

Woman found in Thousand Palms shallow grave in 1994 identified by cold case team



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A woman in her late 50s found wrapped in a plastic sheet and buried in a shallow grave near Thousand Palms in 1994 has been identified by authorities nearly three decades later.

The Riverside County District Attorney's Office announced Monday that the remains belonged to **Patricia Cavallaro**, 57, of Bellflower, after her DNA was matched with one of her surviving children.

DA Supervising Investigator Ryan Bodmer, who manages the county's Regional Cold Case Homicide Team, said Cavallaro's remains are among

about 700 his team hopes can be identified if more people who are missing a relative contribute DNA profiles to databases investigators can access.

"With a cold case, genetics are really the only way to move the investigation forward," Bodmer said. "This tool creates an environment to do real detective work in a case where there are no leads."

Senior Investigator Mike Thompson, who is working the open case, said most homicide investigations start with identifying the body, interviewing relatives and identifying suspects from there. Typically, he added, homicide victims are killed by someone they know.

But this investigation couldn't progress along those lines until the body was identified, Thompson said, which proved to be difficult.

Riverside County Sheriff's Deputies found the remains on Oct. 24, 1994, about a half-mile north of Varner Road between Date Palm Drive and Ramon Road.

"There was no evidence that immediately identified her," Thompson said.

"When you don't know who they are or where they came from, it becomes very difficult. It quickly became a cold case."

Thompson said the autopsy determined she had died from homicidal violence. The lack of evidence near where she was found indicated she had likely been killed elsewhere and buried in the desert. And for about 30 years, her identity remained a mystery.

Joseph DelGiudice, chief of the DA's Bureau of Investigation, and Bodmer established the multi-agency cold case team in 2020, with Thompson and investigators from the sheriff's department and Riverside Police Department. The team collaborates with federal and state authorities to utilize databases of genetic information belonging to missing persons.

"If we can find someone we think is a relative, and do a direct DNA search of them, then we could confirm the identity of the remains," Bodmer said.

The team sent a small sample of the woman's remains to a laboratory in Texas, called Othram Inc. With her genetic information, investigators started the time-consuming work of sketching out a potential family tree.

Thompson described the process as giving Patricia Cavallaro her identity back by tracking evidence of her life until it disappeared. She was born in 1937 and had family in Western New York, he said. She moved to California sometime in the 1960s, was his best guess. She lived in Bellflower, in Los Angeles County, and had two children and a husband, records showed.

Her husband died in 2017, he added. And only one of her children, her son, could be located. She was reported missing in 2001, he said, adding her husband told police she "walked away" from home and was never seen again.

"You follow the evidence and you see she was there, and then she just stopped existing in 1994," Thompson said. "After that, there's no evidence that she's alive or dead, no marriage or divorce records, no death certificate."



Remains discovered by police in 1994 were identified by a cold case task force in December 2020. Patricia Cavallaro was reported missing in Los Angeles County in 2001. Investigators with the Riverside County District Attorney's Office used forensic genealogy to identify a possible relative, who agreed to submit DNA, and provide the match needed to confirm her identity. The DA's office provided one of her identification photos for reference.

So the team spoke with her son to get more information. He declined to comment for this story. Bodmer said her son had expected she had died, but didn't know the circumstances.

He agreed to provide a DNA sample and the California Department of Justice said its analysis indicated a strong likelihood that the remains were Cavallaro's.

"How she got from Bellflower to Thousand Palms is a mystery," Thompson said, adding the investigation is still open.

DelGiudice and Bodmer emphasized that if the team is to make similar progress on the hundreds of other cold cases in the county that have been identified as being solvable with genetic profiling, the public's help will be critical.

"We have quite a number of unidentified bodies that clearly died under suspicious circumstances," DelGiudice said.

Private DNA services, like 23andMe and Ancestry.com, have grown in popularity in recent years, Bodmer said, but law enforcement can't access the data they own. Services such as GEDmatch.com, however, can take the same DNA profiles and make them available to broader search, including cold-case investigators.

Bodmer said there are several other cases that are close to similar breakthroughs, like Cavallaro's, if more genetic information was made available by people who have a missing relative.

He provided the example of a woman found dead of a violent attack in 1996, in her late 30s who had a Cesarean scar indicating she had at least one child. Bodmer said it's likely she was a first-generation immigrant with few records to help identify her.

"Someone alive knows who she is," Bodmer said. "Her child or children are probably in their late 20s."

A DNA sample from a direct relative, a brother or daughter, rather than a distant cousin can provide the genetic match needed in such a case that would otherwise likely remain perpetually unsolved.