

Cold case murder: Decatur woman identified nearly 43 years after remains found in Florida Everglades

While detectives have identified the victim through advances in DNA technology and genetic genealogy, the circumstances surrounding her death remain a mystery.

Author: Reeves Jackson

Published: 10:31 PM EDT July 15, 2026

Updated: 10:31 PM EDT July 15, 2026

DECATUR, Ga. — A Decatur woman whose skeletal remains were discovered in the Florida Everglades more than four decades ago has finally been identified, giving investigators renewed hope that her killer can still be brought to justice.

The Broward Sheriff's Office in Florida announced that the remains found in September 1983 belong to **Shelia Ann Nichols**, a young woman from Decatur who disappeared earlier that year.

While detectives have identified the victim through advances in DNA technology and genetic genealogy, the circumstances surrounding her death remain a mystery.

Investigators believe Nichols was murdered before her body was left off U.S. 27 in the South Florida Everglades, where a truck driver discovered her skeletal remains along the roadside, launching what became a nearly 43-year homicide investigation.

For decades, detectives did not know the victim's identity, where she was from or how she ended up in South Florida. The case eventually went cold despite investigators creating a facial reconstruction and publicly seeking tips. Recent DNA testing, funded through a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice's Missing and Unidentified Human Remains Program, allowed the Broward Sheriff's Office Crime Lab to use genetic genealogy to identify the victim. Investigators later confirmed the match through DNA from Nichols' father.

"It's unspeakable how somebody could dispose of this young lady with such disregard," Broward Sheriff's Office Cold Case Detective Andrew Gianino said. "It's just heart-wrenching."

As detectives reopened the investigation, they uncovered another twist. Around the same time, Nichols disappeared from Decatur in May 1983, her sister, Virginia Gail Nichols, also vanished, prompting investigators to initially question whether both women had become homicide victims.

"This has to be one of the most complex cases with various twists that I've ever worked," Gianino said.

Investigators eventually located Virginia Gail alive, allowing her to reconnect with family after years apart. However, Shelia Ann Nichols' killing remains unsolved.

Detectives now hope that publicly identifying Nichols will encourage someone in Georgia or South Florida to come forward with information about her disappearance or death.

"We need that one phone call," Gianino said. "It would make all the difference going forward."

Anyone with information about Nichols' disappearance or homicide is asked to contact Broward Sheriff's Office Detective Andrew Gianino at 954-321-4376 or submit a tip through the SaferWatch app.

Anonymous tips can also be submitted through Broward Crime Stoppers by calling 954-493-TIPS (8477), visiting Broward Crime Stoppers online or dialing **TIPS from any cellphone in the United States. Authorities said tips leading to an arrest could be eligible for a reward of up to \$5,000.