

Woman's remains identified 33 years after she was found dead beside I-40 in Orange County

Investigators with the Orange County Sheriff's Office have identified the remains of a woman found by road crews 33 years ago.

Posted 11:13 a.m. Sep 27, 2023 - Updated 10:20 p.m. Sep 27, 2023

By

Aaron Thomas

, WRAL reporter

Investigators with the Orange County Sheriff's Office have identified the remains of a woman found by road crews 33 years ago.

Experts believe someone strangled her in 1990, one week before her body was found on the side of Interstate 40 East near the New Hope Church Road exit.

Sheriff Charles Blackwood announced Wednesday that the victim was Lisa Coburn Kesler. Investigators believe Kesler spent most of her life in Jackson County, Georgia. She was 20 years old when she was found.

Although investigators first used the emerging science of DNA to obtain a conviction in a criminal case in 1986, the forensic applications of DNA were still in their infancy in 1990 when Kesler was murdered.

Investigators used traditional methods such as interviewing potential witnesses, pursuing more hundreds of leads, searching missing persons reports, and creating a bust of the victim by applying forensic facial reconstruction techniques to a model of her skull. As the years went by, investigators and skilled volunteers tried new methods, such as generating a digital illustration approximating a photograph and circulating the image on social media. Despite these efforts, the identity of the victim remained a mystery.

"Throughout the decades, some of our finest investigators kept plugging away," Sheriff Blackwood said. "When you can't close a case, it gets under

your skin. You might set the file aside for a while, but you keep coming back to it, looking to see something you didn't notice before, or hoping information gathered in ensuing cases has relevance to your cold case. Investigators also monitor new techniques and technologies in the field, which is what eventually led to the breakthrough in Ms. Kesler's case."

Investigator Dylan Hendricks, who took over the case in June 2020, sent a degraded hair fragment to Astrea Forensics for DNA extraction. After they returned a DNA profile, Hendricks asked Forensic Genealogist Leslie Kaufman to assist with the case. Kaufman specializes in cases involving unidentified human remains and homicides.

She began working to identify family members using genealogy databases and other tools. After she linked the victim's DNA profile to people she believed to be paternal cousins, investigators began conducting interviews. The team eventually learned of Lisa Coburn Kesler, whom no one had heard from in at least three decades.

"Essentially, there was a Lisa-shaped hole on a branch of the family tree right where the DNA told us Lisa should be, and no one knew where she was," Investigator Hendricks said.

Investigators then requested DNA from a suspected maternal relative. Analysis of this genetic material provided additional confirmation.

Clyde Gibbs, a medical examiner specialist in the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, updated NamUs, a national database designed to connect missing persons cases to unidentified remains, reflecting that the DNA method resolved her case. Additionally, the chief Medical Examiner is now able to amend her death certificate, providing her correct name and including other demographic information.

"I am very happy we solved the three-plus-decades-old mystery of this young woman's identity, and I hope it provides solace to her family members," Blackwood said. "We are grateful to the many investigators, passionate volunteers, and talented professionals who assisted with this effort. I believe we collectively demonstrated the value of dogged determination, which we will now apply to the task of identifying her killer. There is no statute of limitations on murder, and no time clock on justice."

If you have any information, please call Investigator Hendricks at the Orange County Sheriff's Office at 919-245-2951. You can also [submit information anonymously here](#).