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News

Forensic workers try to give names to the dead

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By Michael A. Fuoco, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Seven years ago, the decomposed remains of a woman were discovered in an abandoned railroad tunnel behind The Waterfront Giant Eagle in Homestead.

Today, on the anniversary of the gruesome discovery, the woman still has no identity, making her one of four Jane Doe cases in the Allegheny County medical examiner's office going back a decade.

The women may be unknown but they are not forgotten. Forensic investigators and Allegheny County homicide detectives continue to work leads when they arise. Additionally, the Doe Network, an international group of volunteers committed to helping identify unknown remains, tries to generate leads by seeking publicity for such cold cases, passing on any viable leads to authorities.

"Not only did they die but they do not have their names," said Nancy Monahan of Penn Hills, the Doe Network area director for Pennsylvania, which has about a half dozen volunteers. "They're people, they mattered, they had loved ones."

Ms. Monahan, who noted the Homestead case is on both the group's Web site (www.doenetwork.org) and another she maintains (www.pennsylvaniamissing.com), said the goal is to "get her face out there, to make people aware she's still unknown in hopes somebody after seven years will come forward to say who she is, and by doing so the police can find out who left her there."

The unknown woman's remains, naked except for a pair of socks on her feet, were discovered when a project manager looking over his company's property happened upon the corpse hidden about 20 feet inside the railroad tunnel.

Forensic examination of the body led investigators to believe the remains are those of a white female of average height, who probably was between 20 and 40 but likely on the younger end of that scale. They think she had been dead for months and while decomposition made it impossible to determine a cause of death, it is considered suspicious.

A examination by forensic odontologist Dr. Michael N. Sobel revealed what was hoped would be a key lead in determining her identity -- a stainless steel crown on the first molar on the left side, indicating she may have had the work done in Eastern Europe where that dental practice is common. Generally, metal crowns in the United States are custom-made out of

gold or silver from molds of the patient's teeth.

That discovery led county detectives to believe that the woman may have been an Eastern European or Russian immigrant. They enlisted a translator from the University of Pittsburgh for meetings between detectives and a group of Russian and Eastern Europeans living in a county public housing complex in Homestead.

But those meetings -- and the release of two composite sketches of the unknown woman -- yielded nothing viable.

Lt. Chris Kearns of the county homicide squad said the lack of identification in the four county Jane Doe cases makes it extremely difficult for detectives to get any traction in learning how they died.

"The other problem with those four cases is we don't even believe that's the primary crime scene where the bodies were found," Lt. Kearns said. Detectives suspect they were moved there.

"Those are our two starting points in any investigation: the initial crime scene and who the victim is. You can't trace back who they were last seen with if you don't know who they are.

"If you don't have that, you don't have anywhere to go."

The other Jane Doe cases include:

- The badly decomposed body of a slight woman wrapped in a blue blanket bound with duct tape and with a plastic grocery bag over her head that was pulled from the Allegheny River near Fox Chapel Yacht Club on Oct. 24, 2003. The cause of death was a drug overdose, probably heroin.

- The skeletal remains of a black woman, about 18 to 20 years old, 5 feet 7 inches tall and 120 pounds, were found in the cellar of a vacant home in the 600 block of North Avenue in Wilkinsburg on June 28, 1999. Police said she had been strangled six months to a year earlier.

- An elderly black woman was found in a sleeping bag behind a Ponderosa restaurant on Route 65 in Avalon on June 19, 1997. She died of natural causes.

Lt. Kearns said he, like Ms. Monahan, is hopeful publicity might spur someone with information to come forward.

"As time goes on, it doesn't get any easier," he said of the attempts to solve those cases.

Anyone with information is asked to call county police at 412-473-1300.

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