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N.J. State trooper hopes DNA database will identify woman killed more than a decade ago

by [Rohan Mascarenhas](#)/The Star-Ledger

Wednesday August 19, 2009, 10:00 PM

KEARNY -- The driver never saw her. He heard a thump, went to a gas station and thought about the sound he had heard driving alone along Route 280 West in Kearny on that dark winter morning on Jan. 20, 1997. He called 911, and police found her body by the side of the road.

The woman, who had been walking before dawn in the middle of the left lane of the highway, had no identification in the pocket of her green sweatpants or in her leather jacket. Her fingerprints and dental profile were not listed in any crime registries. Her three piercings in each ear, along with scars on her right hand and torso, hadn't been listed on any missing person report. Her body was so battered from the crash that police couldn't even reconstruct her face.



Saed Hindash/The Star-Ledger

New Jersey State Trooper Gerard Tibbs holds the case file of a cold case



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about a Jane Doe who was killed at mile marker on I-280 West in Kearny in January 1997.

To this day no one knows who she is, and case No. 97-129A remains open.

The latest investigator to take on her case hopes the answer will come from Texas, where he sent the woman's DNA this summer as part of a statewide initiative to renew efforts to identify about 300 nameless bodies and 1,000 missing people reported in New Jersey.

Known as the Combined DNA Index System, or CODIS, it is the country's largest DNA database holding more than 7 million profiles given by all 50 states. State Police said this system represents the best chance for solving cold cases and helping families with lost loved ones.

"This is a voiceless victim with a family, friends, loved ones, that she cannot speak to," said trooper Gerard Tibbs, who adopted the case of the 280 pedestrian last year during a routine audit of cold cases. "Throughout all this, I think of her family asking questions."

The state's effort began after Patricia's Law was adopted in March 2008. Named after a Bergen County woman who vanished from her Bogota home in 2001, the law requires police to obtain DNA samples, if possible, from a missing person, so they can be entered into the CODIS database, which is operated by the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification.



Saed Hindash/The Star-Ledger

New Jersey State Trooper Gerard Tibbs, stands at the spot in Kearny where an unidentified woman was killed walking in the left lane after a car fatally struck her in January 1997. Trooper Tibbs hopes to find out who she is by using the latest DNA technology.

To make sure DNA reached the Texas database, State Police contacted every county prosecutor in the state with a list of missing persons in the jurisdiction and provided kits to help collect DNA.

As of July, New Jersey had sent DNA from 275 of its 300 unidentified remains cases to the center, said Detective Sgt. John Donegan of the State Police.

"I have never seen a state more proactive in this area," said George Adams, the Texas center's missing persons coordinator. "They're making a concerted effort to send in all family reference samples and unidentified remains samples."

Adams said his center, which advises law agencies on DNA matters, was looking to emulate New Jersey's model in other states.

As part of the project, the State Police asks families who report a missing person to submit DNA samples, turning everyday items like toothbrushes and towels into investigative leads.

The agency also sends DNA from unidentified remains, as it did with the woman killed in 1997, using tissue from her heart, liver and lungs, Tibbs said.

For all the cutting-edge technology, success hinges on the old-fashioned grunt work agencies must perform, sending samples from cold cases so the odds increase of matching a missing persons report with an unidentified remains case.

So far this year, CODIS has helped solve one missing persons case.

The Maurer family of Piscataway ended a seven-year hunt for their son Ben when they remembered a blood sample taken when he was born, producing a positive result in the database.

The blood matched DNA sent from New York City police, who found Ben's body shortly after he disappeared in 2002. By the time CODIS matched his DNA, Ben had been buried on Hart Island along with more than half a million of New York City's unidentified or impoverished dead.

"I felt a lot of emotions, all jumbled up. Relief, disbelief, sorrow," said his mother, Germaine. "Ultimately, we have our answers. There's a sense of finality. Right now, I can go to his grave -- it's only a few minutes from my house -- and water the flowers. I know where he is."

Maurer praised the state's initiative.

"It's a very exciting time for the missing person community to be able to have another source to find a missing loved one," she said.

Tibbs, a four-year veteran of the State Police, understands the odds are long for his case. The family of the Route 280 pedestrian, now buried in an unmarked grave in an Irvington Cemetery, may not have even reported her missing.

But with investigative techniques always improving, he keeps plugging her information into more databases, hoping for that ever elusive hit.

"We have science behind us," he said, poring over old case photos and reports. "And science is always good."

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Posted by **flatland** on [08/20/09 at 2:11AM](#)

Great Job Troop, If you need something to get done you could always look to the NJ State Police.

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Posted by **sweetloquita** on [08/20/09 at 2:34AM](#)

Base on the Story here -KEARNY -- The driver never saw her. He heard a thump->

If thats the case , then how come they sugesting that --->The woman, who had been walking before dawn in the middle of the left lane of the highway.

* why not that she was already killed and dump there to make it look just like an accident ?

If not one haved claim her here .. check the missing list .. if not then looks like she was dump here from Out of state .. i already have my suspicious how cold exactly .. maybe when checking the recent cases of an Smart ** who was traveling from State to State and even got to hurt here in New Jersey .. that case was recetnly in the Spot news matter fact here on NJ.com

The victim does have a Voice * wink

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Posted by **njbratty** on [08/20/09 at 2:42AM](#)

Forget about the DNA that wont do much now .. lets look like why any would think she was walking on a plain cold weather ?? serious

I myself would not walk on any highway on a plain cold for a million bucks

walking in AL or TN winter season is ok for any girls but here in E Coast .. we girls know better then that then to on purposse freeze our A lol

she got dump there

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