

MISSING

HAVE YOU SEEN
THESE TATTOOS?



NORMA MCCORVEY

NAME: NORMA MCCORVEY
WEIGHT: 117
AGE: 22
HAIR: LONG AND BLOND
EYES: BLUE

LAST SEEN: Norma was last seen the night of March 28th on Main Street. She was wearing jeans and a black hoodie with a skull on the back. She has four identifiable tattoos on her arms: a rose, a sparrow, an eye, and a lion.

IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION PLEASE CALL 646.454.91

92



DIS APP EAR ING INK

When it comes to solving cold cases, tattoos can be more effective than DNA.

BY **DEBORAH HALBER** PHOTO BY **LIZ GREEN**



It was the '80s in Kansas City, MO, and like many teens, sisters Stephanie, Alice, and Paula Beverly Davis were enamored of hot pink, lime green, and fuchsia rainbows, crimson hearts, and prancing white unicorns. Their parents gave them a unicorn-motif jewelry box. While Paula still lived at home, she tacked unicorn posters on her bedroom walls and wore a unicorn charm on a necklace. So it didn't surprise Stephanie and Alice when their elder sister chose a unicorn for her first tattoo. She had a large-eyed, spiral-horned unicorn head tattooed high on her right breast, followed by a green-stemmed red rose on the left.

One day in August 1987, after Paula had married and moved out, she came home to do laundry and take Stephanie, then 14, out for pizza. Paula talked about getting tickets to see Bon Jovi. It was the last time anyone in her family saw her alive.

The next day, nearly 600 miles away in Englewood, OH, police discovered the body of a young woman, semi-nude and strangled with a thin rope or a wire, near a ramp off Interstate 70. Between 17 and 25 years of age, 5'5", with curly brown hair and brown eyes, she had no ID. Before she was buried as "Englewood Jane Doe" in a cemetery south of Dayton, OH, a forensic artist sketched the rose and unicorn that would have just been visible at the neckline of a low-cut blouse.

Back in Kansas City, Paula's parents filed a missing person report, insisting to reluctant investigators that their 21-year-old daughter would not have just skipped town. For the first four or five years after her disappearance, they'd be summoned to the morgue whenever a young woman who resembled Paula turned up dead. "None were her," Stephanie recalls. "After that, the contact stopped, and we had nothing." Her mother, Esther, had carefully noted details she hoped would help locate Paula: the color and style of shirt she was wearing the day she went missing, the bleach stain on the back pocket of her jeans, and her two tattoos. But years went by with no news, and Esther died in 2005 without knowing what had become of her firstborn.

Paula's family is far from alone in experiencing agonizing uncertainty about a loved one. The National Institute for Justice (NIJ) estimates that as many as 40,000 sets of unidentified remains are stowed around the country in freezers and evidence rooms, cremated, and buried in potter's fields. It's as if the entire population of North Miami Beach, FL, or Wilkes-Barre, PA, was dead and mysteriously unaccounted for—a phenomenon the NIJ calls a "silent mass disaster" because so few people are aware of it.

The sad reality is that being unidentifiable sounds unlikely, but it's common. We maintain our day-to-day identities superficially. Driver's license? Photo ID? Passport? We're easily separated from the paper and plastic that proves we are who we say we are. Unlike some pets, we don't—not yet, anyway—have ID microchips embedded under our

skin. Even a medical alert bracelet omits its wearer's name. And despite the popular belief that it's a tell-all human bar code, DNA can only identify you if there's a sample with which to compare.

But now, authorities are increasingly turning to one indelible, reliable sign of identity that has become more common in recent years: the tattoo. A search of the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, or NamUs (pronounced "name us"), a database that logs details of the unidentified and the missing, turns up more than seven hundred sets of unidentified remains bearing recognizable tattoos. Initials, astrological images, semiprofessional jailhouse tattoos—all tantalizing clues to the identities of their owners. Besides your dental work, artificial knee, and breast implants, it turns out the Misfits lyrics on your left shoulder blade might be one of the only means to reconnect you with your name.

