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Unsolved Cases: Nicole Lynn Bryner's Body Never Found

The mother said her daughter had been abducted on the South Side but, later, the mother's boyfriend confessed to burying the toddler in Brookline

By [Zandy Dudiak](#) | [Email the author](#) | 5:45 am

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The image of a little girl on a grocery shopping trip with her mother—then suddenly gone.

That was happened the day of March 9, 1982 when Melody Childs Thomas told police that her daughter, Nicole Lynn Bryner, 3, had been abducted from a shopping cart at the Giant Eagle supermarket on the South Side of Pittsburgh. Though there were extensive searches, no trace of Nicole was ever found.

Then, in 1986, Timothy Widman, Childs' boyfriend at the time, allegedly confessed he had punched Bryner and accidentally killed her. He told police that he and Childs' buried the body in a wooded area along Timberland Road in Brookline. Police searched unsuccessfully for the body. Without it, prosecutors could not pursue the case.

But in 1988, a Superior Court decision changed the law to say that someone could be presumed to be dead after being missing for seven years. That meant that Widman could be charged with her murder even if police could not produce Nicole's body. meant that police no longer had to produce Nicole's body in order to charge Widman with her murder.

Police searched the Brookline area using cadaver dogs after Widman's arrest in hopes of finding Nicole's remains. In the 24 years since her disappearance, the the area's topography had changed several times, including the installation of sewer lines. That search failed to yield Nicole's body.

In 1986, Childs was charged with hindering apprehension and lying to police but those charges were dismissed. She died after back surgery in June 2001 in a Texas hospital.

A 1988 Superior Court decision changed the law to say that someone could be presumed to be dead after being missing for seven years. That meant police didn't have to produce Nicole's body to prosecute Widman based on essentially the same information they had 20 years ago.

[The Post-Gazette reported in 2006](#) that it was not clear yesterday why it took so long to apply the new law. The 1988 precedent means police could have begun Widman's prosecution starting in 1995, when the seven years were up.

Widman, of Brookline, [agreed to plead to involuntary manslaughter](#) rather than face a trial on a homicide charge, according to the Post-Gazette.

[He said he had been sleeping on a couch at](#) his girlfriend's house and had been on a drug binge for several days when Nicole woke him by biting his toe. He said he slapped the child's face with the back of his hand. She fell, knocked her head on the floor and lapsed into a state of semi-consciousness.

[The Post-Gazette reported](#) that Widman told detectives he woke her mother, who took the girl to bed with her. The couple later realized the child had died. The next evening, Widman said he placed the body in a green plastic garbage bag and drove to a wooded area in Brookline near Timberland and Abstract avenues. He said he buried Nicole's naked body in about two feet of soil and said a prayer.

He told police it was Ms. Thomas' idea to notify police on March 11 that Nicole had been abducted from the supermarket.

Anyone with information concerning Nicole's whereabouts is asked to contact the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police at [412-255-2888](tel:412-255-2888).

For more information about this and other missing person cases, visit [Pennsylvania Missing Persons](#), [NamUs](#) or the [Doe Network](#).

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