

## Remains of homicide victim found near Vancouver identified after 41 years

Medical examiners office employee spent eight years chasing leads



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Nikki Costa, the operations manager at the Clark County Office of the Medical Examiner, detailed eight years took to identify remains found in October 1974. Costa delivered the news Monday that the remains were positive as 17-year-old Martha Marie Morrison. (Greg Wahl-Stephens)

By **Emily Gillespie**, Columbian breaking news reporter

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## Remains of homicide victim identified after 41 years



### Tips wanted

Anyone who may have information about what happened to Martha Morrison is asked to call the Clark County Sheriff's Office Cold Case Unit at 360-397-2036 or email [coldcase@clark.wa...](mailto:coldcase@clark.wa.gov) (<mailto:coldcase@clark.wa.gov>).

### Do you have a missing loved one?

Nikki Costa asked that anyone related to a missing person should go to the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, [findthemissing.org](http://findthemissing.org) (<http://findthemissing.org>), to make sure that their loved one is in that database. Agencies with unidentified remains run their findings through that system to positively identify the remains and solve missing persons cases.

For eight years, Nikki Costa has been chasing leads, following hunches and asking for help from experts across the country to put a decades-old mystery to rest. Ever since she became the operations manager at the Clark County Medical Examiner's Office, Costa has worked relentlessly to put a name to the remains of an unidentified woman whose body was found in Dole Valley in October 1974.

On Monday, she finally delivered the news she's been working so hard to confirm: The remains have been positively identified as Martha Marie Morrison.

"I'm nothing if not persistent," she said. "There's nothing about this that was simple, and obviously if you take no for an answer, then you're done. I'm not really that kind of person."

### Decades of mystery

When Costa started working at the medical examiner's office in 2006, she joined a small staff of people in an agency tasked with performing autopsies in not only Clark County, but also Klickitat and Skamania counties.

Costa's job is to run the office — write policy, file the paperwork to maintain accreditation and do whatever else needs to be done. With investigators busy with the day-to-day work, Medical Examiner Dennis Wickham tasked Costa with working on the cases of unidentified remains. She inherited about eight cases.

The most difficult one she's researched so far is the oldest: a case that came into the office, then called the Clark County Coroner's Office, on Oct. 12, 1974, when a hunter found the skeletal remains of two women in a wooded area of Dole Valley, about 14 miles northeast of Vancouver. Investigators quickly learned that both women died of homicide. They identified one of the women right away: Carol Louise Valenzuela, 18.

However, the identity of the second victim, a 17-year-old girl, remained unknown for more than four decades.

In the past 41 years, investigators chipped away at identifying the girl. But sometime before the inception of the Clark County Medical Examiner's Office in 1999, her remains were misplaced.

"I kept getting questions from the sheriff's office about (remains) that had gone missing," Costa said. "So we continued to look."

She made calls to various agencies, seeing if the FBI, the Green River Task Force or various forensic anthropologists had the bones.

But one day in December 2011, Costa made an observation: the teeth on the skull that the agency had kept in Valenzuela's case didn't seem to match her dental records. It led Costa to a startling thought — what if the Clark County Medical Examiner was actually in possession of the missing bones?

Following her hunch, Costa had some experts review the dental records and confirm that the skull and remains on file for Valenzuela were in fact those of the unidentified woman.

"The skull (and remains) that we had, for reasons that are unclear, was labeled with the case number of Carol Valenzuela," she said. "So, what we thought had been long lost for decades had actually just been there and had been mislabeled."

Even though a clerical error had sent the case off course for more than 15 years, Costa finally had a break. Experts could now test the unidentified remains for DNA.

In February 2012, she sent the remains to a lab and a few months later got back a full profile — enough information to do a DNA comparison.

Meanwhile, Martha Morrison's family members had been making discoveries of their own.

## Finding Martha

According to Reba Morrison, Martha Morrison's sister, a family member said he reported the teen as missing in 1974, but in fact he hadn't.

Martha Morrison lived in Portland with a man described as a thinly built, light-skinned African-American. She was reportedly last seen in September 1974, when she left their apartment following an argument. She has not been seen or heard from since.

In 2010, though, when the Morrison family checked on the case, they discovered that her disappearance had never actually been reported to police.

