

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

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Thirty-three years ago, crews working on the side of I-40 found the remains of a young woman near the New Hope Church Road exit. I remember that day – I was a patrol deputy working in the southern part of the county. The victim had been dead for about a week, and the investigation revealed her killer probably strangled her and dumped her body alongside the Interstate.

She was likely between 15 and 25 years old. Investigators wondered if she had been a runaway. Some witnesses reported seeing a person matching her description at a truck stop. Despite pursuing hundreds of leads, investigators were unable to determine her identity or that of her killer.

Throughout the decades, some of our finest investigators kept plugging away. When you can't close a case, it gets under your skin. You might set the file aside for a while, but you keep coming back to it, looking to see something you didn't notice before, or hoping information gathered in ensuing cases has relevance to your cold case.

Think back to 1990. Most of us probably didn't have an email account or regular access to a computer. We did not have smart phones or social media accounts. Searches and inquiries we can accomplish now in a matter of seconds at a keyboard previously required an entirely different skill set.

During the ensuing three decades, technology improved, and investigators continually had new tools at their disposal. They repeatedly checked web-based missing person sites as those became growing repositories of information. They turned to social media. Early in the case, someone made a bust of the victim, applying forensic facial reconstruction techniques to a model of her skull. By 2018, a talented digital forensic artist was able to generate an illustration that resembled a photograph. We pushed out this image and renewed pleas for help on the thirtieth anniversary of the day workers located her body, but nothing came of those efforts.

Meanwhile, in laboratories all over the world, people continued to push the frontiers of science, particularly in the field of DNA research. Although prosecutors first won a criminal conviction using DNA in 1986, the field of forensic science as we know it today was still in its infancy in 1990 when we began this investigation. Although scientists could perhaps confirm someone's identity via a DNA match or prove someone's involvement in a crime through the biological clues they left behind, they could not use DNA to identify an unknown person.

Through the years, we received substantial assistance and resources from the State Bureau of Investigation and several volunteers with a passionate interest in solving missing persons cases. We assigned Investigator Dylan Hendricks to the case in June 2020. He eventually learned from an SBI agent about a California lab doing phenomenal work extracting DNA from rootless hair, another new frontier. Hendricks sent a degraded hair fragment to [Astrea Forensics](#) in May of last year. The company returned a DNA profile last month, and after 33 years, we finally had the breakthrough we needed.

Forensic genealogist Leslie Kaufman worked with the profile to identify family members of the victim using genealogy databases and other forensic tools. She identified some paternal cousins and investigators began conducting interviews. They learned of a female relative named Lisa Coburn Kesler whom no one had heard from in at least three decades. Investigator Hendricks said, “Essentially, there was a Lisa-shaped hole on a branch of the family tree right where the DNA told us Lisa should be, and no one knew where she was.” A maternal relative provided a DNA sample. Once analyzed, we had additional confirmation. Lisa was 20 years old when she died and had spent most of her life in Jackson County, Georgia.

The results satisfied Clyde Gibbs, a Medical Examiner Specialist in the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. He updated [NamUS](#), a national database used to connect missing persons cases to unidentified remains, reflecting that the DNA method resolved her case. Additionally, the Chief Medical Examiner is now able to amend her death certificate, providing her correct name and adding other demographic information.

I am very happy we solved the decades-old mystery of this young woman’s identity, and I hope it provides solace to her remaining family members. We are grateful to the many investigators, passionate volunteers, and talented professionals who assisted with this effort. Our work on this case is not finished. Although we collectively demonstrated the value of dogged determination, we still need to identify Lisa’s killer. There is no statute of limitations on murder, and the investigation remains open.

If you have any information about this case, please call Investigator Hendricks at (919) 245-2951.