He always had friends. What I come up with is: Something happened up here."

Emotion overcame them in waves. Veronica finally felt what she described as the "spinning" in her heart and stomach subside. Margaret listened to the high-pitched birds and tried to imagine what Chris had thought as he heard the same sounds.

The women sat on a large boulder, cried and prayed.

Veronica knelt by the gentle flow of water, cupped her hand and raised it to her lips. She emptied her plastic bottle and refilled it from the stream, noting that later she would plant something in Chris'

memory and use the water to nourish it.

On the hike out, Buchholtz helped the women stack rocks into a cairn, to mark where they should descend from the ridgeline if they ever want to find their way back to the site. And they said they would indeed return, with other relatives who sought what they had found — something short of resolution, but oddly life-affirming.

Veronica picked up a heart-shaped rock and added it to the cairn. The stone, she said, seemed like a sign from Chris.

Kevin Simpson: 303-954-1739, ksimpson@denverpost.com or twitter.com/ksimpsondp

Do you know anything about this case?

Anyone with information about the death of Chris Flores, who would have been 15 or 16 years old when he died and whose remains were found just above Boulder in 2002, can call Boulder County sheriff’s detective Steve Ainsworth at 303-441-3627 or e-mail him at sainsworth@bouldercounty.org. They can also contact Northern Colorado Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-8477.

- Policies
- Report an Error
- Contact Us
- Submit a News Tip



Kevin Simpson | General Assignment
Reporter

Kevin Simpson was a reporter at The Denver Post until 2018.

ksimpson@denverpost.com

[Follow Kevin Simpson @ksimpsonDP](#)

SPONSORED LINKS

She Was A Legendary Actress - Now She Works 9 To 5

The Delite

68 Hollywood Stars Who Look Unrecognizable Now

Post Fun

[Pics] Missing Child Finally Found 2 Years Later In A Hole In

Maternity Week

30 Odd Facts About "Hogans Heroes" You Didn't Know

Past Factory

[Photos] Historians Found Disturbing Photos During The

Studentsea

Do this Immediately if You Have Enlarged Prostatic (Watch)

healthtrend.live

[Pics] This Is Where Chris Cuomo Lives With His Partner

Gloriousa

[Photos] "Waltons" Actress Says Scandal Ended Her Career

Past Factory

Sponsored

Mansion Global

3/5

Recommended by  Outbrain |

Read More

MORE FROM DENVER POST



Mike Pence reportedly in Vail Valley for the holidays

Ask Amy: Parents always name-check race

Broncos game balls and gassers: Jerry Jeudy drops...

SPONSORED LINKS

Five Guys Is Closing For Good In 2021

[Pics] Remember This WWE Star? Wait

Celebrities Who Passed Away In 2020

This transparent protective mask

- The Delite
- Ocean Draw
- ALOT Living
- CleanShield



MORE IN NEWS

Followed by a staffer, Senate Majority ...

Trump’s \$2,000 checks stall in Senate as GOP blocks vote

Bill legalizing abortion passed in Pop

Ask an Expert Online 24/7 - Get an Answer ASAP®

Questions Answered Every 9 Seconds. Get Tech Answers Online & Save Time! justanswer.com/Justanswer/Help

Member Services News Alerts

Subscribe Become a Member / Subscribe Place a Hold Digital Replica Edition Denver Post Store

Classifieds Autos Real Estate Jobs Today’s Ads Weekly Ads Daily Ads

Contact Us [Submit a News Tip](#) [Member Services](#) [Advertise With Us](#) [MNG Network Advertising](#) [C](#)
[Place an Obituary](#)

Today’s Front Page [Back Issues](#) [Archives](#) [Mobile Apps](#)

[Copyright © 2020 MediaNews Group, Inc.](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)
[Terms of Use](#)
[Cookie Policy](#)
[Arbitration](#)
[Site Map](#)
[Ethics Policy](#)
[Powered by WordPress.com VIP](#)