

Madison, WI – After more than 34 years, authorities have successfully identified Dane County Chimney Doe as Ronnie Joe Kirk, originally from Tulsa, Oklahoma. Kirk's last known ties were in Madison, Wisconsin. The identification was made possible through the collaborative efforts of law enforcement, forensic experts, and the DNA Doe Project, employing investigative genetic genealogy.



Ronnie Joe Kirk

On September 3, 1989 the owners of the Good 'n Loud Music store on University Avenue in Madison, Wisconsin discovered a skull visible through a pipe connecting the boiler to the chimney. Further investigation by authorities revealed a complete human skeleton. The skeleton was wearing what was thought to be feminine clothing and wore an iron cross necklace, but no identification was found.

During the forensic autopsy the remains were determined to be that of a White/Caucasian genetic male, 18-35 years old, and about 5' 7" tall. There was no way the person could have gotten into the pipe from within the building.

In December, 2019, detective Lindsey Ludden with the City of Madison Police Department, brought the case to the DNA Doe Project to try a new investigative method using DNA from the remains. It would take more than two years to develop a DNA profile that could be used for investigative genetic genealogy. Astrea Forensics Laboratory of Santa Cruz, California, was able to get enough DNA from rootless hair to develop the profile, an innovation that has now been used to resolve numerous cases.

The DNA Doe Project utilizes cutting-edge techniques to analyze DNA samples and build family trees, helping law enforcement solve Jane and John Doe cases of unidentified individuals. In Kirk's case, the project's expertise shed light on his origins and paved the way for closure in a long-standing mystery. Ronnie Joe Kirk, who had been adopted, presented a unique challenge in tracing his familial connections. The DNA Doe Project, a nonprofit organization specializing in using genetic genealogy to identify unknown persons, played a crucial role in unraveling Kirk's family history. This innovative approach allowed investigators to break through the barriers presented by Kirk's adoption and piece together the puzzle of his identity.

"This was such a unique case with adoption, and multiple generations of different marriages, despite having a relatively close DNA relative match in the family," said Team Leader Gwen Knapp. "The shrewd genealogy work done by my team was amazing to tease out the various relationships. We're so excited that we can give Ronnie Kirk his name back and hope his family has some closure for Ronnie being missing for so long."

"People are going to speculate about the so-called dress, and we feel that it was mislabelled as such since we have found no further evidence to suggest Ronnie ever identified as anything other than male," added Co-Team Leader Megan Pasika.

The DNA Doe Project is grateful to the groups and individuals who helped solve this case: the Madison Police Department, who entrusted the case to the DNA Doe Project; Anthony Redgrave and members of the [Trans Doe Task Force](#) who helped bring the case to DDP, [Astrea Forensics](#) for extraction and sequencing of DNA from rootless hair, including additional pro-bono work provided under an NIJ grant to Arc-Bio; Kevin Lord for bioinformatics; GEDmatch Pro and FTDNA for providing their databases; our generous donors who joined our mission and contributed to this case; and DDP's dedicated teams of volunteer investigative genetic genealogists who work tirelessly to bring all our Jane and John Does home.

Image Credit: FBI and Smithsonian Institution