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New ID tools could turn corpses into somebodies

Solving deaths and disappearances

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They are people who lost their names in death. Their names, how they died, how they lived, and whom they knew - keys to solving the riddles of their deaths - remain shrouded in mystery.

These are among the coldest of cold cases, some sitting idle for decades, wanting for details that could determine whether these corpses were the victims of murder, committed suicide, or died for some other reason.

But advances in science and technology bring the hope that the more than 5,900 unidentified bodies around the country can be connected to the more than 100,000 people the federal government has cataloged as missing.

New Jersey, which has 250 unnamed corpses, is expected by year's end to open one of four FBI-sponsored regional laboratories capable of extracting and identifying maternal DNA in skeletal remains.

Such information would set up a possible match on a database if families of the missing give police something with the DNA of the loved one or the DNA of someone who carries the DNA of that person's mother.

"This is probably the most important thing that families don't know about," said Donna Fontana, a forensic anthropologist with the state police who oversees New Jersey's effort to identify bodies.

New Jersey's lab will process DNA for other states, although Fontana said she was not certain which ones.

For two decades, Fontana has used bones to try to establish the person's age and clay reconstructions to determine looks.

This year, she has been putting as much information as possible on a state Web site in the hope that the public could solve some of the mysteries.

"Being in charge of those unidentified bodies . . . I realized that it would be nice to take that information out of the file cabinets and put it on a Web site," Fontana said.

After that was done, one body recently got a name. Fontana declined to give specifics, citing an ongoing homicide investigation.

An array of jurisdictions around the country have adopted a similar policy of posting information. Pennsylvania has posted a few of the 65 cases it has listed with the FBI's

national crime database.

A spokesman for the Philadelphia Medical Examiner's Office said that he did not know the number of unidentified dead and that no cases had been posted on the Web.

In addition to law enforcement initiatives, a cottage industry of volunteers, such as those with the Doe Network, spend untold hours trying to attach names of the missing to those buried without a name.

Nancy Monahan, Pennsylvania director of the Doe Network, said she had gotten hooked a couple of years ago after she lost her job and became obsessed with a case in Carbon County.

"As I started looking, I was amazed at how many people are missing and how many are unidentified," she said.

She highlights cases on her Web site, pennsylvaniamissing.com. One is "Bensalem Jane Doe," whose remains were found a decade ago behind a diner.

In South Jersey, Detective Stacie Lick of the Gloucester County Prosecutor's Office recently was handed a 15-year-old case in the hope that a new set of eyes might pick up a missed clue.

In what was then woods in Deptford, hunters had discovered a skeleton of a female who could have been anywhere from 16 to in her 20s. The skull was used to make a clay bust and a computer image of what she might have looked like. Both show the pearl bead necklace and yellow metal earrings found with her bones.

Two of the best-known cases of unidentified dead that have stumped investigators are in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The boy known as "the Boy in the Box" was found in the Fox Chase section of Philadelphia in 1957. "Princess Doe," whose age was estimated between 14 and 20, was found beaten beyond recognition near a cemetery in Blairstown, N.J., in 1982.

While investigators say that the more time passes, the harder it is to assemble the pieces of a puzzle, persistence can be rewarded on occasion. The Doe Network, spokesman Todd Matthews said, has helped police put names to 35 previously open cases - with several more expected soon, pending official confirmation.

For nearly 25 years, a body in a Camden County potter's field with the grave marked "Unknown male found Oct. 16, 1975" waited. The nude remains of a teenager or young man had been pulled from the Delaware River that day with no clues as to what led to that fate.

Three days earlier, Martin Michael Burkle, 16, disappeared from his job at a gas station on Spring Garden Street in Philadelphia. His family asked about the body, but authorities said it was not Burkle's.

After more than two decades of putting out flyers, chasing phantom leads, and appearing on TV, the family in 2000 caught the interest of investigators who no longer were so

quick to dismiss the possibility that Burkle was buried in a nameless grave.

The family was asked whether he was a nail-biter. He was. It was asked for photos that showed his ears and widow's peak. Pictures of the body matched. He was exhumed and identified positively through dental records.

"I always knew God would bring him back to me," said his mother, Irene Sejda of Philadelphia.

She said she was still bitter about how police initially handled the case, which has been ruled a homicide.

But she said she was just glad to finally find his body and give her son a proper burial.

"So many people have not found their loved ones," Sejda said. "I know I am blessed."

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Find more information about cases of unidentified bodies via <http://go.philly.com/bodies>

Donna Fontana, a forensic anthropologist with the state police, hopes a Web site and a planned FBI lab help identify bodies. The value of maternal DNA "is probably the most important thing that families don't know about," she said.

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