

Genetic Genealogy Helps ID Victim of Green River Killer

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Genetic genealogy helped identify the youngest known victim of one of the nation's most prolific serial killers almost 37 years after her remains were discovered near a baseball field south of Seattle.

Wendy Stephens was 14 and had run away from her home in Denver before Gary Ridgway, the Green River Killer, strangled her in 1983, the King County Sheriff's Office announced Monday.

Ridgway terrorized the Seattle area in the 1980s, and since 2003, he has pleaded guilty to killing 49 women and girls. Four of the victims — including Stephens — had not been identified.

“Ridgway’s murderous spree left a trail of profound grief for so many families of murdered and missing women,” King County Prosecutor Dan Satterberg said in a written statement. “We are thankful that Wendy Stephens’ family will now have answers to their enormous loss suffered nearly 40 years ago.”

Researchers at the DNA Doe Project, a volunteer organization that uses publicly available DNA databases to find relatives of unidentified victims, helped make the identification.

Genetic genealogy has increasingly been used to track down unidentified criminal suspects and help solve scores of cold cases in recent years, some of them more than a half-century old or involving other serial killers. It unmasked the Golden State Killer, Joseph DeAngelo, who pleaded guilty to 13 murders and 13 rape-related charges that spanned much of California between 1975 and 1986.

Stephens' remains were found in a wooded area next to a baseball field in what is now the suburb of SeaTac on March 21, 1984, after the groundskeeper's dog came home with a leg bone. She had been killed a year

or more earlier, investigators believe, and she is thought to have been Ridgway's youngest victim.

The remains of another Ridgway victim, Cheryl Wims, were discovered at the same time.

Stephens' family requested privacy and declined to speak with reporters, said Sgt. Tim Meyer, a spokesman for the sheriff's office.

Cairenn Binder, who led the DNA Doe Project team that identified Stephens, said that by entering her DNA information into a genealogy website, they were able to locate distant cousins on both her mother's side and father's side. By building out a family tree with census, birth and other records, they pinpointed where the families intersected — Stephens' parents.

Investigators found a missing person report for Stephens that had been filed in 1983, and they matched her DNA directly with one of her parents.

It only took a few weeks for Binder's team to come up with Stephens' name. But it could have been even quicker: Years ago, one of Stephens' parents entered DNA into the database GEDmatch, in hopes of finding her or any children she might have had, Binder said.

That would have provided a quick DNA hit. But in 2019, GEDmatch changed its policies, better protecting the privacy of users by requiring them to opt in if they wanted law enforcement to be able to use their DNA in investigations. Because the parent had provided their DNA before the policy change, and they had not subsequently opted in, Binder's team didn't see the parent's DNA profile when they searched.

Researchers at the DNA Doe Project don't contact victims' families, Binder said, but as the mother of a 14-year-old daughter, she could imagine the trauma they endured.

“It was a lot to think about how youthful this victim was and what she had gone through in her life,” Binder said. “It's really upsetting her youth was taken away from her, but it also gives me some measure of comfort and a feeling of success because we were able to restore her name.”

Ridgway preyed on young women in vulnerable positions, including sex workers and runaways, mostly from 1982 to 1984. He sometimes showed them photos of his own young son to gain their trust.

He was long a suspect in the Green River killings — so called because the first victims were found in the Green River, which runs through several south Seattle suburbs. Detectives were unable to prove his role until 2001, when advances in DNA technology allowed them to link a saliva sample they had obtained from him in 1987 to semen found on several victims.

Ridgway claimed to have killed dozens more women than he was charged with — so many he said he lost count. He pleaded guilty in a deal to avoid the death penalty after agreeing to help investigators find additional remains. He is now 71, spending the rest of his life at the Washington State Penitentiary.