

Just Identifying Gacy's Victims Part 2

Introduction [00:00:05] Now this is recording RTI International Center for Forensic Science Presents Just Science.

Voiceover [00:00:19] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research, and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In episode three of our Case Studies Part 2: mini season, Just Science sat down again with Jason Moran, Commander of Police at the Cook County Sheriff's Office, to continue discussing how his Forensic Services Initiative team reopened the John Wayne Gacy case in an attempt to identify the eight remaining victims. Once Commander Moran's cold case unit announced the reopening of the Gacy case, his team was contacted by hundreds of families across the country who were still looking for their missing loved ones. Although the team planned to identify the eight remaining victims, it turned out they were able to provide answers for more families than they could have ever predicted. Listen along as Commander Moran discusses the hurdles of forming a cold case unit, the methodology behind identifying a victim, and the incredible results from his cold case investigation. This episode is funded by the National Institute of Justice's Forensic Technology Center of Excellence. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may evoke emotional responses or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host, Jaclynn McKay.

Jaclynn McKay [00:01:27] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Jaclynn McKay, with the Forensic Technology Center of Excellence, a program of the National Institute of Justice. Today, we will be continuing the conversation from last week on resolving cold cases with unidentified victims. Back to guide us in our discussion is Commander Jason Moran. Thank you so much for coming back to talk to us again.

Jason Moran [00:01:48] It's great to be with you, Jaclynn. Thanks for having me.

Jaclynn McKay [00:01:50] With all the leads that you were gathering and through your triaging process, what were some of the leads that you received that actually lined up with some of Gacy's victims?

Jason Moran [00:02:03] After we had the press conference announcing the reopening of the case, right away, it became so overwhelming because so many people were reaching out, all regarding missing young men from that time period. You know, one of the first few leads that had come in was a woman looking for her missing brother. And she basically explained that her brother, he was a young man named Bill Bundy, had gone missing in the mid seventies, around 1976, if I remember. That he had left to go to a party and he never returned. And she remembers that he ended up leaving his wallet at home and never was seen or heard from again. The circumstances fit the victim profile fairly strongly. He was from the north side of Chicago, where Gacy was known to operate. He was the right age. Stature was consistent. There was a lot of consistencies with the victim profile. Well, I got a second phone call from a friend of Bill Bundy's, who said that one of the last times he saw Bill alive, just a week or so prior to his disappearance, that Bill had flashed him a bunch of cash money. And he said it might have been a couple hundred dollars, and for a 17-year-old young man in the seventies to have that amount of cash money on him, he thought that he was dealing drugs. So he says, Bill, are you dealing drugs? Why do you got all that cash on you? And he goes, no, I'm working construction for a guy. Now we know from researching the case, I had learned that one way Gacy acquired his victims

