

Piece by Piece: Murder victim's remains identified more than 40 years later



More than 40 years after a murder victim's remains are found in Cape Girardeau County, a family in Texas can finally grieve and say goodbye.

By [Kathy Sweeney](#)

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CAPE GIRARDEAU COUNTY, Mo. (KFVS) - More than 40 years after a murder victim's remains are found in Cape Girardeau County, a family in Texas can finally grieve and say goodbye.

The story is not a murder mystery.

The family of 26-year-old Everette Guy Travis knew he was killed back in 1977.

The man convicted of killing Travis died in prison years ago, but they never knew what really happened to him - until now.

It took skill, luck and a southeast Missouri college professor working alongside her students to find the answers, piece by piece.

On September 1 at 10 a.m., Cape Girardeau County investigators called retired Texas doctor Jim Travis to tell him they positively identified the remains of his brother.

"Hello. Travis here."

"Hey, Mr. Travis. This is Lieutenant Sikes with the Cape Girardeau County Sheriff's Office. How are you doing this morning, sir?"

It's a story Travis has waited more than half his life to hear.

"Well, it's been an adventure in forgiveness for me," Travis said during a Zoom call from his home outside of Dallas. "And healing for me. And reconciliation. And reuniting."

Travis' older brother, Everette Guy Travis, went by his middle name, Guy.

He disappeared from a stretch of I-55 south of Blytheville back in June 1977.

An Arkansas jury convicted Kenneth Derring in Travis' murder, but his body was never found.

"It was hard," Jim Travis said. "I didn't grieve. I didn't know I needed to grieve. Much less how to."

Now, this phone call would finally lay out all the pieces to a puzzle Travis never expected to hear solved.

The story begins with an unexpected discovery near the Oak Ridge exit on Interstate 55.

"Our officers received a report in April of 1981 of a mushroom hunter finding some skeletal remains," Chief Deputy Eric Friedrich told Travis during the phone call.



Human remains discovered by mushroom hunter Bill King in Cape Girardeau County along I-55 on April 6, 1981.(Cape Girardeau County Sheriff's Office)

"We love mushrooms," Bill King recalled when we asked him about the discovery. "And I hunted like when I would get off work."

King had his own special mushroom hunting spot back in the spring of '81.

"It's close right there to the road, you know. I'd just walk into the woods. See if I could find myself some mushrooms."

On the afternoon of April 6, 1981, King was hunting for mushrooms when he saw a pair of jeans in the dirt.



Human remains discovered by mushroom hunter Bill King in Cape Girardeau County along I-55 on April 6, 1981 .(Cape Girardeau County Sheriff's Office)

"And then I saw where his shoes...there was white in between the jeans and the shoes," he said.

The mushroom hunter had stumbled upon human remains.

"And I called the sheriff's office. And they said, 'You stay there until we get there.'"

"They also found, the next day, two .32 caliber slugs," Friedrich told Dr. Travis during the phone call.

"Yeah," retired Chief Deputy David James added. "That was Chief Deputy Doc Coombs."

"Doesn't take a rocket science to figure this one out," Doc Coombs said. "The man was murdered."

