

ST. PETERSBURG — In 1996, Stewart Fletcher Currin mailed me a letter.

The contents, a mixture of satirical wit and a persecution complex, could only have come from my childhood best friend, lonely and schizophrenic and railing against society.

The only son of deceased parents, Fletcher had drifted between St. Petersburg and North Carolina, between a psychiatric hospital and a homeless shelter and the street.

We kept in touch until 1999, when the letters stopped.

As I detailed in a *Times* story in March, I had been searching for him ever since, first in the faces of strangers in crowds, then in dead-end trails of records, then, inevitably, in online composites of unidentified corpses.

I couldn't look past body 99-1145. The man was found dead at a St. Petersburg bus shelter on Oct. 5, 1999. Fletcher was last seen five days earlier, 5 miles away, sleeping on a bus bench.

I presented my research to officials at the Pinellas-Pasco Medical Examiner's Office, who took an unusual step and showed me actual photos of the dead man. I thought that would bring certainty, but after the jolt, the small discrepancies tormented me. Maybe it was Fletcher, maybe it wasn't.

I needed physical evidence, and getting it felt all but impossible.

Fletcher had been arrested for driving under the influence as a student at Emory University. Maybe police in Decatur, Ga., still had fingerprints from the 1970s.

Fletcher's pediatric dentist died 21 years ago. But maybe his widow could find an X-ray from the 1960s.

Each attempt felt more far-fetched, more like a compulsion than a legitimate possibility.

One option remained, which seemed like the longest shot of all.

Before he mailed that letter 19 years ago, Fletcher had licked the envelope shut. Maybe the seal contained his DNA.

On April 8, I drove it to the Medical Examiner's Office, where an investigator wearing rubber gloves popped it into a larger envelope.

On Tuesday, I sat in a conference room with the director of investigations and watched him retrieve the envelope from a thick folder.

"We have the results," William Pellan said. "Your search for Fletcher is over."

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Officials at the Pinellas-Pasco Medical Examiner's Office know what it's like to go to extreme lengths to solve unidentified cases. Sometimes, it means exhuming bodies. In this case, it meant testing 99-1145 against 170 missing persons, only to come away disappointed each time.

On most days, Pellan approaches his job with the gravitas of a funeral director. On Tuesday, he was more upbeat, almost giddy.

"I've never heard of anybody making any kind of attempt at an identification by this way," he said, adding that he planned to present the results at an upcoming Medical Examiners Commission conference.

How it happened was a lesson in forensic preservation.

The letter wound its way to the Pinellas County Forensics Laboratory, to a DNA analyst named Beth Ordeman. Almost always, her job is to exclude matches. She thrives on cold cases and lives for that rare moment when she gets a hit.

It happened in 2009, when she solved the 18-year-old rape and murder of an elderly woman and was named the Florida Department of Law Enforcement's forensic scientist of the year.

Ordeman now had to compare any DNA she could get from Fletcher's envelope against DNA from the femur of the unidentified body.

It wasn't unheard of to get DNA from an envelope, assuming there was any to get; after all these years, it could have been rubbed off or exposed to the elements.

When Ordeman opened the packet and pulled out the letter, her eyes shot to the seal. It was still stuck, still intact, leaving the DNA locked inside for her to find.

The fact that I tear open envelopes from the end instead of the middle, she told me, may have made all the difference.

She unstuck the glue and began to take swabs.

A few hours later, a smile broke across her face.

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I am not sure how to feel. My emotional state alternates between numbness and iodine in an open wound. I'm not sleeping much. I can barely laugh and certainly can't cry. The world feels like something I'm watching, not something I am part of.

The oddest thing is the realization that Fletcher, whom I met in the fifth grade, has not been aging alongside me, even in some faraway place.

I'm 61. He stopped at 44.

I had been keeping Fletcher's cousins in North Carolina abreast of the investigation. On Tuesday evening, I told Freida Hood that Fletcher's DNA matched that of the body.

"Oh, my god, I just felt it was going to," said Freida, 62. Knowing the man at the bus shelter died of a heart attack might have prepared her somewhat. Fletcher's father had died young the same way. So had two of his uncles.

Fletcher's remains will be shipped to tiny, picturesque Olivia, N.C., where he will be buried in a cemetery behind a Presbyterian church, a small white sanctuary with a tall steeple.

Last week, a cousin checked the church's cemetery map to see if there was a plot near Fletcher's parents, who died in 1980 and 1994.

Fletcher's name had been placed there decades ago, almost certainly by them.

On Aug. 1, the remains that have spent 15 years in a cardboard box at the Medical Examiner's Office will be buried in that plot near the family headstone.

