

Skeleton in the chimney' finally has a face and a name, but case is far from closed

Following today's 'extraordinary' press conference in Madison, Doug Moe provides an update on the nearly 35-year-old cold case.

- [Doug Moe](#)
- May 13, 2024



The 1989 "Chimney Doe" cold case remains have been identified as **Ronnie Joe Kirk** of Oklahoma. Courtesy of News 3 Now

Ronnie Joe Kirk was identified on Monday as Madison's "Chimney Doe" nearly 35 years after his remains were found.

It was around a year ago that she first heard the name Ronnie Joe Kirk, said Madison Police Detective Lindsey Ludden on Monday morning, following an extraordinary press conference in the community room of Madison's Central District police station.

But it was later — after more checking and verifying — when she first saw a photo of Kirk, that it really hit home: the realization that they were likely going to be able to put a name and a face on the victim in a cold case that had baffled investigators and intrigued onlookers in Madison since September 1989.

It became known as “[the skeleton in the chimney](#)” case.

Ludden didn’t speak at [today's press conference](#). Madison Police Chief Shon Barnes did — Ludden was seated against a wall to his left — but everyone present knew, or should have known, that none of us would have been there without the efforts first of Ludden, and then an array of professionals and volunteers who used cutting edge DNA and genetic science to make the identification.

The fact sheet distributed at the press conference, which also included remarks from Gwen Knapp of the DNA Doe Project, and Joe Welsch, a cold case advisor for NamUs (a national resource center for missing and unidentified persons), provided the following on Ronnie Joe Kirk: He was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, adopted and raised in the city. He was a father, and married and divorced twice. That was it. The family — and this was reiterated during the press conference — has requested privacy.

I arrived early for the press conference. Only Knapp and Welsch, who I didn’t know, were in the room. I nodded and looked across the room at a table that included evidence boxes, a bust constructed decades ago by a forensic anthropologist, and — most significantly — a black-and-white photo of a young man.

I blinked. The face of the skeleton in the chimney.

I immediately thought back to early 2022, when the editors of [Madison Magazine asked me to write a feature](#) story on a Madison cold case — any cold case, my choice.

I chose the case that began on Sept. 3, 1989, when Steve Liethen, proprietor of Good ‘n Loud Music at 5225 University Ave., peered into a leaky pipe that ran from the basement to the chimney and saw a skull and shoulder bone.

Although I knew some of the more unusual elements of the case — although the remains in the chimney were male, the clothing included a dress — I hadn't written about it much. Certainly not to the extent of my friend and colleague George Hesselberg, the longtime Wisconsin State Journal columnist who resurrected the case every September, in hopes of bringing forth new information.

It was when I began researching my article in early 2022 that I learned that Ludden had picked up the case and was pursuing a new avenue of investigation — DNA testing of rootless hair found with the bones in the chimney.

Ludden, a Madison native, joined MPD in 2006 and has been a detective since 2012.

"I had some familiarity with [the bones case]," she told me in 2022. "Not in any true sense. I knew that we had it and that they still didn't have their name back."

Ludden connected with the DNA Doe Project — an all-volunteer group that uses genetic genealogy in identification — and eventually the hair evidence was sent for analysis to Astrea Genetics in California. If Astrea could extract DNA from the hair, the Doe Project would look for genetic matches among the living. If successful, they would alert Ludden, who could then begin making contact in an effort to identify the skeleton the Doe Project was calling "Dane County Chimney Doe."

Astrea Genetics had the hair evidence while I was researching my 2022 story.

"It wasn't a rock star sample right off the bat," Astrea CEO Kelly Harkins Kincaid told me. "But it wasn't a hard no."

They kept working on it.

My article appeared in May 2022. In September, I received a note from Astrea Genetics. They had successfully extracted DNA from the hair. It was now the DNA Doe Project's turn.

The first person I reached out to when I heard from Astrea was Jim Grann, who was the Madison police detective who first worked the skeleton in the chimney case in 1989. Grann was legendary in the department for his relentless determination to close cases.

The skeleton case haunted him. Grann had numerous investigative successes, most famously, the 1983 contract killing of Carolyn Hudson. But when we shared a long phone call in 2022 while I was researching my skeleton in the chimney story, he called it his “most frustrating” case. He even wanted to work it as a cold case after he retired.

We spoke for an hour that day in 2022 even though it was clear Jim wasn’t doing well. He had a terrible cough but insisted we go on — he wanted to help. He was cheered by the news that Ludden had reactivated the case and was seeking answers through DNA.

[Jim Grann died in December 2022.](#) I swapped emails with Ludden, who wrote, “I am sad I was not able to give him a big update before his passing — but I will continue to think of him as we work on the case.”

The DNA Doe Project was successful in its “Chimney Doe” investigative genetic genealogy and came up with a relatively close DNA match in the family.

Still, as they stated in a press release, it was anything but easy.

“This was such a unique case,” the release noted, “with adoption and multiple generations of different marriages.”

In his press conference remarks, Chief Barnes said the department’s focus will now be on completing a picture of who Ronnie Joe Kirk was and what brought him to Madison.

Forensic anthropologists had originally suggested the skeleton in the chimney was likely between 10 and 30 years old, although Kirk was in his mid to late 40s when the bones were discovered (it was estimated the remains had been in the chimney for up to two years when they were found).

There is also the matter of the women's clothing. The DNA Doe Project's press release refers to "the so-called dress" and suggests it was mislabeled. Perhaps, but there was also a matching belt, a shag-pile sweater and pointed, low-heeled shoes.

Hesselberg, who wrote about the case with such diligence, had a conflict Monday morning and didn't attend the press conference, but told me Monday afternoon that "it's good to see the science used to put an end to the first part of this mystery."

The mystery of how Kirk ended up in that chimney remains.

"I thought I would feel relief," Ludden told me after the press conference — and certainly, putting a name to the skeleton is an accomplishment that was evidenced by the half dozen uniformed officers who showed up in the community room Monday morning in support of Ludden.

She smiled. "But it's opened up 10,000 more questions."

Completely closing the case is a long shot, but then, so was putting a name to the skeleton. Ludden won't quit.

When I asked her about Jim Grann's son, Jamie Grann, who is also a Madison police detective, she pointed toward the door of the community room.

"He's just leaving," she said.

I caught up with him.

"What would your dad think about today?"

"He'd be thrilled," Jamie Grann said. "He'd be over the moon."

If you have any information in regards to Ronnie J. Kirk, the Madison Police Department is asking that tips be submitted to Detective Lindsey Ludden at LLudden@cityofmadison.com or 608-229-8215.