

Teen girl, 'Precious Jane Doe,' ID'd 43 years after her murder in Snohomish Co.

by KOMO News Staff

Thursday, June 25th 2020



EVERETT, Wash. – Cutting edge DNA technology has enabled authorities to finally identify a teenage girl who was murdered in Snohomish County 43 years ago and became known as "Precious Jane Doe."

The girl's body was found by blackberry pickers in unincorporated south Everett several days after her murder. She had been strangled and shot in the head seven times - and was unrecognizable.

Her killer was caught and sentenced to 26 years in prison, but he didn't know who she was. He had seen her hitchhiking and gave her a ride, then killed her and dumped her body after she declined to have sex with him.

But now Precious Jane Doe has been identified as Elizabeth Ann Roberts of Roseburg, Ore., who was reported as a runaway after leaving home in July 1977 - but whose name somehow was dropped from the National Crime Information Center's list of missing persons afterward.

How she was identified after 43 years is told in this Facebook post by the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office:

After nearly 43 years of working to identify Precious Jane Doe, Snohomish County Sheriff's Office Major Crimes Unit, Cold Case Team and the Snohomish County Medical Examiner's Office have positively identified her. She was born in 1959 as Elizabeth Ann Elder in Hood River, Oregon. She was adopted around the age of two and named Elizabeth Ann Roberts. She went by Lisa Roberts.

Lisa was raised by her parents in Roseburg, Oregon. On July 25, 1977 her father reported 17 year-old Lisa as a runaway to Roseburg Police Department. Lisa called home from Everett, Washington a couple of weeks after she ran away and asked her parents for money. They begged her to come home and she said she would think about it. Her parents sent her money to Seafirst Bank in Everett, however, it was never picked up. Lisa was

murdered 15 days after she left home on August 9, 1977, and her body was discovered five days later on August 14, 1977.

Successful identification of Lisa was established using SNP DNA and Investigative Genetic Genealogy. The DNA used for the identification was obtained from Lisa's hair using a new scientific technique developed by Dr. Ed Green, a scientist of ancient DNA and paleogenomics. This new technique, previously thought to be impossible, enables DNA-based forensics from rootless hair and other difficult sources.

Through Investigative Genetic Genealogy in the hands of Dr. Barbara Rae-Venter and her Firebird Forensic Group and using public genetic genealogy websites, they were able to build a family tree to identify the biological parents. Further investigation found a biological half-brother, whose DNA was used to verify he matched to Lisa's maternal DNA profile. Adoption records were then obtained from the Oregon Health Authority. Based on all this new information, Snohomish County Chief Medical Examiner, Dr. Matt Lacy established the positive identification of Elizabeth Ann Roberts. "We are grateful to Dr. Barbara Rae-Venter and her Firebird Forensics Group for the effort and hundreds of hours that they donated solving this case for us. Lisa would not be identified today if not for the work they did," said Dr. Lacy.

During the murder investigation in 1977, detectives learned Precious Jane Doe was hitchhiking near Silver Lake on August 9, 1977. She was picked up by David Roth who wanted to go swimming at the lake. Instead, he gave her a ride and asked her to have sex. When she declined, he strangled her and shot her seven times in the head. Her body was found five days later by residents picking blackberries in the 11300 block of 4th Avenue West in unincorporated south Everett. She was unrecognizable. Roth confessed to the murder and was sentenced to 26 years in prison. The remains were thought to be that of a 25 to 35 year old woman. Detective John Hinds drew a composite sketch of what she should look like, but no one could identify her. For an unknown reason, she was no longer listed as missing in NCIC.

Extensive efforts began again in 2008 to identify her body after the Doe Network inquired about the case. Investigators exhumed the body and she was examined by Dr. Kathy

Taylor, the State Forensic Anthropologist with the King County Medical Examiner's Office. Her examination revealed that the remains were more likely that of a teenage girl, age 16 to 19. That got the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children involved to assist. Forensic Artist Natalie Murry provided an updated composite sketch. Detectives were never able to identify the female, who was named Precious Jane Doe by Detective Jim Scharf.

"This young girl was precious to me because her moral decision from her proper upbringing cost her her life," said lead Detective Jim Scharf. "I knew she had to be precious to her family too, so I had to find them. We needed to give her name back to her and return her remains to her family." Detective Scharf worked on this case for 12 years and Snohomish County Medical Examiner Lead Medical Investigator Jane Jorgensen worked on it for the past three years. After hundreds of hours of investigative teamwork by many volunteers and extensive advancements in DNA science, Precious Jane Doe has finally been identified.

On June 16, 2020, Detective Scharf received the phone call he has been waiting many years for. The Oregon Health Authority Vital Records confirmed Precious Jane Doe was adopted in Oregon and renamed Elizabeth Ann Roberts.

Detective Scharf contacted her family and made the sad notification. He learned that she went by "Lisa." Lisa's sister, Tonya, who was only 10 years old when Lisa ran away said, "I looked up to Lisa as my big sister, who would spend time with me and play with me downstairs. We had a really good bond because we were both adopted." Arrangements are currently being made for Lisa's memorial service and her remains will be buried in a family plot in Hood River, Oregon.

"I am so proud and so thankful for the incredible work and dedication by Detective Jim Scharf and all of our partners and investigators who made this possible," said Snohomish County Sheriff Adam Fortney. "For years Detective Scharf has had Precious Jane Doe's story linked in his email signature trying to identify her. Although it wasn't the answer anyone wished for, Precious Jane Doe finally has her name back, and she can now be returned to her family and loved ones."

