

Police ID woman found in Bensalem lot 30 years ago. Now they want to find the Warminster woman's killer.

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Nearly 30 years after she disappeared, the woman whose body was found wrapped in plastic and buried in a shallow grave behind a popular 24-hour diner has a name again.

Now Bensalem police want to find out who killed Merrybeth Hodgkinson, a 31-year-old single mother of two who grew up in Bucks County and once danced at Lower Bucks strip clubs.

"They're cold cases, not closed cases," Bensalem Director of Public Safety Fred Harran said Tuesday at a news conference announcing the breakthrough. "People don't wrap themselves up in plastic and wind up behind a diner."

The Bensalem detective overseeing the case believes he has identified a person of interest who may have information. When asked if the killer could be tied to other murders of women in Bensalem around that time, McMullin said authorities are investigating.

"That individual is what I would call a person of interest," said Detective Chris McMullin said.



The identity of the woman known as Clubhouse Jane Doe was solved last month after her DNA profile was uploaded into an international database to build a genetic family tree.

Earlier this month, a DNA match with a living sibling confirmed the remains are Hodgkinson, who was last seen alive in 1992, Bensalem police said. It was the second time in less than a year that the department successfully used genetic matching technology for a Jane Doe case.

Clubhouse Jane Doe's body found

Children playing in a wooded area near the Clubhouse Diner off Street Road near Knights Road found the remains on Sept. 18, 1995.

The decomposed body of a naked woman was inside clear, heavy-gauge plastic wrap. Several pieces of clothing, two crucifixes and a wood beaded massage cushion were found buried nearby. No identification was found.

McMullin confirmed Tuesday police are working to check for other DNA on the items discovered near Hodgkinson's body.





Forensic experts estimated Jane Doe had been dead two to three years, according to police reports at the time.

She was described as white with olive skin, probably between 35 and 45 years old, and petite. She had given birth at least once. Her jaw was square and she had wide set brown eyes.

An autopsy found the cause of death was undetermined but strangulation suspected, police said. The manner of death was ruled a homicide.

The body did not fit the description of any reported missing persons in the area at the time and the investigation quickly went cold.

The Bucks County Coroner's Office quietly buried the remains in a plot at Trinity Cemetery in Telford. A marker listed the date she was found and the name "Unknown Jane Doe."

The case file gathered dust until it caught the eye of McMullin in 2002, when he reopened a handful of cold cases in the department. He was a Bensalem patrolman in 1995 when the Clubhouse Diner body was found.

"I was dissatisfied with the original investigation," McMullin said in a recent interview. "I felt a lot more can be done."



Identifying Clubhouse Jane Doe

The Clubhouse Diner case was one that he posted on various unsolved crime websites hoping to generate new leads.

In 2004, the Doe Network, an all-volunteer group that works with law enforcement to solve cold cases, contacted McMullin with an offer to make a three-dimensional sculpture of the Clubhouse Jane Doe.

The crime-solving tool was one the department used a decade earlier when it hired renowned forensic sculptor Frank Bender to create a clay bust of an

unidentified pregnant woman whose remains were found in January 1988 on the grounds of an abandoned whiskey distillery.

McMullin obtained a court order to exhume the Clubhouse Jane Doe remains. The finished clay bust was unveiled at a news conference in June 2004 and later detailed facial portraits were also released to the public.



But it didn't generate any solid new leads.

The Clubhouse Jane Doe bust was eventually dismantled and Bensalem police stored her remains in its evidence facility.

A few years later Bensalem received a grant as part of a new federal DNA Initiative program to extract genetic material from the bones of the 1988 Jane Doe case. The DNA profile would be uploaded it into CODIS, the national computerized DNA indexing system used by law enforcement.

McMullin included bones from the Clubhouse Jane Doe case.

The next big development happened after Bensalem pursued advanced genetic testing and profiling technology for the 1988 Doe case and uploaded the results into GEDMatch and FamilytreeDNA.com, public websites built for genealogy research that uses data files from different DNA testing companies.

The effort was a success.

Earlier this year, Bensalem announced Publicker Jane Doe was identified as Lisa Todd, a 17-year-old pregnant Philadelphia girl who disappeared in October 1985. Her death has been labeled as suspicious, though the cause and manner remains undetermined.

With the success in the Todd case, Bensalem authorized its private forensic testing lab, Bode Technology, to work on a genealogical profile for the Clubhouse Diner Doe case, McMullin said.

Last month, Bode identified three DNA matches, but they were distant relatives and all lived abroad, two in the United Kingdom and one in Italy.

Shortly after McMullin got the Bode report, the Vidocq Society, a members-only crime solving club in Philadelphia, held a training on deviant sex killers.

McMullin is a Vidocq member, as is Jennifer Moore, CEO of Innovative Forensic Investigations in Virginia and a DNA genealogy expert, who was in town for the training. After hearing about the Clubhouse Diner case, Moore offered to assist police with additional genealogical research.

Less than a week later, she found a name — Merrybeth Hodgkinson — and a list of potential family members.



"Anybody who knew her please call us"

With a solid lead, McMullin reached out to Hodgkinson's siblings. He soon learned that Hodgkinson was one of eight children who grew up in Warminster. She graduated from William Tennent High School in 1979.

She worked as a dancer in the local strip club circuit, including the Oakford Inn off Old Lincoln Highway in Trevose, now known as Scruples. She lived in a rent-by-the-week motel in Bensalem, but also rented a room over the Oakford Inn, police said. She also had an apartment in northeast Philadelphia.

Family members last saw her alive in September 1992, according to Bensalem police.

The siblings said Hodgkinson was reported missing to Warminster and Philadelphia police, but McMullin said he found no missing person report entered into the national database law enforcement uses.

Her family had her legally declared dead in 2006, McMullin said.

With Hodgkinson's remains identified, McMullin hopes new attention to the cold case will generate leads from people who knew her, or were familiar with the local strip club scene around the time of her disappearance.

"Anybody who knew her please call us. We want to find out what was going on in her life during the time she disappeared," the detective said. "Who was in her life at the time she disappeared. Aside from her family, there has to be other people also wondering where she was at."

Hodgkinson's death falls within the same time frame as a nearly identical 1992 murder in Bensalem.

Toshiko Ciaccio, 42, a Japanese immigrant and exotic dancer, was found naked and wrapped in clear plastic and carpet near the development where she lived on Sept. 27, 1992. She had been bludgeoned and strangled, police said.

Bensalem resident William "Wild Bill" Montgomery was arrested in 1994 for the murder of Ciaccio and Philadelphia resident Amy Moore, 25, whose beaten body was found wrapped in a camper awning near the Delaware River in August, 1993.

In 2001, Montgomery pleaded guilty to both murders and he was sentenced to two life sentences, which he is serving at the State Correctional Institute in Somerset County, about 75 miles southeast of Pittsburgh.

McMullin said he suspects that Montgomery may have information related to Hodgkinson's death.

"I'm very confident," he said in an interview.

For now, the detective said he is relieved that one mystery surrounding the case has been solved.



BUCKS COUNTY JANE DOE



Crucifixes found with the victim



T-shirt found with the victim

Bucks County Jane Doe was discovered in a wooded area behind the Clubhouse Diner in Bensalem, PA on September 18, 1995



Forensic sculpture made from decedent's skull

"I'm very happy that technology and investigation has gotten us this far," McMullin added. "When we exhumed her body, she had a grave marker that said, 'Unknown Jane Doe.' Now when she is returned to her family, they can give her a proper burial."