

Gone, but not forgotten: Over 120 unidentified people buried in Pima County Cemetery

TUCSON - There are currently more than 120 unidentified people buried in the Pima County Cemetery.

Some of those cases are homicides.

The Medical Examiner's office recently received a grant of over \$175,000 to exhume some of the remains for DNA profiling, in hopes of letting families know their loved ones have been found.

Prior to 1999, unidentified remains were buried without getting DNA samples.

The Medical Examiner's office has known that for the last 30 years but did not have the funds to exhume the bodies -- until now.

"We believe that if we get DNA profiles out of some of these 40 or 50 planned to be exhumed the bodies and skeletons the DNA labs can suggest some matches," Bruce Anderson, a forensic anthropologist with the Medical Examiner's Office, told News 4 Tucson.

Anderson said in space 112F is John Doe. His remains were found in 1976 near Kitt Peak. It's one of the graves that will be exhumed.

More than 40 years ago, Dr. Walter Birkby, a well-known forensic anthropologist, wrote in his report that he deemed the skeleton to be of a young white male, 5'10" and had long brown hair.

Anderson showed a missing person poster of a man who fit the description.

The unknown man is considered a proposed match to Kenneth Dean Smith from Michigan. Smith was last seen December 1974.

Smith told his parents he was leaving the Grand Canyon and was headed to Organ Pipe National Monument

"I was able to look at the circumstances and it made a lot of sense where the John Doe was found kind of agreed with the travel plan this particular person had communicated," said Julie Lampe, a cyber sleuth from the Doe Network.

Lampe is a volunteer who handles the Arizona cases as a researcher.

She connected the dots from information on the Doe Network, the International Center for Unidentified and Missing persons, NAMUS, National Missing and Unidentified Persons System and social media.

"As I sit here right now, there's three or four cases that I think could easily be identified if we can get DNA out of the decedent's body or skeleton," Anderson added.

Anderson is referring to the remains of two John Does who were Hispanic men.

Both were homicide victims and were buried in 1999.

A few weeks ago, the Doe network contacted Anderson about Gilberto Rene Gonzales and Jose D. Jesus Chavez who went missing in 1996.

Their remains were found near Ryan Air Field three years later.

"This case was interesting because you had two people who went missing together and as I was going through the various data basis I noticed two were found together several years later," Lampe told News 4 Tucson.

Anderson is also hopeful.

"I have to conclude what they concluded it's possible that these missing people are in fact the skeletal remains that were found in an around Tucson," Anderson told News 4 Tucson.

Retired Pima County Sheriff's Detective James Gamber spent 23 years with the department, 14 of those in the homicide unit.

Now, Gamber helps out with the Sheriff's Auxiliary Volunteers along with other retired detectives.

Gamber is assigned to the Cold Cases located in a vault.

Some of those are unidentified victims like John Doe No. 60, whose skeletal remains were found in 1988.

"It leads us to giving these people back to their families but also it leads us to following up on how they disappeared and was their criminal activity," Gamber said.

He added it may also help further their investigations and bring the person or person responsible for the victim's death to justice.

Once the DNA is sent to a lab, it has to be compared.

Anderson said that's where NAMUS comes in.

People who've reported loved ones missing have entered their DNA into the database so if there's a match, they will be alerted.

The exhumation will begin in spring.