In the years that followed, law enforcement took a swab from the inside of the cheeks of Reba Morrison and Martha's half-brother, Michael Morrison, for DNA comparisons. The results yielded a possible match with the unidentified Dole Valley remains, but nothing conclusive.

"This is the first lead we've had on this case ever — since 1974 — for identifying this girl," Costa said.

She was told by the experts: "You need more DNA; it's statistically weak."

But Martha Morrison's parents were dead. When Costa reached out to more family, they were resistant.

So she tried different avenues: With help from the Eugene Police Department, Costa hunted down a tissue sample of Martha Morrison's mother that was on file at a Springfield, Ore., medical facility. That sample, she said, was days away from being destroyed.

The sample showed the DNA was consistent, but still not conclusive.

Though she had hit another dead end, Costa continued to search for more clues.

Ideas came to her while driving to work, taking a shower or when she'd see something on the news.

"It was constantly churning in the back of my mind," she said. "I needed a final answer ... She deserved a name."

Costa realized that Martha Morrison had psoriasis and spent months researching whether using the disease to match with her family could help the case. She researched using photo superimposition technology to overlay a photo of Martha Morrison onto the bones to draw a conclusion, but the only photo she had was a Polaroid, which was too small.

"It's a little needle in the haystack," she said. "The answers are out there, I just needed to ask the right questions."

Martha Morrison had been in foster care and once lived at a children's facility in Corvallis, Ore., so Costa reached out to those agencies for any clues. She searched for Martha Morrison's dental records and even called Reba Morrison, hoping that her mother had kept a lock of Martha's baby hair.

More and more experts that she talked to told her, "We know it's her," Costa said, but not confidently enough to put it in a report. Costa said all she heard was: "Don't give up."

She had librarians search old obituaries, hoping to find a close enough relative that might bolster the DNA match.

## Finding a match

After a while, experts told her the only thing left to do was to get DNA from Martha's father, who had died in 1976. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children told Costa that if she wanted to exhume Albert Ray Morrison's body for a family DNA reference sample, they'd pay for it.

Reba Morrison agreed to the exhumation and the NCMEC spent the next few months coordinating with a cemetery and other agencies in Arizona, where he was buried. While coordinating the effort, Costa considered the possible negative outcomes, such as the possibility that Albert Ray Morrison wasn't Martha Morrison's biological father.

"Our bigger fear was that the sample would be so degraded from having been embalmed and in the ground for all this time," she said.

But on June 11, the body was exhumed and a DNA sample sent to the lab for comparison.

Around the same time, Costa got news that Reba Morrison's health was declining, so Costa pressed the lab to work as fast as they could.

And on Wednesday, Costa got the email.

Costa choked up as she read aloud the words that concluded eight years' worth of difficult and sometimes discouraging work: "It is 59.7 million times more likely to be Martha Morrison than any other unrelated Caucasian person with a probability of relatedness 99.999998 percent," she said.

While Costa has a long list of people that she credits with helping identify Martha Morrison's remains, Kathy Taylor, a state forensic anthropologist whom Costa consulted throughout her research, said that Costa is owed the credit for keeping the case alive.

"It really was way beyond what a lot of offices do, and that's really phenomenal," Taylor said. "Martha didn't have anyone else to be her voice. (Costa) was a voice for her, she really was."

She added that having a body go unidentified is the most frustrating part of autopsy work.

“She just never dropped this, she never said ‘OK, this is too hard’ ” Taylor said. “(Costa) would hit a roadblock, but she didn’t drop it. She was determined from the beginning that she was going to identify this woman.”

Costa said that making the call to Reba Morrison to deliver the news that her sister was identified was the best moment.

“It wasn’t a surprise,” Reba Morrison said. “I’ve known for a long time, since she came up missing, that she was dead.”

She said that when Costa first contacted her about the possibility of the unidentified remains being Martha Morrison, she was certain then, too.

“It wasn’t 100 percent, but I had a gut feeling,” she said.

While she still doesn’t know how her sister died — the girls’ killer has never been identified — Reba Morrison said the development was the most important one for her. She’s planning on having Martha cremated and interred next to her mother, whom Reba said had always held out hope that Martha would come home.

“Martha and momma will be reunited in that way and that makes me feel good,” she said.



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