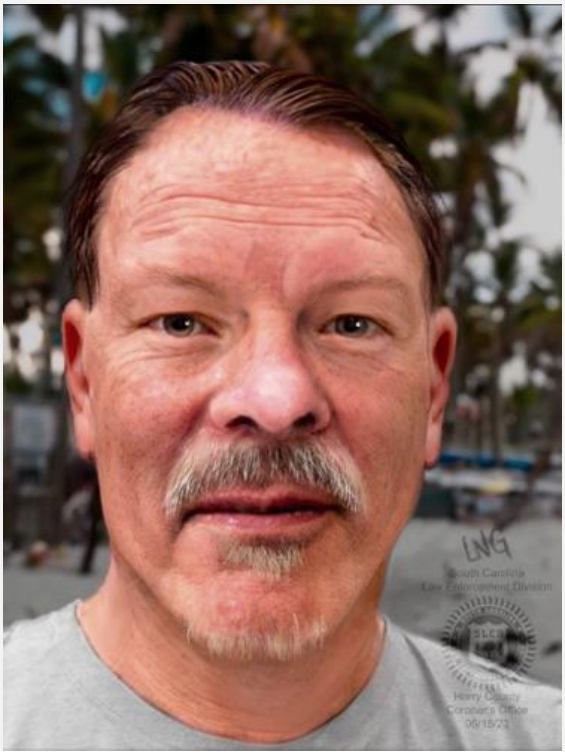
A man was killed in the Myrtle Beach area 3 years ago. Genealogists helped finally identify him.

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- Oc t 3, 2026



The Horry County Coroner's Office announced on Oct. 1, 2026, that William Ray Griffith, 62, (pictured) has finally been identified after he was struck by a car in Myrtle Beach back on May 27, 2023.
Horry County Coroner's Office/Provided

MYRTLE BEACH — A Myrtle Beach-area man's remains are finally being returned to his family after he was reported missing three years ago.

The **Horry County Coroner's Office** on Oct. 1 announced that William Ray Griffith, 62, had been identified as the John Doe who was fatally struck by a car near Myrtle Beach back in 2023.

Griffith died close to 9440 N. Kings Hwy. around 10:30 p.m. on May 27, 2023.

But when his body was discovered, authorities ran into a problem: Griffith had no forms of identification, nor any DNA or fingerprints in any national criminal databases since he had never been arrested.

His only identifier was a U.S. Army tattoo in the shape of a red-white-and-blue shield with a bald eagle perched above the top, according to the coroner's office.

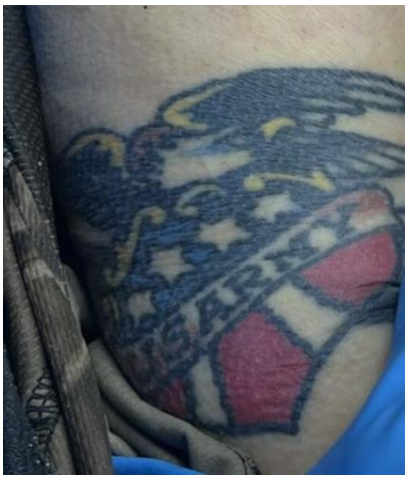
With nowhere else to turn, Chief Deputy Coroner Tamara Willard sought the help of genealogists **Dena Chasten** and **Pawleys Island Police Chief Mike Fanning** to discover his identity.

They had previously helped **identify the body of Malquan Hawkins**, a 22-year-old man discovered in a North Myrtle Beach swimming pool in 2016. Hawkins had been a John Doe for nearly a decade before being identified in 2025.

As with Hawkins' case, the duo used forensic genetic genealogy to trace Griffith's ancestry in the hopes they could figure out who he was.

The practice is used to uncover a person's identity through generational DNA, or DNA that is shared through a person's ancestry. It's mostly used to identify perpetrators of violent crimes and cases of unidentified human remains.

Famously, this work helped pinpoint the Golden State Killer's identity in 2018, according to the **National Library of Medicine**.



The Horry County Coroner's Office released a photo of a tattoo that William Ray Griffith, 62, had at the time of his death back on May 27, 2023. Griffith's body has finally been identified and returned to his family, the coroner announced on Oct. 1, 2026.
Horry County Coroner's Office/Provided

Tracking down DNA

Fanning and Chasten sent samples of Griffith's DNA to Florida's DNA Labs International. From there, they obtained **generational DNA** and entered it into some genealogy databases to trace his ancestry, including Family Tree DNA and **GED Match**.

These sites offer DNA testing to discover a person's genealogy, similar to **Ancestry.com** or 23AndMe. However, they also allow law enforcement to use the submitted DNA to help track down people who may be related to unidentified people, Fanning said.

"In the Griffith case, we had to go up to (his) great-great-grandparents. … We have to build the trees back down and see who matches who and the genetic distance that's related between them," Fanning explained, adding he and Chasten took on different sides of the family tree. "We try to figure out who's closer and how they would fall into a particular family. This particular family had several brothers and sisters, and we started figuring out who was still alive."

Through his work, Fanning discovered that a man fitting Griffith's description and age was reported missing in Myrtle Beach in May 2023. From that lead, the pair was able to finally identify the man, Fanning said.

Griffith had moved to South Carolina from Louisa, Ky., in 2018. He had lived on Old Bryan Drive in the Myrtle Beach area at the time of his death, according to the coroner’s office.

Meanwhile, before Griffith had even been positively identified, the person who had killed him in the hit-and-run had been arrested and convicted, Fanning said.

The genealogists now plan to help the coroner’s office with identifying several remaining John Doe/Jane Doe cases.

"It's very important that people get their name back and get their identity back, and we can help families start to heal," Fanning said. "They can give their loved one a proper burial, and say goodbye with that, and answer all those questions that they've had for all those years."