

2023 Oregon Cold Case Investigators Award

Detective Mark Povolny

In September 2021, Detective Povolny was assigned an unsolved double-murder case from 1974. In October 1974, Donald Bartron and Peter Zito Jr were working on a car in the parking lot of a community center when they were shot to death with a 22 High Standard Pistol. The victims were just 18 and 16, respectively, at the time of their deaths. Detectives made an arrest later that day, however, charges against that person were dropped. Early in the investigation, Steven Paul Criss was a suspect. Criss went to high school with both victims and worked with victim Donald Bartron at a local restaurant.

The investigation stalled and Criss enrolled in the US Army after graduating high school. While stationed at Fort Lewis, Criss shot and killed his commanding officer, also with a .22 High Standard Pistol. Criss was arrested and pled guilty. An analysis was done on the firearm recovered from that murder and at the time, no link could be made between the 1974 murders and the 1976 murder. Criss was sentenced to 35 years, however, only served 12 and was released in 1988 from Fort Leavenworth. Criss has lived in Washington County Oregon since his release, residing a mere few miles from the place where he executed victims Bartron and Zito.

After organizing and studying the case, Detective Povolny believed he had a very strong circumstantial case to present against Steven Criss. Detective Povolny resubmitted the ballistic evidence from 1974 and 1976 to the ATF and Oregon State Police. He learned that the same gun was used in all three murders, providing overwhelming evidence that Criss was responsible for the murders. This match in ballistics to firearm was the oldest known successful ATF comparison in the United States. Due to this evidence Criss was indicted and arrested on November 2, 2022.

Detective Povolny's attention to detail and excellent work ethic provided a resolution to two families who waited nearly 50 years for justice.

This case was always considered open; however, no other investigator gave it the attention that Detective Povolny did. Had this case been stayed much longer, it is very likely that key witnesses would be deceased, making the case impossible to prosecute.

Dr. Nici Vance

Dr. Nici Vance is a State Forensic Anthropologist and Human Identification Program Coordinator with the Oregon State Police Medical Examiner's Office.

Dr. Vance applied for and was granted a Bureau of Justice Assistance grant in 2019 to use emerging technologies, like investigative genetic genealogy (IGG) and DNA phenotyping, to generate leads in identifying the more than 100 unidentified remains held at the Oregon State Medical Examiner's.

Dr. Vance partnered with Parabon NanoLabs and DNA Labs International to assist in DNA extraction from unidentified remains. Out of 43 submitted cases, investigative genetic genealogy was initiated on 39 of the cases. These studies have led to the positive identification of

approximately 30 individuals, some of whom have been unidentified for decades, almost all who were never reported as missing. One such investigation included the resolution of Oregon's oldest unidentified human remains case from 1963 of two year-old Stevie Crawford.

Dr. Vance's ability to recognize the emerging science/technology and how useful it could be to solving cold cases, dedicating time and effort to seek funding for the testing and collaborating with others has been an example for others.

Dr. Vance's work has been recognized nationwide and we in Oregon are fortunate to have her. Dr. Vance's efforts have reunited previously unidentified individuals with their families and allowed them to be put to rest, which is the ultimate goal of those who do this work. Her dedication and determination has provided answers to families (and investigators) after decades of waiting.

Dr. Vance has almost singlehandedly managed this project, and in doing so, she has reinforced relationships with many local agencies, communicated effectively with the media, and has generally increased the profile of the State Medical Examiner's Office. Dr. Vance's career has spanned over 27 years with the Oregon State Police and her work has been invaluable to victims, families, law-enforcement, and the communities we serve.

Det. Jeff Williams

Det. John Williams

On September 1, 1996, the skeletonized remains of an adult female were found wrapped in a tarp and bound with rope in rural Polk County, Oregon. Investigators surmised that the death was the result of a homicide. There was no identification found and no missing person reports fitting the subject. After extensive investigation and no identification of the subject, the case went cold. In 2014, the Polk County Sheriff's Office Cold Case Team began work on the case with Detective John Williams as the coordinator of the team and Detective Jeff Williams working closely throughout the case. The detectives were provided multiple family matches for the subject using multiple avenues including: the assistance of the OHSU neurology department conducting a CT scan of the subject's skull, a composite sketch of the subject done by a Clackamas County artist, support, and consultation by Dr. Nici Vance, and a national television show supporting the resubmission of DNA for analysis. Detective John Williams and Detective Jeff Williams worked closely together making several hundred phone calls to potential family members. Eventually a lead to a family connection in Sutherlin, Oregon resulted in the discovery of the subject's identity as Kathy Thomas (Clifton). At that point, the investigation took on new energy, commitment, and persistence by both Detectives John and Jeff Williams who bore down even more and through tireless commitment eventually discovered the identity of the perpetrator living in Oklahoma. During the investigation there were trips to New Hampshire as well as three trips to Oklahoma, obtaining the support of the Shawnee Oklahoma Police, a grand jury indictment, and the arrest and eventual murder conviction of Brian Clifton on October 20, 2022. It was a little over 26 years since Kathy's remains were discovered and this case was resolved. Due to the tireless efforts of Detective John Williams and Detective Jeff Williams they were able to solve this 26-year-old cold case.