was through employment, through Gacy's business, PDM contractors. So that immediately struck out and combined with what I learned from the sister was - fit the victim profile very, very strongly. So I decided to pursue with the DNA. So I collected DNA from Bill Bundy's sister and brother, sent it in for profiling and the mitochondrial DNA in the samples from the sister and brother were a match to the mitochondrial DNA in victim number 19. Unfortunately, that victim did not produce a suitable amount of STR DNA, so I didn't have that to go on. And as your listeners may or may not know, mitochondrial DNA is maternally inherited, but it's non discriminative. So in other words, if your mother and you and your child all left a drop a blood on the desk and we swabbed it and tested it for mitochondrial DNA, we would not be able to say, this is your mother's drop of blood, this is yours and this is your child. All we be able to say is these individuals are maternally related since the beginning of time. So while it's a great tip or a clue, it wasn't discriminative. So I needed a little more. And I began looking at the skeletal analysis report for victim number 19. The skeletal analysis report and the dental reports. Notice that victim number 19 did not have the maxillary canine teeth. So, in other words, the upper jawbone did not have the I or canine teeth. But not - it wasn't postmortem tooth loss. They didn't fall out in Gacy's crawl space as a result of decomposition or a result of the excavation and I teeth are known to fall out post mortem because they don't have a strong root system like the molars do. But it wasn't that. These were healed fracture. The forensic dentist that examined victim number 19 noted that these were healed sockets. In other words, the I teeth were extracted from this victim prior to death, which at the time was not significant to me. I didn't know what - I've never really known anybody that had both I teeth extracted or what the purpose of that would be. I just noted it in the report. So I thought to myself, if I could get a picture of Bill Bundy smiling, you know, a nice big, bright smile, and we could see that Bill did not have k9 teeth, that that in combination with the mitochondrial DNA match, in combination with the circumstances surrounding Bill's disappearance, may be enough to say that victim number 19 and missing person Bill Bundy, were one in the same person. So I'd gone back to the family of Bill Bundy and I'd asked them for these photographs and and we really went on a journey, which is something you do with family members of long term missing persons, you know, going back through their recollection and seeing the pain of having a long term missing person in your life and other circumstances. You know, I call it living in a cruel limbo. But so we sort of went on this journey about her remembering and she shared with me, you know, my mother was so upset after Bill went missing, you know, it became so hard for her to look at this picture year after year after year that we started to purge Bill's items. And we don't have many pictures left. And she didn't have any of Bill smiling. And I couldn't lead on at the time that I knew about the mitochondrial DNA profile or what the circumstances were because I did not want to get this family's hopes up. So we just talked it out. We talked and talked more. And I asked about other items she may have belonging to her brother. And she thought about it, she thought - she goes well, I have his teeth. I go, what do you mean? What do you mean you have his teeth? She goes, well, years before he disappeared, our dentist and by the way, they didn't have dental records for Bill. Bill's dental records were destroyed years prior to reopening the case. Actually, they were destroyed prior to the original murder case because the family came forward, Bill Bundy's family came forward during the original Gacy murder case to try to learn if their missing loved one was one of Gacy's victims. But when my predecessors asked for dental records, the family could not locate them. They went to the dentist, he had retired and destroyed his dental records. So they went back to my predecessor and said, well, there is no dental records. And they said, well, there's no other way to identify the skeleton at this time. So I'm sorry. But anyway, she had explained to me that prior to Bill's disappearance, he'd gone to the dentist and had these two teeth removed, and I think he was about 15 at the time. And being a typical boy from that time period, especially, he requested from the dentist to keep his teeth, particularly because the I teeth, they're the biggest teeth in the

mouth. So being a boy, he said, I want to gross my friends out by showing them my big teeth that were extracted from my head. And the dentist allowed it. And he did. I guess he kept them in a little jar and he would show the girls to try to gross them out or he would jiggle them in front of his guy friends and that type of thing. So I immediately showed them to the forensic dentist, he identified them as maxillary canine teeth, and I asked, why would a dentist extract someone's canine? And he says, well, back in the day before, braces were popular, or even if they were around, they were so expensive. When someone, an individual, specifically a teen, had crooked teeth or very tight, the teeth were very tight, they would remove the canine teeth to allow the rest of the teeth to sort of spread out and line up better. They were like poor man's braces is what he referred to them. But the significance of the teeth was now there was enough. Now we could say that between the mitochondrial DNA profile, the circumstances surrounding Bill's disappearance, both that he was working construction for an individual and location and the timing of it all, his biometrics, his stature and some other things were consistent with victim number 19. Now, the maxillary canine teeth, that was enough to say that Gacy's victim number 19 and missing person, Bill Bundy, were one and the same person. And that is really how human identification is done in a cold case setting. You know, it's never one thing. You know, it's never just DNA or just dental or just circumstances. You take all of the evidence and information that you have to find out if this is reasonable to say this missing individual is this unidentified deceased person. And we were able to amend victim number 19's death certificate with the name of William Bundy. And that was the first Gacy victim that I was able to identify.

Jaclynn McKay [00:10:01] That's incredible. I literally have goosebumps, you talking about that and I really think that will resonate well with our listeners, and I'm very happy that you were able to give that victim their name back.

Jason Moran [00:10:14] And their family members some answers.

