

“The Evidence Speaks” Season 01 Episode 03 – JOAN – Transcript

00:00:02 CENSULLO

In the weeks that followed, the sexual assault and murder of 16-year-old Peggy Beck, the FBI tested scrapings taken from the girl's fingernails and biological samples from her body. They'd also tested the sleeping bag, confirming that sperm was found inside of it. But then the small amount of physical evidence collected from the crime scene at the Flying G Ranch was locked in storage at the Jefferson County, Colorado Sheriff's Office for 44 years, waiting for science to catch up and it did, although it would still be much longer before we got to the point we're at today. Forensic science expert Kevin Lothridge says the sleeping bag was the key to cracking the case.

00:00:53 LOTHRIDGE

That sleeping bag was like an evidence bag. It kept her inside of it with all the other material and that sleeping bag was kept, for not only one type of testing but several testing for DNA have been done on that sleeping bag.

00:01:10 CENSULLO

The sleeping bag came out of the evidence locker in 2007 when cold case investigators reexamined the file. According to former Jefferson County detective Elias Alberti, the sleeping bag was submitted to the Colorado Bureau of Investigation Laboratory. The hope was that a DNA profile could be developed from the seminal fluid identified by the FBI decades earlier. It could and was. But it didn't deliver the answers investigators had hoped for.

00:01:43 ALBERTI

Hey, due to that evidence testing a profile, partial profile, was created and entered into CODIS, where that profile still sits today.

00:01:53 CENSULLO

That means there weren't any hits on the evidence profile. There wasn't a match to anyone in the combined DNA index system or CODIS database, and in the years since 2007, Peggy's case couldn't be linked, in CODIS anyway, to any others. That doesn't mean there weren't, or aren't, other cases or other options for finding a linkage, so investigators didn't give up. They had the evidence analyzed again 12 years later.

00:02:28 ALBERTI

In June of 2019, we resubmitted some evidence that was left at the scene also to develop, maybe potentially a better DNA profile.

00:02:41 CENSULLO

That didn't change the results in CODIS, of course, but investigators now had more resources at their disposal than they had the decade before, including a retired database programmer who found herself doing something she never thought she'd do: help solve cold cases.

00:03:01 JOAN

I'm not a crime junkie. I don't watch the forensic shows. I don't watch crime shows.

00:03:08 CENSULLO

I'm Meredith Censullo and this is The Evidence Speaks, Part 3: Joan. Forensic genetic genealogy lies at the intersection of forensic science and high-tech sleuthing. Many investigative genealogists work in law enforcement or are civilians with a passion for solving crimes. But the genealogist who first came up with the name James Raymond Taylor as a possible suspect in the murder of Peggy Beck was neither of those.

00:03:46 JOAN

I was a database nerd. I knew my computer, I knew my family history, and I know fishing, that was my background. And so, this is.

00:03:58 CENSULLO

She goes by Joan the genealogist. She doesn't like her last name being shared publicly, though her talents rival more well-known genetic sleuths, she shies away from the spotlight, preferring to quietly do her work. It's frankly not work she'd ever envisioned herself doing. She thought once she retired from years of spreadsheets and data, she'd be starting a new adventure with her son.

00:04:29 JOAN

I had lived for my son. I, we had plans to go to Eastern Europe and I was going to teach little kids Polish and do different things with him. Um, when that came to an end, I was really lost.

00:04:46 CENSULLO

Joan's son died more than a decade ago. She's never really gotten closure, if closure is even possible, but she stayed busy with her hobbies, researching her family's ancestry and helping her friends do the same. And fishing - you can't forget about that. But she likes fishing for the fish; she never imagined she'd wind up hooking a murder suspect.

00:05:16 JOAN

And then I got a call.

00:05:18 CENSULLO

It was early 2018 when Joan picked up the phone. A woman on the end of the line identified herself as a private investigator calling on behalf of the DNA Doe project, an all-volunteer organization of genetic genealogists skilled at working family trees, forward and backward. The team helps put names to unidentified human remains.

00:05:44 JOAN

I wasn't even aware of the DNA Doe project because I wasn't aware of Jane and John Does.

00:05:49 CENSULLO

Joan, who'd never heard of the DNA Doe project, was surprised to learn her own extended family tree had turned up in a DNA Doe investigation.

00:06:00 JOAN

The lady identified herself, said that a close relative of mine was the closest match they had to a John Doe, and they needed to know everything I had on this close relative.

