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COMIC-CON COVERAGE



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Comic-Con 2015 is officially here. It's the largest event of its kind on the planet, attracting more than 130,000 people to downtown San Diego. Don't miss our continuing coverage.

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DNA hit solves 1992 murder-mystery

The remains of Jovita Collazo of National City were found near Apple Valley and recently Id'd

(/staff/pauline-repard/) By Pauline Repard (/staff/pauline-repard/) | 5:06 p.m. July 7, 2015



NATIONAL CITY — Twenty-three years after a National City woman disappeared from her apartment and two years after her boyfriend admitted killing her, Jovita Collazo's remains have been identified.



"I didn't even think I would see the day," her husband, Michael Collazo, said in a telephone interview from his home in Washington on Tuesday. "I'm in shock, with a little bit of relief. I've



Events surrounding Jovita Collazo's death spanned more than two



decades and included good and bad police work, a North Carolina prison escape, developing science and some dumb luck.

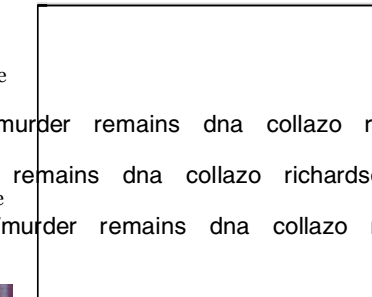


"It was fate," suggested National City police Sgt. David Bavencoff. "It was really timing."

He said he returned from vacation one day in 2010 to find a stack of newspapers, cold homicide cases and missing persons files on his desk. He read the papers, including news that Michael Eugene Richardson of Chula Vista was charged with murdering his wife and mother-in-law.

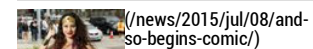


Jovita Collazo



richardson/all/?#)

TOP STORIES



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No more showers at state beaches



Michael Richardson, left, pleaded guilty to three murders in Superior Court on Monday. He is shown here with Deputy Public Defender Richard Gates during victim impact statements. — K.C. Alfred

Then Bavencoff grabbed a missing person's file on Jovita Collazo, who was 38 when she disappeared from her apartment on May 1, 1992.

Her husband, now 57, said at that time, he and his wife had been separated but were renewing their relationship and even planning to leave San Diego County together. He said she was doing laundry at his apartment one evening, returned to her own place to get something, and never returned. Their daughter was with him at his home.

The next day he reported Collazo missing and fetched his daughter's belongings from the apartment his wife and Richardson had shared.

He said police first viewed him as a suspect in Collazo's disappearance, and never looked into Richardson's background.

"I eventually gave up," he said. "No one was doing anything."

He later learned that in 1975 Richardson was convicted of robbery after shooting a cabdriver in North Carolina. He got a 30-year sentence, but after six years he escaped from an inmate road crew. It isn't clear when he reached San Diego County.

Bavencoff said he was surprised that he'd never seen the Collazo case before. He found out later it had been deleted accidentally from a missing person's database in 2008. He was also surprised to read that Collazo's boyfriend was Richardson.

"We opened the case," Bavencoff recalled. "We had never had DNA samples before, so I coordinated with the DA's office to bring Mr. Collazo and their daughter in and I got (DNA) swabs."

He submitted the swabs for testing, a process that often takes years to produce a result.

Meanwhile, in 2011, then-Deputy District Attorney Enrique Camarena (now a Superior Court judge) charged Richardson with Collazo's murder. He had no evidence of her body or a cause of death, but built a circumstantial case.

"We tore apart his apartment and searched for blood, but we never found anything," National City police Lt. Robert Rounds said Tuesday.

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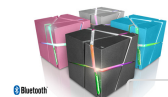
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Richardson also faced murder charges in the death of his wife, Thao Richardson, and her mother, Than Yi. Their bodies were found in the wreckage of their car at the bottom of a Lakeside ravine on June 29, 2010. Autopsies showed, however, that his wife's throat had been cut and his mother-in-law appeared to have died of strangling or smothering.

Richardson pleaded guilty to all three murders in 2013 to avoid the death penalty, and was sentenced to six consecutive life sentences. He is currently housed in Centinela state prison in Imperial County. He never told authorities how or why he killed Collazo.

Michael Collazo said he thinks the motive was that his wife was going to leave Richardson and possibly reveal that Richardson had been molesting Collazo's daughter. He also had been charged with statutory rape on his own wife's teenage niece, but those charges were dropped in the plea agreement.

"He lived on the run for 20 years," Michael Collazo said. "Who knows what else this guy has done? I think he's got other bodies out there in the desert. He never gave up what he did with my wife's body."

The DNA samples from him and his daughter served to ultimately answer that question.

On Oct. 31, 1994 -- 18 months after Collazo disappeared -- a rock hunter from Victorville found a skeleton in a shallow grave in Apple Valley, two and a half miles off Interstate 15 and Stoddard Wells Road. It was open desert and scrub back then.

The San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department unit assigned solely to investigate bodies buried in the desert could find no leads to identify the skeleton, Rounds said. DNA was fledgling science at that time, and not widely used in police work. The remains were buried in a county cemetery.

Then in 2006, the unit started exhuming all the "John Doe and Jane Doe" bodies to take DNA samples. They got around to the Apple Valley skeleton in 2008. But there was no DNA in the computer system to match with it until Bavencoff submitted the family samples in 2010.

It took five more years for the match to be confirmed.

San Bernardino sheriff's investigators contacted Bavencoff at the end of June with the news. Bavencoff tracked down Michael Collazo to tell him.

"You could have knocked me over with a feather," Michael Collazo said. "I'm a little happy now that he didn't get away with it. But I'm going to go to my grave angry over it." "All those years of wondering," he said. "At least we know, now."



(/staff/pauline-repard/)

Pauline Repard (

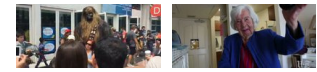
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