

Remains of 1976 New Orleans murder victim Mary Ann Perez have been recovered, DNA test shows

Case was profiled in 1991 by popular true crime TV show 'Unsolved Mysteries'

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Mary Ann Perez

The results of a DNA test have confirmed that skeletal remains recovered in rural Alabama in late 1976 belonged to a St. Bernard

Parish woman who had been missing since she was murdered earlier that year, authorities said Tuesday.

The University of North Texas' Center for Human Identification compared genetic data from the remains found in Mobile County, Alabama, to a biological sample provided within the last year by the daughter of Mary Ann Perez, who hadn't been seen alive for decades.

Mobile County Sheriff's Office Detective J.T. Thornton, who led the investigation, said he was alerted Monday that the test results showed the remains were those of Perez.

That conclusion not only closed a 42-year-old cold case. It also revived the possibility that a man who claimed responsibility for Perez's murder could be charged with her slaying. The man, David Courtney, is serving a life sentence in Kansas in connection with an unrelated killing.

Thornton said he will forward information about Perez's case to authorities in both Alabama and Orleans Parish. Investigators believe Perez was slain in New Orleans, and authorities here could attempt to prosecute Courtney for her murder.

New Orleans Parish District Attorney Leon Cannizzaro's office on Tuesday said it had not been notified of anything regarding Courtney. New Orleans police didn't immediately comment.

Perez's son, Byron, declined to discuss his mother's case Tuesday.

Thornton said he was experiencing mixed emotions about the outcome of an investigation he was mainly responsible for solving.

"There's sadness because this was someone's mother and daughter," Thornton said. "But there's also jubilation because you can get her family some closure."

According to media accounts, Perez was having car trouble outside a New Orleans East lounge on March 26, 1976. She was spotted by Courtney as he was on his way to pick up his wife, Donna Courtney, from a Pizza Hut on Chef Menteur Highway where she worked.



Has body of N.O. woman murdered 41 years ago finally been found? Officials think so

David Courtney, then 35, convinced Perez to let him and his 36-year-old wife take her to Perez's home in Poydras, a community in St. Bernard. Yet Perez, 34, ended up instead at the Courtneys' mobile home, and the couple then began driving her toward St. Tammany Parish, with each making sexual advances that Perez rebuffed, police later told The Times-Picayune.

Eventually, somewhere on the way to St. Tammany, David Courtney strangled Perez with a coat hanger, investigators said. The Courtneys then allegedly dumped her body somewhere in Alabama without knowing exactly where they were.

The Courtneys later pleaded guilty to a killing in Wichita, Kansas, in 1980. Kansas officials said both confessed to also killing two people in Houston as well as one in or near New Orleans.

The circumstances of the alleged New Orleans killing matched Perez's disappearance. A now-retired New Orleans detective named Robert Lambert tried to secure charges against the Courtneys, but prosecutors were unwilling to go ahead without Perez's body.

A little more than a year ago, Thornton took a fresh look at the case of some unidentified skeletal human remains that had been

discovered in a cornfield in Grand Bay, Alabama, in late November 1976.

He quickly began to suspect that the remains may have belonged to Perez, whose case was profiled in the true-crime television show “Unsolved Mysteries” in 1991.

Thornton reached out to Perez’s family and learned she had suffered head and teeth injuries that matched some on the remains, among other things. She also had earrings as well as a coat that matched items found with the remains, which ended up in storage in an Oklahoma warehouse, according to documents released by the Mobile County Sheriff’s Office.

Perez’s daughter later provided the DNA sample that testing linked to the remains. The University of North Texas handled the comparison through a federally funded program known as NamUS, or the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System.

Lambert said he was relieved to learn of the key DNA match. He credited Thornton for closing a tough case that had weighed on the retired detective as well as Perez’s family.

Donna Courtney died shortly after being paroled in 1990. David Courtney, 74, remains in prison in Kansas.