00:06:13 CENSULLO

But the relative wasn't on a branch of Jones family tree she'd ever researched. So, she told the investigator.

00:06:22 JOAN

I haven't done their research, we're estranged from that side of the family and, Bye! And she said, no, no, no, you're a genealogist, I researched you, you're going to help us. And I said, OK.

00:06:35 CENSULLO

And she did. She got to work, spending by her estimate more than 100 hours filling in the missing branch of her family tree. When she finished, she called up the private investigator with a possible name. And then she left, for one of her long fishing trips, far away from cell phone service. But she couldn't stop thinking about the case. She had to know if her online fishing expedition had netted the missing link the private investigator needed. She drove to the nearest town and called the PI.

00:07:13 JOAN

She said yup, we identified who this person was and we were able to contact the mother the week before Mother's Day, to let her know what had happened to her son and it just got me in my heart. My son had died of undetermined circumstances 15 years ago and I know what that's like, not knowing what happened to a child. And so, I just said yes, I want to help. What can I do?

00:07:46 CENSULLO

The self-professed database nerd packed up her fishing pole and went back to school to become a private investigator. She enlisted in a Citizens Academy to learn more about criminal justice, and she joined the DNA Doe project as a volunteer. One day when she got into her criminal Justice academy a little bit early, she picked up a newspaper.

00:08:12 JOAN

There was an article about this guy named Mitch Morrissey, who was working using DNA, um, to help solve crimes. And I thought oh, it must be like what we do with the DNA Doe project, but it wasn't.

00:08:29 CENSULLO

That guy, as Joan put it, was the Mitch you've been hearing from in this podcast, the former Denver District Attorney turned founder of United Data Connect. UDC provides software that assists law enforcement agencies in familial genealogy searches as an overlay to CODIS. Familial searches may help

identify unknown individuals, if a relative's DNA is in CODIS. Joan pondered, what if someone isn't in any database?

00:09:03 JOAN

I thought, hmm, he could probably use somebody like me. So, I called him up, which I don't know how I ever got the courage to do that, but I called him up and said, hi, Mr. Morrissey, I'm Joan.

00:09:17 CENSULLO

They made an appointment to meet the next week. And in the meantime, Joan did a deep dive on the former DA, showing up with a packet of information about his family history. The career prosecutor was pretty impressed with her sleuthing skills.

00:09:33 MORRISSEY

It was very interesting because she showed me with my family what she does best.

00:09:40 JOAN

So he talked to his partners, and we tried it out and it worked. So that's, that's where I am.

00:09:49 CENSULLO

Joan's timing was good, even though she'd never contemplated a future as a crime fighter, 2018 was the year when forensic genetic genealogy made headlines.

00:10:02 REPORTER

Police say one of the most elusive serial killers in American history has been captured outside his suburban home.

00:10:10 CENSULLO

Joseph DeAngelo, the Golden State Killer, who assaulted and raped nearly 50 women and girls and murdered 13 victims during the 1970s and 80s, was arrested after being identified through investigative genetic genealogy. The technique had first been used the year before, to identify deceased convict Terry Rasmussen as the man who murdered a woman and three young girls and left their bodies in barrels near Bear Brook State Park in New Hampshire, sometime in the late 70s or early 80s. The talents of investigative genetic genealogy would soon be in demand by cold case units across the country. Joan explains how it works.

00:10:57 JOAN

We get a little bit of a background and just a little bit of a background on a case. What kind of DNA it is, where it was found in relation to the crime scene. If it's single source, how much so? In a rape case, it might be a mixture, that could be a problem. We then determine what type of analysis this DNA needs. Can we use chip sequencing, which is what most consumer DNA websites do, like ancestry.com, 23andMe, familytreedna.com, they all use a chip to sequence or to analyze the DNA. Sometimes if it is degraded or bacteria has eaten away at that DNA, we might have to go to whole genome sequencing, which means it reads the entire genome of that DNA, and maybe we can pull out enough from that that

we can make an identification. So that all happens way prior to me being involved on the genealogy side.

00:11:58 CENSULLO

Joan uploads a completed DNA sequence to GEDmatch.com, which allows investigators to search profiles of users who have opted in for law enforcement to look at their data. GEDmatch generates a list of users that could be matches. Jones scours the list for people whose profiles have the highest number of centimorgans to her target. A centimorgan is a unit of genetic measurement that describes how much DNA, and the length of specific segments of DNA, are shared between relatives. Then the work of researching potential matches and building a family tree begins. Sometimes it takes Joan weeks, others take months.

