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MPD cold case detective brings another family closure

Doug Svendson vanished in late 2003; Detective Jeremy Drexler's dogged search for him solved the mystery behind his disappearance.

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By [Doug McMurdo](#)

One year after he solved one of Moab's most enduring crime mysteries — the 1973 murder and sexual assault of Ann Woodward at Woody's Tavern — Moab Police Detective Jeremy Drexler has brought closure to another family.



Doug Svendson went missing more than 22 years ago. A dogged Moab Police detective helped bring his family closure after DNA testing confirmed human remains found near a California highway were his. Photo courtesy of David Svendson

For more than 20 years, David Svendson and his mother, Emily Svendson, worried and wondered about what might have happened to Douglass “Doug” Svendson, who vanished late in 2003.

Drexler, through old-fashioned police work and a relentless desire to solve long-cold cases, unraveled the mystery in large part by looking at internet databases. He noted that one missing persons site included both a listing for Doug Svendson and information on unidentified remains found across the country.

Drexler noted the remains found in one case were located close to where Doug Svendson was last known to live — Willits, California, where his mother owned an undeveloped 40-acre parcel.

Willits, known as the “Gateway to the Redwoods,” is in Mendocino County in Northern California and is also part of the Emerald Triangle, a tri-county region that has long been the largest marijuana cultivation area in the U.S.

Two worries came to Drexler's attention when he opened the cold case: One was that Svendson had been camping on his mother's acreage; the other was that the parcel sat between two marijuana grow operations, which were illegal at the time.

He thought Svendson might have found trouble with one or both of the growers, but like any good detective, he went where the evidence took him.

"I initially thought something nefarious might have happened to Mr. Svendson," said Drexler. In interviewing David Svendson, who has lived in Moab for 30 years and is the person who reported his older brother missing in late 2003, Drexler learned that Doug had stopped withdrawing money from an ATM machine and that's when David knew something was wrong. His only income was a Social Security payment that he accessed with a debit card.

"His debit card stopped being used in late 2003," said Drexler.

The remains were found off of Highway 101 just outside of Willits and about 17 miles from Doug's campsite on his mother's property. They went undiscovered for a while because they were off the highway and down a ravine. The skeleton was not complete.

Although the partial skeleton was found in 2004, DNA was not extracted from a femur until late 2024 at Drexler's request. He then asked David Svendson for a DNA sample to match.

David consented and the analysis showed it was a "presumptive yes," meaning "probably this is your guy," said Drexler.

But California, said Drexler, does not accept a presumptive yes finding as sufficient to prove a match. The detective approached Emily Svendson and she agreed to provide a sampling. DNA from parent to child or vice versa is much more dependable because every child has at least 50% of that parent's DNA. Siblings, on the other hand, also share an average of 50% of their DNA, but through variations, the specific genetic material inherited is random and potential ambiguity can arise when comparing sibling DNA.