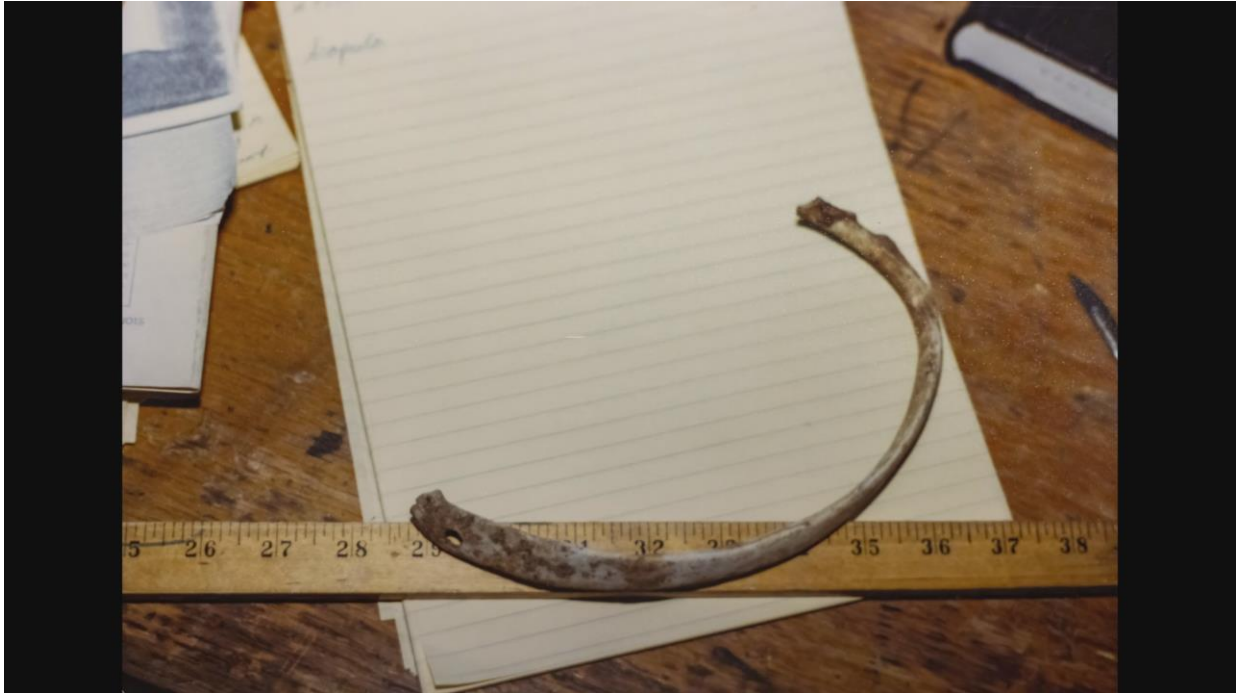


Photo of rib bone showing bullet hole.(Cape Girardeau County Sheriff's Office)
But looking back, Coombs said that's really all they knew.

"But here, I've got nothing. I don't know the suspect. I don't know the victim. And I have no clue, method, opportunity or motive. Any of that. I have nothing."

Coombs left the case behind when he took another law enforcement job just a month later.

"I had always wondered, you know, what happened with the case," he said.

Jump ahead to the spring of 1988.

"April is a good time for mushrooms."

On April 13, 1988, Bill King found himself back at his favorite hunting spot. And calling the sheriff again. He'd found a human skull.

"It was just laying there. It had washed down, oh, 30-40 feet below on down the ditch from where the body was," he said.

A one-page report described King's unlikely second discovery, but that's where the paper trail seems to end.

Retired Chief Deputy David James explained to Dr Travis how the case got back onto his radar in 2008 with a surprising question from none other than Doc Coombs.

"He called me and asked me 'whatever happened to that rib bone that had the hole in it?' And I said, 'what rib bone?'"

"I gave him the details of the case," Coombs recalled.

"So I sent my detectives hunting for the missing bones," James said.

Detectives Eric Friederich and Travis Sikes started at the SEMO crime lab.

They learned the remains found in 1981 and 1988 belonged to the same man and got sent to the Anthropology Department at Southeast Missouri State University.

At that time, the department was located in the Art Building on campus.

"And we got lucky," Friedrich said. "And we found the remains in a cardboard box in the top shelf. In a closet."

But their luck would end when an FBI analysis of the remains got a mitochondrial DNA sample, but no match in the National Missing Persons Database.

The unidentified bones remained at the sheriff's office for another 12 years.

Also involved in the call to Dr. Travis was Southeast Missouri State Anthropology Professor Dr. Jennifer Bengtson.

"I primarily consider myself a teacher, right?" Dr. Bengtson explained during a visit to her classroom. "That's what my job is here at the university. So, I only really work on cases where law enforcement agrees to allow me to have my students assist."

In the spring of 2020, investigators gave her the remains in the hope she and her student might be able to piece together the clues leading to an identification.