Jaclynn McKay [00:10:17] Absolutely. And I'm sure, especially since they were involved, since the beginning, that they welcomed those answers.

Jason Moran [00:10:25] That was the hard part to the poor family. They tried to learn if Bill was one of Gacy's victims back during the original murder case. But without those dental records, there was nothing that could be done. From working with dozens and dozens and dozens of families of long-term missing persons, it's the cruel limbo, not knowing what to think. I've met some family members of long-term missing persons, they wouldn't move from their house in case the missing person had amnesia or some other issue that made them not remember where they lived and that they would get their memory back one day and they would come back home and that the family would be gone because they moved. It's really working with family members of long-term missing persons. They're just so eager for any answer, anything. An exclusion is good for them. I can exclude this as a possibility of what happened to my missing loved ones. That is a huge win. You know, they don't want to give up hope. It's a very hard way to live. And the other side of that is with the, you know, with cold cases, unresolved murders, the family lives in incredible pain with the loss of their loved one, but an increased pain without knowing who killed them. But at least they have a grave to go to. You know, at least they have some answers. So there's a different type of pain with family members of long term missing persons because there are so many unanswered questions.

Jaclynn McKay [00:11:49] With your experience working with all these families, are there any like victims centered practices that you would recommend to investigators for actually

making the death notifications? And how does death notifications differ for cases that are decades old, or do they even differ at all?

Jason Moran [00:12:09] Well, I've always said one of the worst parts of being a detective, at least for me, was making the death notification. You know, there's just no good way to put it. You know, informing someone of their loved one's death is just, it's just a horrible task. There's a lot to it because you also have to obtain information from the next of kin to make sure you're talking with the right person that they are responsible for the decedent's welfare. There's other investigative questions that have to be answered. It's sensitive, but you have to be a fact finder at the same time. While you may feel emotionally connected to the person, you cannot become emotional. It's just a horrible task. But it's an important part of the death investigation because it begins that victimology, you know, learning about your victim. Part of what you learn, you know, the victimology is talking with the next of kin. So that death notification is an important part of the case. And it really makes no difference if the individual died an hour ago, say, in a car crash or the individual died 40 years ago at the hands of a serial killer.

Jaclynn McKay [00:13:23] For sure. So you walked us through how you were able to identify one of the remaining victims. So that leaves us with seven left. How many of those individuals have you had the fortune to identify, and what are some future steps that you're planning to take in order to help resolve the remaining cases?

Jason Moran [00:13:46] Through the process, I've been able to identify three of Gacy's victims. Three of the eight. The investigation continues. Unfortunately, I'm not able to work on it full-time, so there's still more work to be done. One new method that I've employed in the case is forensic genetic genealogy or forensic investigative genetic genealogy or forensic genealogy. It goes by so many names now FG, FGG, FIGG, but that is one new process that I've used that actually has began since I reopened the case. So when we reopened the case ten or so years ago, FIGG was not even a thing. But since we reopen the case, it has become a thing. So that is another method that I'm using. It's been successful with the identification of victim number five, a missing kid named Francis Wayne Alexander, and it aided in identifying him and it's something I'm going to use in the five remaining Gacy victims.

Jaclynn McKay [00:14:48] Obviously, missing persons and unidentified remains investigations is much different today than it was back in the 1970s. So can you maybe talk about what has changed and what strides have been made in order to try to help these investigations as we've moved forward with maybe the addition of new technology or just new ways of thinking?

Jason Moran [00:15:11] That's an interesting part about cold cases or forensic services or these types of investigations that we discuss. One of the main ways we solve cold case is by applying contemporary investigative methods to an old case. So when I'm reviewing a cold case, whether it be an unresolved murder or a missing person or unidentified human remains, undetermined death, I look for what processes do we have now that my predecessors did not. And it doesn't have to be in the form of just DNA. DNA is the main one. But there's other contemporary forensic methods that were not available to our predecessors that we could apply. And that's one of a few different ways we solve cases. What's available to us now, or was a method that was used back then, used incorrectly? Were the results somehow false? And do we have to do retesting with our current standards?

