



Snohomish County Sheriff's Office News Release



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John R. Lovick, Sheriff

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CONTACT: Shari Ireton, Director of Communications

425-388-3377, Shari.Ireton@co.snohomish.wa.us

Breaking News Pager: 425-339-5700

Cold Case of Man Missing for 26 Years Solved

Snohomish County Sheriff's Office detectives in collaboration with the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office in Arizona have solved a cold case that spans 26 years. A break in the case came when detectives were able to compare DNA from the victim's family with that of remains found in Arizona.

Todd Mertes of Marysville was 25 years-old when he last contacted his family in September of 1986 from Las Vegas. In January of 1987, an informant contacted the Phoenix Police Department about the murder of a man she called "Mike" by her friend's husband. "Mike" had been staying with the couple and was stabbed to death by the husband, Michael Alan Root, after an argument. Root and his wife put the body in a sleeping bag and dumped it in the Arizona desert.

Maricopa County Sheriff's Office detectives were contacted in February 1988 when a hiker found skeletal remains outside of Tonopah. The location of the remains and items found there were consistent with the information given to Phoenix PD a year earlier. It was assumed that this was the man murdered by Root in 1986, but detectives did not know the identity of the victim they knew as "Mike." Detectives located Root who was serving multiple life sentences for murder charges in Michigan. Root, who died in prison in 2008, never confessed to the murder and the Maricopa County Attorney's Office declined to prosecute.

In 2010, Snohomish County Sheriff's Office cold case detective Jim Scharf had learned through research and Todd's family that a missing person report wasn't on file in any of the cold case databases. Scharf asked the family to file a report and collected DNA from Todd's sister, mother and father. The DNA profile was loaded into the Combined DNA Index System, a DNA database that is part of a federal initiative funded by the Department of Justice to solve cold cases across the nation through DNA technology.



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When Arizona detectives extracted DNA from "Mike's" remains in 2010 and loaded them into that same system, they came back with an immediate match to the profile of Todd.

Scharf recently contacted Todd's family to inform them that he had finally been found.

"If there is a lesson to be learned from Todd's story, it's that family members should check back with agencies who they think have an active missing person report, especially if it's been more than 10 years," said Scharf. "The tools and technology have advanced so much in recent years. It may be possible to locate or identify someone that we couldn't have 10 or 20 years ago and give peace to the family."

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