

**DECADES OLD
ARIZONA COLD CASE
IDENTITY CONFIRMED
WITH HELP FROM
RAMAPO COLLEGE**



Staff in the Ramapo College Investigative Genetic Genealogy Center successfully delivered a candidate to the Maricopa County Medical Examiner's and Arizona Attorney General's offices.

Mahwah, NJ– Investigative genetic genealogy helped confirm the identity of a Phoenix, AZ John Doe after his death more than two decades ago.

A man was found alive and unconscious on the sidewalk of Third Avenue and West Madison Street. Phoenix Emergency Medical Services transported him to St. Joseph's Hospital where he was pronounced deceased on August 17, 2004. He had no identification on him when he was found.

For 20 years, his identity remained unknown. The Phoenix Police Department employed standard means of identification, including fingerprints and entering DNA evidence into the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS) which did not yield any results.

The Maricopa County Office of the Medical Examiner (MCOME) contacted the [Ramapo College Investigative Genetic Genealogy Center](#), located in Mahwah, NJ, in September of 2024. Upon accepting the case, MCOME sent a portion of the bloodstain to [Genologue](#) in Tucker, GA, where a DNA extraction and whole genome sequencing was performed. In October of 2024, Genologue sent files to [Parabon Nanolabs](#) in Virginia for bioinformatics.

In November of 2024, the genotype files were received by the IGG Center and subsequently uploaded to [GEDmatch Pro](#) and [FamilyTreeDNA](#) to try and identify John Doe. Undergraduate students in the [IGG Workshop](#) course at Ramapo College began working on the case, but were unable to progress to an identification prior to the semester's end. Between the last day of the semester and the winter break, staff in the IGG Center continued the work of the students and found two people related to the man, both third cousins.

The team advanced **John Thiellesen** as a candidate to Senior Medicolegal Death Investigator Christen Eggers of the **Maricopa County Officer of the Medical Examiner**. The Arizona Attorney General's Cold Case Unit, led by Supervising Special Agent Roger Geisler collaborated with MCOME to obtain a family reference sample from a sibling of Thiellesen.

In March 2025, MCOME positively confirmed Thiellesen's identity.

"I have had the honor of working with Ramapo College for the past couple of years and our collaborative efforts have led to not only this identification but many others in progress. Ramapo College has become a beacon of hope for individuals and families across the nation," said Eggers. "Their tireless efforts have provided answers to countless families and demonstrates an unyielding dedication to the welfare of all people, regardless of their circumstances.

"This case showcases the power of investigative genetic genealogy to close longstanding missing persons cases," said Cairenn Binder, assistant director of the IGG Center. "Every John and Jane Doe is the answer to a family missing a loved one, and we will continue to do everything in our power to keep restoring their names and providing those answers."

"I'm proud of the work our Cold Case Unit is doing to bring answers and closure to the family members of missing and murdered Arizonans. With increased technology, and the right kind of cooperative approach between law enforcement agencies, there is hope for the loved ones of countless victims," said Arizona Attorney General Kris Mayes.

If you have any information related to the cases the Arizona Attorney General's Cold Case Unit is investigating or any other missing or murdered Arizonans, please submit your tip to the Cold Case Unit [here](#), or by visiting **Silent Witness**.

Nationwide, the IGG Center, which is the only center of its kind to offer case work, research, and hands-on learning, has helped solve **28 cases and has 39 active cases**.

To learn more about the IGG Center's work, visit ramapo.edu/IGG.

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About Ramapo College

Ramapo College of New Jersey is the state's premier public liberal arts college and is committed to academic excellence through interdisciplinary and experiential learning, and international and intercultural understanding. The comprehensive college is situated among the beautiful Ramapo Mountains, is within commuting distance to New York City, was named one of the 50 Most Beautiful College Campuses in America by *CondeNast Traveler*, and boasts the best on-campus housing in New Jersey per Niche.com. Established in 1969, Ramapo College offers bachelor's degrees in the arts, business, data science, humanities, social sciences and the sciences, as well as in professional studies, which include business, education, nursing and social work. In addition, the College offers courses leading to teacher certification at the elementary and secondary levels, and offers graduate programs leading to master's degrees in Accounting, Applied Mathematics, Business Administration, Contemporary Instructional Design, Computer Science, Creative Music Technology, Data Science, Educational Leadership, Nursing, Social Work and Special Education, as well as a Doctor of Nursing Practice.