

Toronto

# Oneida woman discovers long-lost uncle after Toronto police DNA testing identifies his remains

Toronto police project uses DNA testing to identify unknown remains, bring closure to families



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CBC's Ali Chiasson explains how a Toronto police initiative called Project 31 is identifying unknown remains with genetic genealogy, named for the number people police have on file. As the project advances, police say it's bringing closure to families who've lost loved ones.

When Michele Dent got a call from Toronto police in January, she thought it was a scam.

The investigator on the other end of the line was calling about a case from 2021, when police found unidentified human remains near Downsview Park.

The remains belonged to **Willard Duval**, an Indigenous man in his 70s who was reported missing in 2018. A lengthy investigation into his identity involving genetic genealogy eventually led police to Dent.

They believed he was her uncle.

"I have an ancestral DNA profile because I've been looking for family ... that's how they verified that Willard was my uncle," said Dent, who is Oneida.

Duval is one of the latest people to be identified through Project 31, a "humanitarian initiative" named after 31 open Toronto police cases involving "long-term, unidentified people for whom DNA material is readily available," according to police.

The project makes use of forensic technology called investigative genetic genealogy (IGG), helping provide closure for families looking for answers about missing loved ones and giving dignity to those who have died.

## **IGG works by identifying 'genetic hiccups'**

"IGG is like a big game of genetic warmer and colder," said Det. Const. Mike Kelly, who works in the Toronto police's homicide and missing persons unit.

Typical DNA testing for things like paternity checks requires a comparison of one known person to another to check for a genetic match. IGG comes in when it's not possible to do a one-on-one comparison because there is an unidentified person involved.

The technique instead looks for “genetic hiccups,” said Kelly, which allows for portions of DNA to be found that are unique to a person’s ancestors.

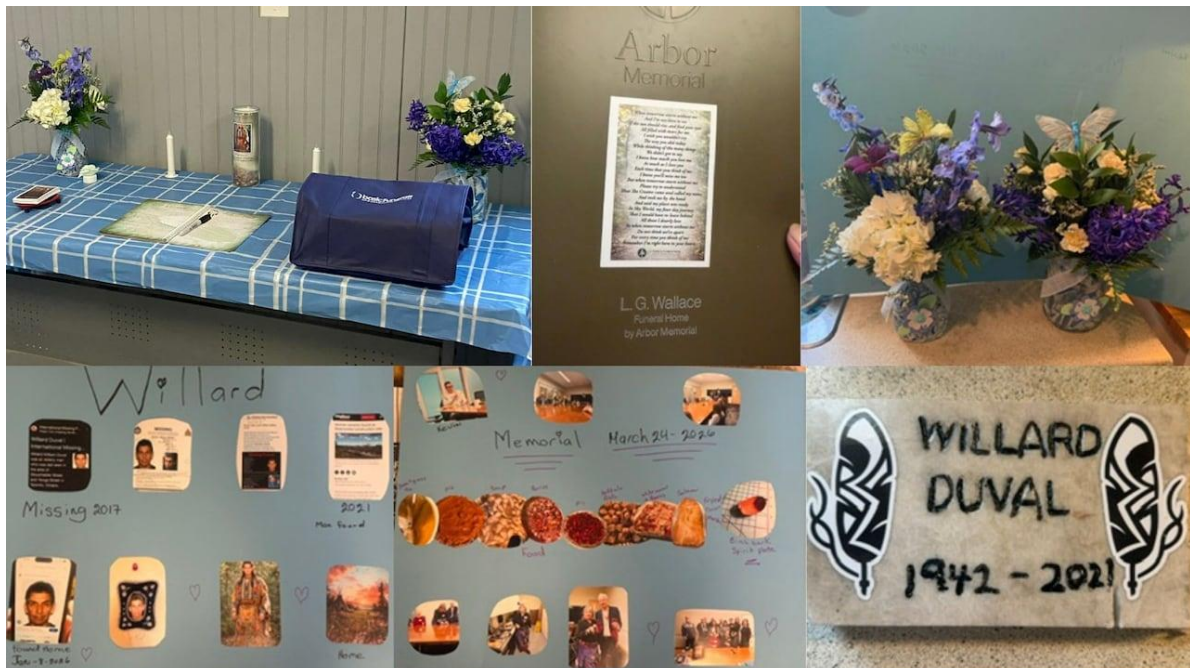
“By searching those types of portions of DNA against databases, that allows us to say ‘OK well who is this person?’ We don’t know who this person is, but who are they related to, biologically? And [by] how much?” he said.

The results could help police build a family tree to see where the unidentified person would fit.

“Ideally it would take us right down to a person,” said Kelly.

In cases where police can't narrow down results to an individual, they can use the genetic information gathered as a “compass” to find a country, region or town for answers.

The technique has so far helped police track down 11 unidentified persons in Project 31.



Michele Dent held a ceremony for her uncle Willard Duval after police identified her long-lost uncle through Project 31. Duval is now buried with his brother, Dent's father. (Submitted by Michele Dent)

## Who was Willard Duval?

In September 2021, a construction crew installing a fence near 30 Carl Hall Rd. found a human skull in thick brush near the new fence line, according to a news release from police last month.


The chief coroner's office and police determined the death was not suspicious but did not provide a cause. It's likely Duval was dead for "several years" before his remains were found, the release said.

Police weren't able to initially identify the remains through "conventional investigative techniques," and the case was selected for investigation using IGG technology in 2022, the release said.

Four years later, Duval was identified and connected to Dent

Dent said she didn't know "anything" about her family because it was "ripped apart" when her dad — Duval's brother — was five years old.

The two siblings were separated from each other and adopted by different families. Dent's father was also sent to the Mohawk Institute, a residential school that operated for more than 140 years in Brantford, Ont.



Dawn Hill, a residential school survivor, recalls the time a teacher hit her hands with a stick as she was trying to learn how to write in cursive. It was one of many experiences of physical abuse during her four years at the school.

Before Dent was able to find out about her uncle, she only knew about her family through a small stack of papers she got from the Children's Aid Society.

"I read it years ago, and it was heartbreaking to know what happened and why the family was ripped apart," she said.

"I'm just so happy that [Willard] found home."

Duval was buried next to his brother. Dent arranged the burial, describing it as "Willard's last powwow." Genealogists and investigators who worked on the case were among those who attended.