

Hamilton County Cold Case Unit
District Attorney General's Office
117 East 7TH Street
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COLD CASE UNIT CLEARS TWO UNSOLVED CASES WITH DENTAL MATCH

Background Case 1: Unidentified Body Found in Fire Rubble

Around 3:00am Wednesday, December 25, 2013, East Ridge firefighters responded to an extensive fire at 6715 Ringgold Road. The burning building originally housed the Hungry Fisherman restaurant; it had long been vacant and was used frequently as shelter by homeless people. Investigators were unable to determine what caused the fire.

During a walkthrough of the burned out building, investigators found human remains. Because of extensive thermal damage, the victim's race and gender could not be determined on scene. An autopsy revealed the victim was a white male, age 30-40, who died of an acute alcohol overdose prior to the fire. The medical examiner could not determine the victim's eye or hair color.

An anthropologist from the University of Tennessee examined the remains and determined the victim had been 5'4" – 5'7" in height and concluded the victim's dental records would be needed for positive identification.

Background Case 2: Missing Person's Report of Joshua Judea Zipperer (dob 6/26/1988)

On Monday, December 30, 2013, the mother of then 25-year old Joshua Zipperer reported him missing to East Ridge police. She had seen media reports about a body discovered in the debris of the Christmas Day fire and was concerned it might be her son.

Joshua Zipperer had been living in a homeless camp near the Hungry Fisherman building. He normally kept in frequent contact with his mom, typically calling her several times each day. His mother told police she had last seen her son at the Wendy's on Ringgold Road around 6:30pm on Christmas Eve and she had not heard from him since.

Joshua Zipperer had a recorded height of 6'1", well above the 5'4" – 5'7" range the UT anthropologist had given the fire victim. He was also five years younger than the 30-40 year age range the medical examiner gave the fire victim.

Recent Developments:

In April 2017, HCDA Cold Case Unit Investigator Michael Ray began reviewing the U.S. Department of Justice's NamUs (National Missing and Unidentified Persons System) repository for all missing and unidentified persons cases related to Hamilton County and its municipalities.

Acting on a hunch, Investigator Ray began investigating the circumstances of Joshua Zipperer's disappearance and the possibility the fire remains belonged to the missing man.

Inv. Ray tracked down Zipperer's dental records and gave them to Dr. Heath Blockley, a Chattanooga dentist who provides forensic odontology exams for the Hamilton County Medical Examiner's Office. Dr. Blockley compared Zipperer's dental records to the dental photos taken during the autopsy and concluded they matched.

Dr. Steven Cogswell, who performed the 2013 autopsy on the fire victim, then reviewed the fire death case and revised the autopsy report.

Victim's Family

DA General Pinkston and the CCU met this morning with Joshua Zipperer's mother. She told us she does not want to talk to the media and asks that you respect her privacy.

Attachments: Autopsy report (revised)*
 2013 anthropologist report**
 2017 forensic odontology report** ***
 Photo of Josh Zipperer****

**The autopsy was revised following the dental comparison, which took place two weeks ago, in May 2017. Throughout the revised autopsy report these events are referenced as happening in "May 2016", which is in error. There were no developments in this case during 2016.*

***Tennessee law prohibits release of autopsy photographs. These have been redacted from the anthropologist report and forensic odontology report.*

****Tennessee law prohibits release of personally identifying medical information. Photos of Joshua Zipperer's dental x-rays have been redacted from the forensic odontology report.*

*****Joshua's mother does not have any photographs of him. This is a booking photo taken four months before his death.*

DA's Cold Case Unit

District Attorney General Neal Pinkston created the Cold Case Unit upon taking office in September 2014 to review the 200 unsolved homicides and missing persons cases in Hamilton County. The Unit is led by retired CPD Captain Mike Mathis. Chattanooga Police Chief Fred Fletcher and Hamilton County Sheriff Jim Hammond each provide an investigator to the unit. If you have information about any cold case, please contact us using the Cold Case Hotline at 423-209-7470 or by email at coldcases@hcdatn.org.