"We had quite a bit of the skeleton that was present," recalled former Southeast student Meghan Cook. "So that is surprising given that they were found outdoors."

While Cook worked on a bio-profile of the remains, Amanda Milbrandt looked for the best options for another DNA extraction.

"There is part of your skull. It's right where your ear is," Milbrandt explained. "Your inner ear. There is a very dense bone called the petrous bone. And that was very successful in DNA extraction in past cases."

Ultimately, Dr. Bengtson homed in on that petrous bone.

In March 2022, she asked the sheriff's office for permission to send the skull to Othram, a forensic genomics company out of Texas.

"And it was like, what do we have to lose at this point?" Friedrich recalled. "Let's just go for it."

In late July, Othram got a successful DNA extraction.

Less than a month later, they had a match.

"It was probably one of the happiest days of my life, getting that news from them," Bengtson said.

They also had a brother's name - Dr. James Travis.

Detective Lieutenant Travis Sikes tracked him down.

"So, I got back ahold of Dr. Bengtson. And she sent me some brief information on what her and her students had found. And the gentleman's name who we believed the brother was."

"Soon as I saw the caller ID for a sheriff in Missouri, I knew exactly what it was," Dr. Jim Travis said. "Even after 45 years and giving up hope. I just knew."

45 years after the murder of Texas native Guy Travis, his brother Jim learned the crime happened in Cape Girardeau County and not Arkansas where the 26 year old disappeared.

"I was shocked," Jim recalled of getting the news. "I wouldn't say surprised. I was not expecting it."

"To bring a case, especially a case this old, to conclusion is very, very, very rare," Cape Girardeau County Sheriff Ruth Ann Dickerson said. "And it's a very proud moment for our department."

Travis himself even played a role in the case without realizing it.

Several years ago, he researched his own DNA and allowed it to be uploaded into a genealogy research database called GEDmatch.

"People have asked me if I was thinking about maybe it would help identify my brother's remains. I don't remember thinking about that. May have been in the back of my mind somewhere. But I did upload it. And if I didn't, we wouldn't be having this conversation today," Dr. Travis said.

Jim said he and Guy grew up in Texas, their childhood memories captured on an 8mm camera.



Guy, Jim, Mary Ellen and Everette Travis.(Dr. Jim Travis)

Guy graduated from Texas A&M with a math degree.

But it's an incident in college that would change the course of his life.

"He had been kind of an alcoholic in college," Jim said of Guy. "And his fellows thought he was being obnoxious one time and locked him in his room."

Guy went out a third-floor window and woke up on the ground.

"He said, 'I'd better get right with Jesus,'" Jim recalled. "And he started helping people along the side of the road. Witness to them about Jesus."

Guy was learning to be a mechanic at a vo-tech school near Blytheville in the summer of 1977 when witnesses saw him stop along the side of the road to help a man later identified as Kenneth Derring.

"And Guy stopped to pick him up as was his way. We all talked to him. And cautioned him. And said this might not end well for you."

Investigators at the time believed Derring killed Guy in Arkansas, then dumped his body in the Mississippi River.

"It was hard to have closure because there was no body. There was no funeral, you know."

But now, the identification of Guy Travis' remains shines a whole new light on his murder.

Former Cape Girardeau County Chief Deputy Doc Coombs found the two .32 caliber slugs beneath his body, proving Travis had been killed in the woods off I-55.

"I remember thinking what circumstances were around this poor man being shot to death in the woods in Cape County? How did he get there?"

Local investigators dug back into the Travis case, and learned Kenneth Derring was actually arrested in Sikeston, trying to sell Guy's 1972 Dodge Dart.

"And this is adding up. this is close to home because it's Sikeston, you know," Detective Sikes said. "Not only did he get caught with Mr. Travis' vehicle that he was driving that morning that he was disappeared, but he was also in possession of a .32 caliber revolver."

