

The Nameless Dead: Doe cases in NC

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Next month, NC WANTED will be taking a look at John and Jane Doe cases in North Carolina. We will profile local cases and talk with experts about what science and technology bring to investigations where the victim is unidentified.

ALL COUNTIES: A contractor was mowing grass off of Interstate 85 in Mebane on a sunny September afternoon when he saw it; dull white and ominous along the edge of the woods. Looking closer, he could see the teeth on the skull and more bones lying beside it.

It was 1998, and the medical examiner estimated the boy was around 10 years old. There were a pair of khaki shorts, with \$50 in the pocket, and a black pair of sneakers.

Almost 10 years have passed since Orange County investigators found the young John Doe along the interstate and in that time, Tim Horne has read, taken classes, tracked down leads across state lines and manufactured countless scenarios explaining how the child got there. He still has no idea.

The cause of death was inconclusive but Investigator Horne is almost convinced the boy was murdered. It baffles him that so much time has passed without a missing person report and leads him to speculate that a caretaker, or one who likely would file such a report, is responsible for what led the boy to become a file under his desk.

It happens in North Carolina about a dozen times a year -- someone finds a body, sometimes just a skeleton, sometimes without clothes and most importantly, without a name.

It happens all the time and could happen to anyone, really, said Daphne Hurgronje, who works with the Doe Network, an international organization aimed at identifying John and Jane Does. Doe and missing persons cases are two halves of a strange and frustrating puzzle, explaining the found and finding the lost, and in theory the two should work hand in hand. But sometimes they don't, and Ms. Hurgronje said the Doe Network estimates about 40,000 unidentified sets of remains in the United States. That figure is probably low, she said.

"It's very sad," she said. This is an everyman problem. You're no different than any of these people who are found out there on the side of the road. Neither am I. I mean, this could be you or me. It really could. And it's not that we wouldn't have people looking for us, because we would. And we can't assume that because somebody's found and they're not identified that somebody's not looking for them. They just haven't found them yet."

Clyde Gibbs, a pathologist with the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Chapel Hill, has a background in anthropology and mortuary science and studies unidentified remains, searching for clues to who a person was, how they lived and where they may be from. Without soft tissue, or a trauma like gunshot or blunt force that leaves evidence of the injury on the bones, placing a cause of death can be difficult. Determining age for adults is difficult too. It's easy to estimate a child's age precisely, judging by the fusion at the ends of the bones and molar growth, but estimates for Doe adults typically range from 10 to 20 years, making it hard to match up with missing person reports. Even when the remains aren't skeletal, it can stay unresolved.

In December 1994, a man checked into a hotel in downtown Raleigh under the name Brian Stillwell. He paid for two nights and staff doesn't remember seeing him after that. He never checked out, and when police went to his room they found the door taped shut, along with all of the electrical outlets, the sliding glass door and the windows. The bathroom door was taped shut too, and when John Lynch, then a detective with the Raleigh Police Department, went inside, he found the man in the bathtub with a black plastic bag taped around his head. A pillow was under his feet and a propane tank, with a hose leading up inside the bag, was on the bathroom floor.

They found a wallet in the room, and it had been emptied of any identification. He probably wasn't local, Mr. Lynch said, and like Investigator Horne, he has devoted countless hours to

imagining where he came from, why he did it, and who he left behind. Like Horne, he is reluctant to share his theories. Until the man is identified, those stories are private.

They think the Jane Doe had been dead for three days before they found her along Interstate 40 outside Chapel Hill. It's pretty clear she had been murdered and tossed from a car, probably traveling east on the interstate.

It was September 1990, and since that time, Investigator Greg Strowd of the Orange County Sheriff's Office has nicknamed her "Hope," because she was found near the New Hope Church Road exit. She was wearing nothing but a bra and a sweatshirt, pulled up over her head.

Although it had only been three days, it was too late for fingerprints. The best they had to go on was the sweatshirt, pink and with three rabbits, two on bicycles and one on a unicycle, and a report of a woman with dirty blond hair at a truck stop in Burlington a few days before she was found by some inmates cleaning the side of the highway.

They think she may have been strangled, and the autopsy indicated she was about 19, give or take a couple of years.

Advances in DNA science may reduce the number of unidentified bodies, particularly with family members of missing people submitting DNA and better mechanisms of comparison, but experts doubt the statistics will dip to the extent one might expect, at least not for the time being. Mark it up to a highly mobile population, where a missing person in Florida could end up a Jane Doe in California.

Mark it up to an increased immigrant population, where language barriers and distrust of law enforcement keep cases from entering the system. As long as there are people who get lost, there will be people who get found. And as long as there are people found without identities, there will be people imagining the person they were and the family they left behind in the hopes of filling in the blanks.

It's restoring some dignity, I think, Ms. Hurgronje said. Being a part of these people's lives, even if it's only in their death, is really sacred, I think. And I'm really humbled to be allowed to be a part of it.

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