A marker will identify him permanently as Stewart Fletcher Currin: March 29, 1955 — Oct. 5, 1999.

I will watch him laid to rest, but will not need to return.

To visit Fletcher, I'll simply dust off the sloppy file in my den with his name on it, the one place I know I can keep his letter and not lose it.

I'll unfold the computer paper, filled with his dot-matrix musings, and read it again:

*Please write me. Use a typewriter. Don't take it personal if it takes me two years to respond.*

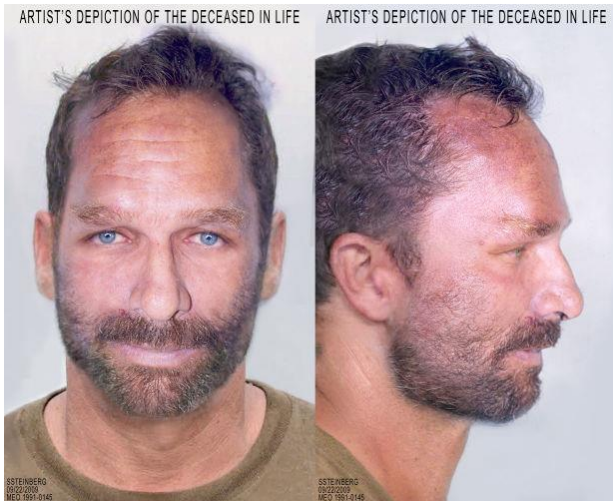
*I miss you.*

I miss you too, Fletch.

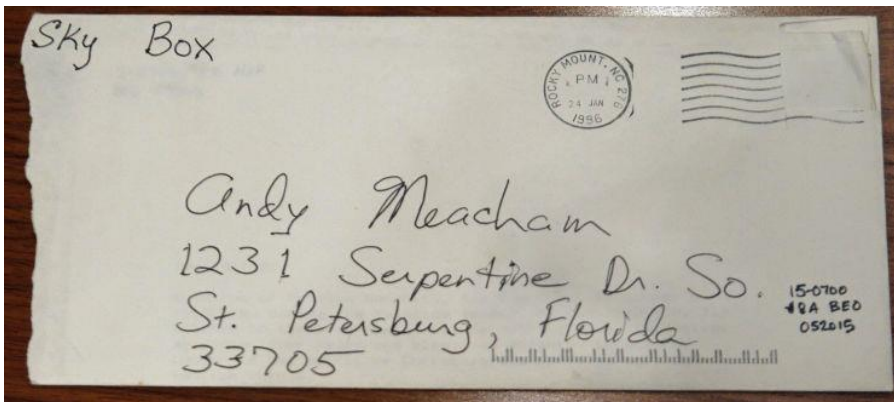
*Contact Andrew Meacham at [ameacham@tampabay.com](mailto:ameacham@tampabay.com) or (727) 892-2248. Follow @torch437.*



Medical Examiner William Pellan, left, talks with Andrew Meacham last week about the DNA that linked a body found in 1999 to an envelope sent from Fletcher Currin to Meacham. JIM DAMASKE | Times



This is a rendering from the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System identified as body 99-1145.



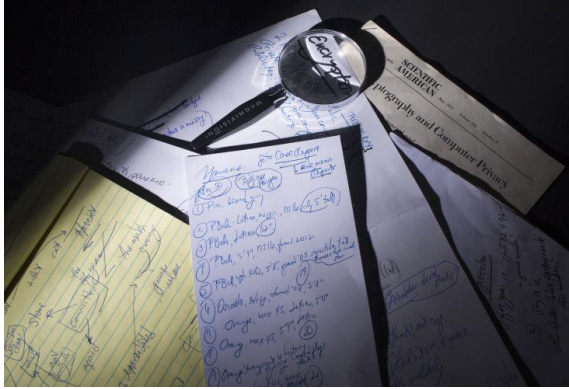
The medical examiner lifted DNA from this envelope sent by Stewart Fletcher Currin. JIM DAMASKE | Times



The last known photo of Stewart Fletcher Currin was on a 1998 state ID.



Andrew Meacham visits the Seminole Boulevard bus stop where his friend Fletcher Currin was last seen — in September 1999 by a Pinellas sheriff's deputy who told him to move along. JOHN PENDYGRAFT | Times



Andrew Meacham, who refused to stop looking for Fletcher Currin, kept detailed notes of his findings. JOHN PENDYGRAFT | Times



Fletcher Currin (standing center) in 1971, from his 1972 yearbook. Handout pictures for Andrew Meacham's Floridian story. Handout |

Source: <http://www.tampabay.com/news/after-15-years-the-mystery-behind-finding-fletcher-has-been-solved/2234458>

Doe Network Case File 345UMFL