

23 years later, investigators solve Baby Hope murder cold case

The Pueblo County Sheriff's Office has closed the case in the homicide of an infant whose body was found in the Arkansas River in 1996.

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Published: 2:53 PM MDT March 9, 2020
Updated: 5:22 PM MDT March 9, 2020

PUEBLO, Colo. — The body of an infant girl was found dead in the Arkansas River in 1996, and investigators have been working ever since to solve her murder.

On Monday, the Pueblo County Sheriff's Office (PCSO) said they've done just that.

LeeAnne Hed, 52, of Pueblo West, was determined to be solely responsible for the death of the girl known as "Baby Hope," PCSO said in a release. Hed was identified through DNA testing to be the child's mother. "Bringing closure to this case demonstrates our determination to solve crimes, no matter how old the case may be," said Pueblo County Sheriff Kirk M. Taylor.

Two fishermen found the infant girl in the Arkansas River on Aug. 24, 1996. An autopsy showed the infant was born alive before she was left in the river and died by drowning. She was buried under the name Baby Hope at Mountain View Cemetery in Pueblo.

After more than two decades of investigation, in early 2019, the Colorado Bureau of Investigation (CBI) conducted an updated analysis of Baby Hope's DNA. That resulted in a list of persons of interest who were possible parents of the infant, according to the release.

One of those persons of interest was Hed, who refused to speak to detectives when they contacted her last October, according to PCSO.

Days later, the Pueblo Police Department investigated a burned vehicle with a body inside in the parking lot of the Southern Colorado Gaming & Events Center. The Pueblo County coroner recently identified the body as Hed and ruled her death as a suicide.

Det. David Butterfield, who took over the case in 2017, gathered evidence from the vehicle. Hed's DNA was compared with Baby Hope's, which confirmed Hed was the child's mother, according to the release.

Further investigation since Hed's death has determined she was responsible for Baby Hope's death, and the case has now been closed, PCSO said.

Investigators determined last year that Baby Hope's death was not related to a similar case in Larimer County, in which an infant girl's body was found on the shores of Horsetooth Reservoir on the same day that Baby Hope's body was discovered.

The case involving that child, called "Baby Faith," was also solved through DNA testing. The child's mother, Jennifer Katalinich, is currently facing charges of first-degree murder.