

Mount Vernon Jane Doe homicide victim from 1988 was NYC 19-year-old

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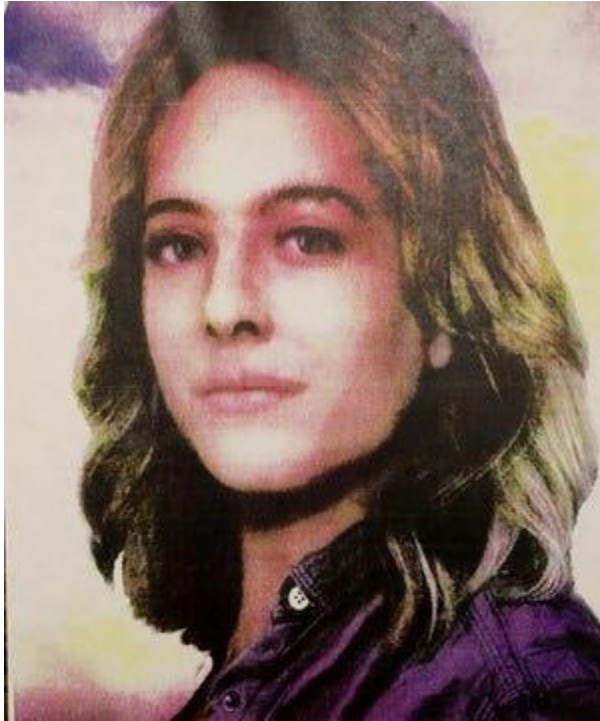
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Thirty-three years after a young woman was strangled to death and her body left on a Mount Vernon sidewalk, she is a Jane Doe no more.

Advanced DNA analysis helped investigators identify the woman killed on Valentine's Day 1988 as Veronica Wiederhold, the first success for new cold case units in the Westchester County District Attorney's Office and the Mount Vernon Police Department.

Her identification has resurrected an investigation that was mostly dormant for years. Finding Wiederhold's killer is the ultimate goal, said Assistant District Attorney Laura Murphy, but the DNA result has shown that success comes in multiple forms in cold-case work.

"If we can identify a victim, we've done good work," said Murphy, chief of the cold case bureau that District Attorney Mimi Rocah set up when she took office this year.



Veronica Wiederhold

The case is among the first in New York in which the identity of a murder victim was determined through investigative genetic genealogy, a process that matches unknowns to their relatives.

It's a technique that has become popular in cold-case investigations nationwide, particularly after 2019 when it helped identify the so-called Golden State Killer, ex-cop Joseph DeAngelo Jr., who confessed to more than two dozen killings in California in the 1970s and '80s.

In the Mount Vernon case, Det. Brent Gamble reached out to the FBI in the summer of 2020 to see if genetic genealogy could identify Jane Doe.

Once the Westchester forensics lab determined that it had sufficient DNA from the victim, the FBI's genetic genealogy unit was able to link it to possible relatives who had submitted their DNA to a genealogy website.

Murphy said it was fortunate there was sufficient DNA to test, because in the late 1980s DNA collection in criminal investigations was in its infancy.

Wiederhold's body was discovered just before noon on Feb. 14, 1988, laid out near a junkyard on Carleton Place, an industrial, often deserted stretch off South Columbus Avenue in Mount Vernon located a quarter-mile from the Bronx.

She was naked, with reddish-pink press-on nails, her legs crossed at the ankles. She had ligature marks on her neck, wrists and ankles, suggesting she was bound while transported to the spot where she was found.

An autopsy determined she may have recently been involved in sexual activity, but whether she was raped could not be determined. The victim had a small amount of cocaine in her blood and broccoli in her stomach.

Police suspect Wiederhold was placed there sometime after 10:20 that morning, based on an account from a passerby. The medical examiner estimated she was likely killed between midnight and 6 a.m.

Within a few years, it was suspected she may have been the victim of a Yonkers serial killer sought in three murders between 1989 and 1996, cases where the victims were also posed in death. But when a DNA match led to Francisco Acevedo's arrest in those killings in 2010, it was determined he was incarcerated in Connecticut when Wiederhold was killed.

The DNA match positively identifying Wiederhold was made in April and her family was notified. Family members could not be reached for comment on Tuesday and Mount Vernon police declined to comment.

In recent months, investigators have begun following up leads on who might have killed Wiederhold and the "Jane Doe" death certificate is being updated to include her name.

Wiederhold's relatives, in Queens and Brooklyn, had last seen her at the end of 1987.

Once the identity was confirmed, Westchester investigators could find no record of Wiederhold in missing person databases.

Relatives told investigators that they tried to file a missing person case in New York City. But an extensive search in recent months by the NYPD turned up no such record, Murphy said.

Wiederhold's identification leaves at least 16 Westchester cases since the 1970s in which the deceased remain unidentified.

Six of those cases are classified as homicides, including that of a gunshot victim discovered in a cedar chest along Saw Mill River Road in Hastings-on-Hudson on April 23, 1978.

The DA's office on Tuesday released a picture of that man in hopes it would jog someone's memory.

Anyone with information about Wiederhold or the Hastings John Doe is asked to contact the DA at 914-995-TIPS.