Jaclynn McKay [00:16:09] Jason, you've dedicated your life's work to resolving cold cases. So what is the importance of having these units established within police departments and what can other cold case investigations teams learn from your experience through reopening these cases?

Jason Moran [00:16:27] Well, that's the big question, you know, when you're talking about forming a cold case unit. There's two main hurdles to forming a cold case unit. One of them is the technical hurdle, and that is resources in the form of personnel who have skill sets in these types of cases, which really - it really comes down to, unfortunately, money. It's money to support salaries of detectives who have skill set in this type of work because cold cases are different than other investigations and they require a certain skill set and experience and training, and it costs money to find individuals with the skill set and experience necessary to work these cases. It takes money for advanced testing, as in DNA testing. Forensic genetic genealogy costs money. So there's that technical hurdle where, are the decision makers, are they willing to put time and money and effort into forming a cold case unit? The second hurdle is the philosophical, and that is what do we value? And it goes back to what we talked about earlier, you know, and it's something that I had always said and the sheriff and I have talked about, is a person that goes missing 30 years or less important than a person that goes missing today? Is a person that was murdered 25 years ago less important than a person that is murdered today? If your answer is no, then you've gotten over the philosophical hurdle, right? If you value justice and you value dignity, then you've gotten over the philosophical hurdle. But there's two. It's the technical and the philosophical. Once you get decision makers to say this is of value, this is important, that we're going to put resources towards funding a cold case unit or a forensic service initiative, so what I do, and you get people with a philosophical hurdle, all of these victims are important, then you have to start getting yourself organized. What is our need? How many cold cases do we have? And that's what I - when we were talking before about defining a cold case, you know, what is a cold case and how are these solved? If you're just doing unresolved murders, you're limiting the effect of the cold case unit. Because some agencies and I'm talking about law enforcement agencies, they may have one or two unresolved murders in their history, but they may have five open missing person cases, long term missing person cases. They may have two unidentified deceased person cases. They may have ten open sexual assault cases and maybe five undetermined deaths where the ME or coroner has not been able to determine the cause and manner of the death. Now, when you look at it, that perspective, now you have 25 cases you're looking at and it's easier to put resources in the form of money, particularly, towards this. So you've got to get yourself organized. When you're presenting the cold case options to decision makers, you've got to know. What do you have here? What's open, what's not open? How many unresolved murders do you have? How many long-term missing persons, you know? And you got to give them to them clearly so they can make an informed decision on should we put resources toward this? Does it make sense to form a task force? You know, maybe, you know, here in Cook County, I think there's 130 municipalities in one county. Cook County is the second largest county in the country with 130 municipalities and almost 130 different police departments. Well, many of those police departments may have one unresolved murder case or some have none, some have a bunch of missing person cases and some have a couple of unidentified human remains cases. So none of those departments within themselves would ever form a cold case unit because they don't have the amount of work that would justify putting those resources towards forming the unit. But if you look at the ten towns or the 20 towns or 30 towns around you, maybe in that group there's eight unresolved murders, ten, you know, six unidentified human remain cases, you know, and the sexual assaults and down the line like we've talked about. Now, maybe we pool resources because together we have

enough, but individually, we don't. You know and talking about county task forces, state task forces, but getting over those technical and philosophical hurdles, so you have decision makers put resources into these groups, I think is very important. No less important than some of our homicide task forces that we do now on cases that occur today.

Jaclynn McKay [00:21:04] Commander Morgan, it has been great discussing these topics with you. Thank you for your insight and your time. It has truly been a pleasure talking with you.

Jason Moran [00:21:12] Thank you, Jaclynn it was great.

Jaclynn McKay [00:21:13] If you enjoyed today's episode, be sure to like and follow Just Science on your platform of choice. For more information on today's topic and resources in the forensics field, visit ForensicCOE.org. I'm Jaclynn McKay and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Voiceover [00:21:32] Next week, Just Science down with a panel from the Cuyahoga County Medical Examiner's Office to discuss an active case where modern technology is being used to help identify another victim. Opinions or points of views expressed in this podcast represent a consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.