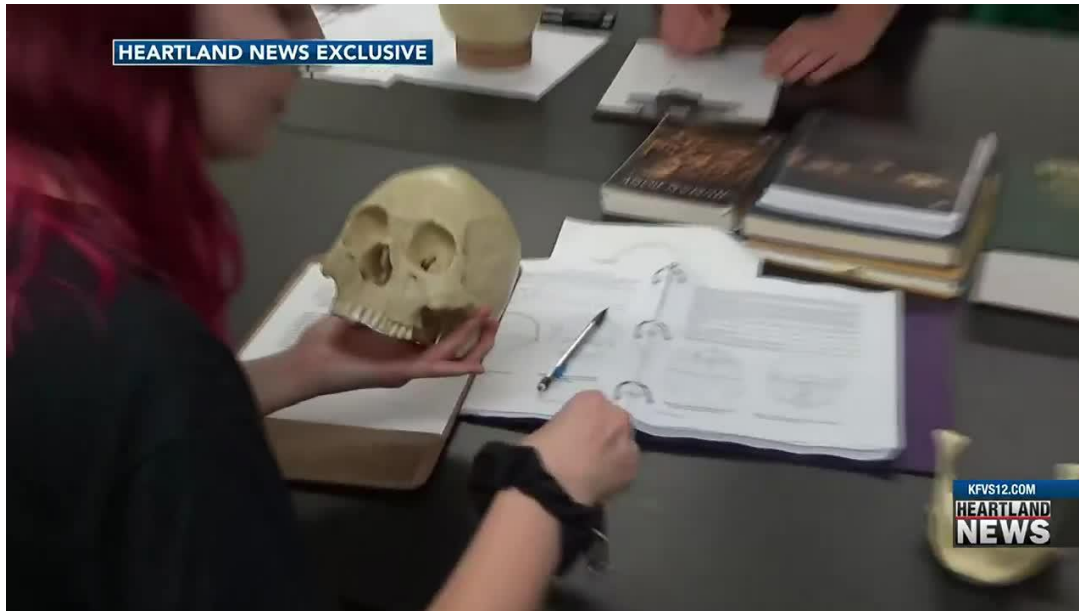
We asked if he ever wondered after all these years who that might have been.

"Many times. Many times," he responded.

Now that mushroom hunter Bill King knows he found Guy Travis' remains, he wanted to meet Guy's brother Jim. The retired doctor made that happen over Facetime.

“Kathy called me the other day and wanted to know if I’d talk to her about this,” Bill told Jim. “And I kind of hesitated. And my wife said, ‘yes you will.’ So, we’re talking to each other now. And I’m glad we are.”

“Well, I’m sure glad to get him back,” Jim told Bill. “And I appreciate your help.”



More than 40 years after a murder victim’s remains are found in Cape Girardeau County, a family in Texas can finally grieve and say goodbye.

Back at Southeast Missouri State’s Anthropology Department, Dr. Jennifer Bengtson called Guy Travis’ identification the reason why she and her students give so much of their own time.

“They volunteer their time to work on these cases,” Bengtson said of her students. “I work cases outside of my teaching responsibilities at the university. Because we want to do this work for families.”

“It’s like a sense of relief, but not for me personally,” Meghan Cook said. “A sense of relief for them that they have answers now that they didn’t have before.”

“I did cry a little bit,” Amanda Milbrandt recalled. “It was a full circle moment. Very rewarding.”

Bengtson said they actually come up with a nickname for each set of remains. Little did she know in this case, she seemed to know his name from the start.

"So, I was just calling him 'Our Guy,' you know, 'Our Guy.' It's time to work on 'Our Guy.' A lot of the cases that we work on are outside of Cape Girardeau County. So that might be why I was calling him 'Our Guy' because our county, our guy."

Jim now considers everyone here Guy's extended family, from the man who found him to the investigators who worked his case, to the professor who helped identify him.

"Well, it's been an adventure in forgiveness for me. And healing for me. And reconciliation. And reuniting."

Dr. Travis recently traveled to Cape Girardeau County to personally escort his brother's remains back to Texas. He also wanted to meet all the people responsible helping bring his brother back home.

We'll share that update with you on Friday, October 28 on Heartland News at 6.

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