NamUs and volunteer-run sites such as the Doe Network are like Facebook for the dead, populated with forensic artists' reconstructions of victims with mournful names: Jane Arroyo Grande Doe, Madison Man, the Belle in the Well. The images run the gamut from photo-realistic digital reconstructions to crude clay busts with cheap wigs askew. Tattoos, when they are present, are sketched from morgue photos—or, in some cases, the morgue photos themselves are included, the tattoos distorted or washed out by an overzealous flash.

In Phoenix, law enforcement is borrowing techniques from Hollywood to make postmortem tattoos more lifelike. Maricopa County, AZ, has almost a hundred sets of unidentified remains—homicides, suicides, accidental deaths. The earliest were recorded in 1970, but cold case detective Stuart Somershoe believes some date from earlier. "If you don't have family members calling in and saying, 'Hey, get on this case,' they're truly nameless, voiceless victims that nobody really is advocating for," Somershoe says.

That was true of the handsome, clean-shaven, 30ish, well-dressed man found facedown in a vacant lot in a sketchy section of Phoenix in 2001. Dead of a drug overdose, he carried no ID, but his romantic history seemed to have been permanently etched all over his body—clues to an elaborate life story, if anyone could decipher it. On the left side of his chest, a pair of blue-finned dolphins leapt over a heart inscribed to "Claudia" and "Gabriella"; perhaps these were the women whose heads appeared on his right forearm? His left arm was adorned with a bird, and there was also a two-headed child, skulls, and a coral snake. His left forearm and right deltoid were devoted to a crucifix and a Virgin Mary; his right forearm sported a red-lipped, leering clown head, fringed with an ornate collar, springing from a jack-in-the-box. Other images were even more enigmatic: script in an unrecognizable alphabet on his right upper arm, abstract shapes on his right shoulder and left leg, something winged on the left side of his back, and a woman, with cartoonish, oversized eyes sporting

A selection of tattoos from the NamUs database.

a sombrero-shaped headdress in greens, reds, and blacks on the right side of his back.

For the past two years, Somershoe has devoted himself to the department's missing and unidentified unit, plowing through cold cases that have slipped through the cracks and rerunning fingerprints, resulting in a whopping two dozen identifications. Many of his colleagues counted themselves lucky to achieve one or two such IDs in decades. Yet the tattoo man stymied him. The body was too decomposed to photograph. He thought perhaps Kirt Messick, the department's forensic artist, could sketch the tattoos for dissemination to the media.

Messick is a fine artist who set up his tiny office at police headquarters with the ambience of a meditation studio to help victims and witnesses relax as much as possible while he sketches faces from horrific moments of their lives. Now, seated at his PC, he retouched the tattoo man's digitized autopsy images, making them cleaner and brighter. If a witness happened to tell Messick that a suspect sported a tattoo, Messick would scan websites such as checkoutmyink.com for something similar. But this victim's tattoos—elaborate, flamboyant, fanciful—were like nothing Messick had ever seen in his dealings with criminals. "These aren't prison tattoos," he mused. "He's spent some money."

Messick peered at the photos. He wished there was less glare. But decomposition had done him a favor: The top layer of skin had started to peel away, like after a bad sunburn, exposing the vivid reds, yellows, and blues of the original ink. Messick had been experimenting with the digital sculpting tool ZBrush—"Photoshop on steroids," he called the software used in the gaming and movie industries to create the realistic effects of *Avatar* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Now he turned to those tools to depict the placement of the John Doe's tattoos. "I just painted digitized images right onto a 3-D model, right on the surface exactly where they were on him," he said. The result was a white figure on which the brilliant swirls and tendrils of blue waves and clouds, and the clown/jack-in-the-box's Elizabethan ruffled collar, stood out in stark contrast.

