

Collier County Sheriff's Office

· Follow

January 12 at 1:35 PM ·

Deceased Hiker Identified

Today, Sheriff Kevin Rambosk is pleased to announce that after more than two years, thanks to the great work of our detectives, tips from the public and the use of DNA technology, we now know the identity of the deceased hiker who went by the trail name Mostly Harmless. Although an autopsy did not indicate foul play in his death, our detectives worked tirelessly to identify him.

On July 23, 2018, two hikers stumbled upon the body of a man at a small campsite deep within Big Cypress National Preserve. The man had no identification, phone or computer with him and our exhaustive efforts to identify him through traditional means were unsuccessful. Today we know that Mostly Harmless was a man by the name of Vance Rodriguez, an IT worker in New York with roots in Louisiana.

Through our investigation we learned that Mr. Rodriguez set out to hike the Appalachian Trail in 2017. He spent several months hiking south, toward Florida using only paper maps. He was friendly with other thru hikers, but also reserved. No one we interviewed knew his real name even after spending time with him on the trail, sharing stories and snapping photos of him.

Mr. Rodriguez had reached Southwest Florida by April of 2018, which was the last time a witness reported seeing him on the trail. A few months later, his body and his belongings were found in a tent at Noble's Camp Ground in Ochopee, near mile marker 63 of Interstate 75.

We began our investigation with traditional means, combing missing persons databases for matching fingerprints or dental records. Later that summer, the agency posted a composite photo to Facebook. Within minutes, fellow thru hikers had sent dozens of photos of Mostly Harmless and reported meeting him along the trail.

We interviewed the hikers, pieced together a timeline and looked into dozens of tips submitted by members of the public.

This past year, our agency partnered with Othram, a DNA lab in Texas that works exclusively with law enforcement to solve cold cases through forensic genealogy.

But the case was ultimately solved this month when a former coworker of Mr. Rodriguez saw his photo online and reached out to us after seeing a 2019 bulletin our agency issued. The coworker provided us with Mr. Rodriguez' name and photos. We enlisted the help of the Lafayette Parish County Sheriff's Office, which made contact with his family. The family then agreed to provide a DNA sample for comparison. Othram has made a positive identification based on that DNA.

We are glad to have solved this case. And we want to thank the community for their interest and for circulating the information that eventually reached the right person.