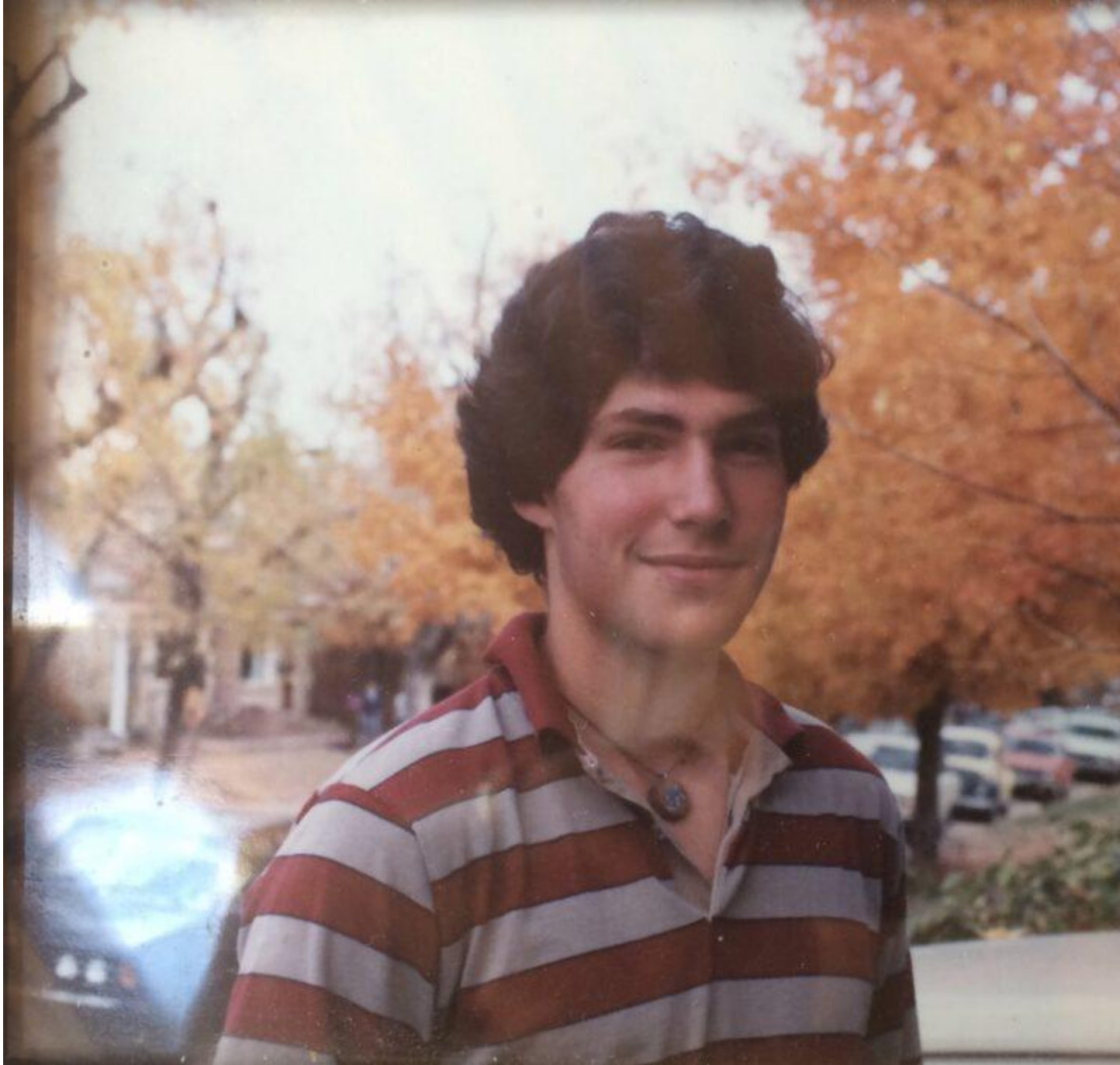
Drexler called David on July 21 to tell him his mother's DNA sample proved the remains were Doug's. "One hundred percent," he said. "We knew we solved it. The outcome was sad, but I think it will bring them some closure," said Drexler.

David never got the chance to tell Emily. She died earlier in the day on July 21. Fifteen minutes after noon, to be precise.

“She knew it was probably Doug,” said David. “My DNA showed there was a good chance and she accepted that.”

So what happened?

“I don’t know about the illegal grow operations,” David said. “In that part of the state that stuff (marijuana cultivation) is the primary income. You didn’t just go walking around out there and Doug knew that.”



Doug Svendson was likely killed in a hit-and-run accident on Highway 101 in Northern California. Photo courtesy of the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System

Both Drexler and David believe Doug was killed by a driver in a hit-and-run accident. Remarkably, Doug was previously struck by a vehicle on the same highway, 101, which cuts through Willits into the Redwood National Forest. He was hospitalized in that first incident, which occurred inside city limits.

David said his brother likely didn't survive the second accident because he was outside the town limits where highway speeds were higher. Whoever it was that hit him didn't stop.

David said his brother suffered with a psychiatric disorder from his mid-teens until his death in his 30s. "Unfortunately, he struggled with mental illness for most of his adult life," said David. "He would hold down a job and then he'd do what we used to call going off the deep end."

When he wasn't living in a tent on their mother's California property, David said his brother was in and out of state hospitals. "He would know enough to get his act together when he went in front of a judge and he would be released," said David. "He would not take his meds. He was not willing to do that. They would stabilize him, but he didn't like the way they made him feel drugged. It was sad. That happened numerous times in his life."

The hardest part

"The not knowing was the hardest part," said David. He credits Drexler for putting his mind somewhat at ease. "I put Doug on the missing person's list in 2004," said David. "In the same database were found remains. Jeremy just happened to reach out to me and he linked the two files pretty quickly."

David wondered if law enforcement was putting in the effort needed to find his brother, but Drexler said he assured him officers were diligent, including early in 2004 when Doug was reported missing. "They (Moab Police) were in constant contact with Mendocino County," said Drexler. "There was only so much that could be done at the time."

Moab Police took the case because Doug stayed in Moab for several months in 2003 before he found his way back to Northern California.

Before Doug's mental illness manifested, David said his brother was "just a normal kid. He was pretty outgoing. He had friends ... I'm just relieved to have some closure. It's been a long time we've been waiting. It's good to have closure."

He has one more task to complete to come full circle. David said the remains will be cremated and sent to him. When he gets them, he'll scatter his long lost brother's ashes.