In November 2012, many media outlets around the country ran Messick's images. Somershoe doesn't try to hide his frustration that the exposure resulted in radio silence. "You look at the tattoos, and they are so ornate and colorful and detailed," he said. "People who had seen this kind of thing on this man would recognize him. You know the artist who did it certainly would recognize it. So it's really kind of mind-boggling. You can't help but think, Why isn't this guy identified?"

Yet other cases point to tattoos' inherent usefulness as postmortem identifiers, particularly for the stay-at-home amateur detectives. The advent of internet databases in the late 1990s spawned a contingent of web sleuths who pored over descriptive details: height, weight, clothing, an item of jewelry found with an unidentified corpse—and tattoos. They'd then compare these details with those of missing people and pass along tips

on potential matches to law enforcement. The web sleuths encounter varying degrees of receptivity from the police; Somershoe, for one, is a fan. A web sleuth had helped him pinpoint the identity of a suicide victim and of a man who had turned up dead in an abandoned building in Yuma, AZ.

Among the web sleuths who helped close baffling cases around the country are Carol Cielecki in Pennsylvania, who had spotted a 2002 report of a solidly built white male with a goatee who had been found floating in a river west of Boston. The letters "PK" were tattooed on his right shoulder in ornate Old English script. Cielecki zeroed in on a separate report of a missing Texas man with such a tattoo; Massachusetts police determined the body was indeed that of Peter Kokinakis, 40, who had disappeared from Houston earlier that year. In another case, a web sleuth who worked as a police dispatcher queried an FBI database for a missing female, 5'4", brown-eyed, with a tattoo on her left arm. Within seconds the system spit out the name of Angela Marie Parks, 23, a woman with a tattoo of the word "Tonk" on her left shoulder who had disappeared from Bowling Green, KY, in 1992. The web sleuth had matched her to Elm Mott Jane Doe, who had died after being struck by a train in a remote spot near Waco, TX.

In 2002, a young woman was found badly wounded in a wooded area in a Maryland community not far from Washington, D.C. She died without being identified. Three years later, a web sleuth in upstate New York was entering information about 19-year-old Jennifer Landry, who had disappeared from her hometown near Boston, into a missing-persons website when she noticed a detail she'd previously associated with a Jane Doe: a description of a tattoo on Landry's left ankle—a kangaroo with boxing gloves and the word "Joey." Police confirmed the match through fingerprints.

In 2009, Stephanie Beverly Clack was 37. She'd been 14 when she last saw her sister Paula that August day at the pizza parlor. Stephanie was at home in Missouri watching the TV series *The Forgotten*, about a group of volunteers who try to identify nameless victims. As the credits rolled, she spotted a public service announcement for NamUs, the NJ internet database of the missing and unidentified. She sat down at her computer and entered Paula's stats: female, 21, missing since 1987, last seen in Missouri. No results popped up, Stephanie recalled. "And I tried leaving out the state last known alive, and that's when I came up with five pages of matches from that year," she says.

The last case was that of a young woman with two tattoos, which a forensic artist had sketched based on morgue photos: a unicorn head and a rose, high on each breast. "Oh my God," Stephanie recalls telling her sister Alice. "We just found her."

"I knew nobody in this world had the same tattoos she had in those spots. The tattoos were what led me to believe 100 percent it was her," Stephanie says.



We've come a long way from milk cartons. Namus.gov hosts information on missing persons, including photos of their tattoos and illustrations that re-create ink. More identifiable and more permanent than other physical aspects, tattoos are bringing closure to cases and families.



DNA confirmed the ID, and the crew of *The Forgotten* helped pay for an exhumation. The murder is still unsolved; Stephanie was frustrated to learn that in the two decades between Paula's death and identification, some physical evidence has gone missing. Still, she's relieved. "It was sad, but it ended all those years of not knowing," she says. "We've been able to bring her back home and bury her next to my mom. It provides closure, knowing she's not out there lying in a ditch. I have my sister back." ■