

New light shed on old case after remains identified

Volunteers help identify body found in 1996

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by penny colston

Thanks to a group of volunteers, police have identified human remains found near Interstate 70 in western Howard County in 1996, breathing new life into a case that has stumped detectives since then.

State police are now bent on piecing together the final days of Reedsville, Pa., resident Tonya Marie Gardner, 52, whose decomposed body was discovered Aug. 27, 1996 near the intersection of I-70 and Route 94 in Lisbon.

Following a tip last month from the Doe Network, a volunteer group that helps officials solve missing persons cases, Maryland State Police positively matched Gardner's dental records to the remains.

"We now know the who; we are working on the how and the why," Sgt. Jack McCauley of the Maryland State Police said.

McCauley refused to comment further on the investigation, except to say police had no suspects and consider Gardner's death "suspicious."

Because Gardner's body was found near a state highway, Maryland police, rather than Howard County police are conducting the investigation, county police spokeswoman Sherry Llewellyn said.

Hunch leads police to body

State Highway Association workers discovered the body of a female in brush near an on-ramp to westbound I-70 from Route 94.

The heavily decomposed remains were at the bottom of a steep embankment and provided no immediate clues to the person's age, sex, race or cause of death. McCauley said police believe a passing motorist dumped the body.

An autopsy identified the remains as those of a 35- to 40-year-old Caucasian woman. The woman had undergone extensive dental work and possibly surgery for Arnold-Chiari malformation, a rare brain defect.

The autopsy also revealed the woman's body likely had been at the scene for one or two months, according to information posted on the Doe Network Web site. The nonprofit volunteer group helps police find missing persons and identify human remains in the United States, Europe and Australia.

Last month's identification came after a tip from Kylen Johnson, the group's Maryland director, who spotted Gardner's missing persons profile while browsing a law enforcement Web site that profiles cold cases.

The site featured details about Gardner posted in 1999 by Pennsylvania Crime Stoppers, a group that helps police solve crimes. Pennsylvania State Police had released the profile after friends and family reported Gardner missing.

The profile said that Gardner had left her Pennsylvania home on July 3, 1996, and never returned. Police offered a \$2,000 reward for information about her disappearance.

Johnson alerted Maryland police last month on a hunch that the remains in Lisbon might be Gardner's.

A mention in Gardner's profile of an unusual 2-inch surgery scar at the back of her neck immediately caught Johnson's eye, she said. However, Gardner was 52, older than the 35 to 40 years officials estimated from the remains.

"The age was way off, but I remembered (from the Lisbon remains) that there had been this brain irregularity," said Johnson, who volunteers for the Doe Network from her home in Montgomery County.

Johnson sent the tip to state police, who tracked down Gardner's dental records and matched them to those gleaned from the autopsy.

Network lends valuable help

McCauley added that officials might never have linked the remains to Gardner were it not for Johnson and the Doe Network.

"She's the one who really deserves the credit," he said. "The work her group does is just awesome."

The nonprofit volunteer network formed in 2001. It includes volunteers from all backgrounds, some in forensics and law enforcement, Johnson said. Since its founding, the group has solved 19 cases, including one other in Maryland.

The group's Web site details more than 700 unidentified remains _ which officials call John or Jane Doe _ and 2,220 unexplained disappearances in North America, Europe and Australia.

Police pursued "several" avenues in their eight-year quest to identify Gardner's remains, McCauley said.

For example, detectives contacted specialists and organizations linked to the rare Arnold-Chiari malformation. He would not say whether Gardner actually suffered from the defect.

State police also used a worldwide criminal intervention that compares missing persons profiles with autopsy reports and supplies possible matches.

McCauley said a number of factors might have prevented the database from alerting police to Gardner.

"This Doe Network is better than computers," he said. "As we all know, computers can foul up."

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