

Final victim of 'Happy Face' serial killer identified. How the public helped crack the case



Lydia McWhorter, in an undated photo, was revealed to be the final unidentified victim of serial killer Keith Hunter Jespersen, known as the "Happy Face Killer."
(Riverside County district attorney's office)

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- More than three decades after her remains were found near Blythe, investigators have identified the final unknown victim of "Happy Face" serial killer Keith Hunter Jespersen as Texas woman Lydia McWhorter.
- The breakthrough came after cold-case detectives used advanced DNA analysis, public genealogy research and a cheek swab from McWhorter's sister to confirm the match and finally restore her name.
- Riverside County prosecutors say the identification closes the last open case tied to Jespersen's cross-country killing spree, offering long-

awaited answers for a Texas family and renewed validation for public tipsters.

For decades, Brenda Burks wondered what happened after her little sister disappeared in Texas in the 1990s, and this week she finally learned the tragic truth.

Her sister, Lydia McWhorter, was revealed to be the final unidentified victim of serial killer Keith Hunter Jespersen, known as the “Happy Face Killer,” according to the Riverside County district attorney’s office.

Jespersen, who is currently serving multiple life sentences in Oregon, has confessed to killing eight women between 1990 and 1995. He gained his moniker from sending letters to media outlets bragging about his murderous feats and signing them with a smiley face.

Lydia’s remains were found along U.S. Route 95 in Riverside County, around seven miles north of Blythe, in August 1995. Jespersen later confessed to killing the unidentified young woman, whom he referred to only as “Claudia,” while he was working as a truck driver and she was hitchhiking.

He pleaded guilty to her murder in Riverside County in January 2010, by which time he had already been convicted of murdering five other people. He received a sentence of 25 years to life for “Claudia’s” murder, but investigators remained unable to determine her true identity.

In 2022, advances in DNA technology led investigators with the Santa Clara County Sheriff’s Office to [identify the remains](#) of another one of Jespersen’s victims as Patricia Skiple. Her body was found on the side of State Route 152 in an unincorporated area near Gilroy in 1993.

The following year, Riverside County cold-case homicide investigators paid Jespersen a visit at the Oregon State Penitentiary to interview him about “Claudia” in hopes of generating new leads.

He told investigators that he met her at a brake check area on Interstate 15 south of the Victorville and that she asked to be taken to Los Angeles, but he refused because his trucking route was planned for Arizona. She then traveled

with him until the Indio/Coachella Burns Brothers rest stop where they argued about money, he told investigators.

Jespersion claimed he killed her in his truck in Coachella and dumped her body in Blythe.

Investigators then generated a forensic approximation of what she might have looked like based on a combination of DNA technology, her remains and Jespersion's descriptions.

They determined that her father was deceased and from Cameron County, Texas. They were unable to track down any biological matches to the victim's mother at the time, and in 2024, they issued a news release [seeking the public's help](#) in generating additional leads.

This week, there was a major breakthrough when DNA provided by her sister, Burks, was determined to be a match, enabling investigators to finally identify the 1995 victim as Lydia.

"I wanted to do [the test]," Burks said, "because I knew if I did the swab that it would prove whether or not the lady that they found was actually my little bitty sister that's been missing."

Ebony Caviness, senior investigator with the district attorney's office, expressed her appreciation to the public for helping crack the case. She did not reveal who submitted information, saying she wanted to ensure people feel comfortable coming forward with tips in the future.

"Over the years, we have received valuable assistance from people with an interest in genealogy and family history who have taken the time to research family trees and share information with our investigators," she said. "In this case, that information provided an important investigative lead that ultimately helped us identify Lydia."

The district attorney's office is in touch with Lydia's family as they determine how they would like to lay their long-lost relative to rest, she said.