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## **Volunteers find names for dead Doe Network members scour Web to match found bodies, missing persons**

By Leon Alligood  
USA TODAY

LIVINGSTON, Tenn. — Todd Matthews' hobby begins with a nameless corpse — the remains of somebody who died, probably violently, and was found without identification.

There are almost 6,000 unidentified bodies — John and Jane Does — listed in the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database, according to the FBI. “They're all someone's mother or daughter, father or son,” Matthews says. And they can be forgotten by law enforcement agencies that are short on time and tight on resources.

That's where Matthews and like-minded volunteer researchers from the Doe Network come in. An Internet-based alliance of more than 600 people in 23 countries that began in 1999, the network tries to match the unnamed dead with bereft families hoping to find a missing relative.

The Doe Network's primary tool is the Internet. Network members are known for their persistence: No database or message board is too obscure, no clue too tangential, no amount of e-mailing too much in search of the leanest of facts.

The network reports on its site, [www.doenetwork.us](http://www.doenetwork.us), that it has identified 36 bodies. That might not sound like many, but considering that Doe members work on their own time without pay and that many of the “unknowns” have been dead for years, the number is a source of pride for members.

Kylen Johnson, 36, who works for an Internet technology firm in Rockville, Md., became a Doe Network volunteer about five years ago. In 2002, her work gave a Kentucky family the closure it had sought for 18 years.

The facts of the cold case were these: Roger Gene Jeffreys was 22 when he left his home in Clay, Ky., in September 1984, bound for Canada. He called home from Maryland but was never heard from again.

Jeffreys' ex-wife, Loretta Conrad, never gave up hope of finding him. She contacted the Doe Network and ended up working with Johnson. “As she was telling me the story, I told her it sounded like an ‘unidentified’ up in Vermont that I knew about,” Johnson says.

The body in Vermont had been found by hunters in a shallow grave in 1985, and it had been there for several months. The person had been killed by a blow to the head.

A critical clue helped make the connection. Conrad said her former husband had “RGJ” tattooed on his shoulder. Vermont's John Doe had a similar marking. The men were one and the same.

“Being in the Doe Network, where you learn a lot about other cases all over the country, helps you to make those connections,” she says. “I love doing this kind of thing.”

Detective Pat Ditter of the Washington State Patrol turned to the Doe Network in 2004 to help him solve a decade-

old hit-and-run case.

On Feb. 1, 1993, a man's body had been found along State Route 24 near Moxee, Wash. It had no identification. On the same day in Amarillo, Texas, Judge David Glen Davis' wife reported him missing.

Eleven years later, with the help of a photo posted on the Doe Network website, Ditter connected the cases. Moxee's unidentified dead man was Amarillo's missing judge.

"They're fulfilling a service that we don't have. We don't have photos in the NCIC database," Ditter says. "When you've used the resources that we normally have at our disposal, that's all you can do. It's good to have an organization like the Doe Network."

Matthews says the work is "akin to grasping at straws."

"You just hope to pull out one piece of information that leads to a more crucial piece."

Matthews broke his first case in 1998, a puzzler that had confounded him for more than a decade and kept him in front of the computer screen for hours on end.

The Jane Doe whose identity he sought had been known simply as "Tent Girl" since 1968, when her body, wrapped in a canvas tarpaulin, was found near Georgetown, Ky.

The man who discovered her remains was Wilber Riddle, Matthews' father-in-law. Matthews married Lori Riddle in 1988. "It was one of the first things we talked about when I started dating Lori," he says.

"For some reason, the story of the Tent Girl got inside of me and I couldn't let go. It changed my life," he says, noting that his marriage suffered as he spent time and energy on the case.

The night he connected Tent Girl to a Lexington, Ky., woman missing since 1967, he was browsing on a hunch. A message on a genealogy website got Matthews' attention.

"My sister Barbara has been missing from our family since the latter part of 1967," the posting said. "She has brown hair, brown eyes, is around five feet, two inches tall, and was last seen in the Lexington, Ky., area."

The message was from Rosemary Westbrook of Benton, Ark., who was seeking information about her sister, Barbara Taylor. Matthews shakily typed a reply: "This girl is my girl."

Westbrook thought so, too. The family persuaded Kentucky authorities to allow an exhumation, and a DNA comparison made it certain: Tent Girl was Barbara Taylor.

Matthews, 35, a quality control inspector at a company that makes parts for auto air conditioners, says he regrets his search for clues caused him to ignore his wife and two boys at times, but he calls the discovery of Tent Girl's identity "a life-fulfilling moment."

"I spent 10 years of my life searching for Tent Girl's name. I could have gotten a college degree and an advanced degree in that time, but she taught me a lot more."

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