00:12:46 JOAN

When I identify a person of interest in a case, I'm usually very excited and I'll run in and tell my husband hey guess what, guess what, I found a guy. And his first comment is always, you cannot get emotionally involved in these cases. Yeah yeah yeah, yeah whatever. Then I go back, I call the detective, I call Mitch, and let them know that I'm feeling good about this. And then reality sets in as to how important this is to family members and the community. Oftentimes I, uh, it's emotional, you know. You just can't get away from that.

00:13:32 MORRISSEY

She gets caught up in the story. She gets caught up in the family. She gets caught up in the important part of this work and that is getting to the person that did this. And hopefully then, if they're still alive, holding them responsible, in a way, in court. And so, she's fully engaged all the time, on all of the cases that we work on.

00:13:59 CENSULLO

Joan's work only provides investigative leads. Detectives do the rest.

00:14:07 JOAN

At that point, I'm out of this situation until they can disprove that it's true or not.

00:14:15 CENSULLO

Sometimes Joan comes up with several leads to follow, or sometimes no leads at all, only dead ends.

00:14:24 JOAN

It's an overwhelming responsibility sometimes, to want to stop them, and I realize it's a self-imposed responsibility, but it's, I just wish I could solve every crime in the world. I can't, but I know when I first started this I wouldn't go to bed. I was staying up all night because the detectives would say, you're our last hope. Ah yeah, no pressure! But I had to sleep at some point, and the more I've talked to detectives I have a huge respect for them and a greater understanding of what they must carry every single day of their lives.

00:15:13 CENSULLO

And that's how Joan became the last hope for Peggy Beck. In 2019, the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office asked Mitch and Joan to look at Peggy's case, which was then cold for 56 years. The Sheriff's Office and United Data Connect had had success working together on other cases. But Peggy's case was by far the oldest they had attempted to solve and remember, the crime scene that investigators encountered on August 18th, 1963, had largely been cleaned up, so the only evidence that Mitch could work with was the DNA on the sleeping bag.

00:15:53 MORRISSEY

The only saving grace was the sleeping bag, and you know, I guess we're just lucky that the camp counselors didn't take her out of the sleeping bag and throw it away.

00:16:02 LOTHBRIDGE

This would have been a whodunit, had Mitch and UDC not done their genetic genealogy on this, and it was because there was material to test.

00:16:12 CENSULLO

The Sheriff's Office handed over the latest DNA profile, developed off of the sleeping bag by the Jefferson County Regional Crime Lab.

00:16:22 JOAN

In this case, we had a good match and in genetic genealogy, a match over 100 centimorgans, which is a measurement that they use in genetic genealogy, that's like a happy dance kind of time. It's still three, four, fifth cousin range, but you know it was still good. So that's, you take that match, and you start building their family tree.

00:16:47 CENSULLO

Joan began combing through records. Because Peggy case is so old, Joan was able to use census reports, which are now available up to the 1940s. She also tracked down legal documents and obituaries and came up with a name. It was a woman, that she thought might be a distant relative to the man whose DNA profile she was handed. She picked up the phone and dialed the number.

00:17:21 JOAN

(Phone ringing) I said hi. I, you know, gave a little spiel about who I am, what I'm calling for, the case I'm working on. And she says right away, oh, I know who did. It's this close relative of mine, James Taylor. What? What?

00:17:41 CENSULLO

This is not something Joan usually encounters when she cold calls strangers. The woman on the other end of the line was completely unaware of Peggy Beck's case, but the call from Joan was something of an a-ha moment for her because it finally made sense why her family hadn't heard anything about this relative in a very long time.

00:18:09 JOAN

So, I said, I'll call you back. So, I called the detective right away and told him you're not going to believe this. This woman thinks she knows who killed Peggy Beck. And so, I recommended that we do a DNA test because if she were right, she would show up as an extremely close relative to this guy. So, we sent her a kit.

00:18:32 CENSULLO

Her instincts had been right. The woman's DNA indicated there was shared DNA between her and the evidence collected from the crime scene.

00:18:46 JOAN

So, that was how we found it.

00:18:49 CENSULLO

Or at least, that's what made detectives zero in on their prime suspect.

00:18:55 ALBERTI

In October 2019, we are able to, through research and some advancements in the genetic genealogy investigation, were able to identify James Raymond Taylor as a suspect. Once we were able to identify Mr. Taylor as a suspect, we are able to locate and contact immediate family members of his family.

00:19:20 CENSULLO

Specifically, they contacted Taylor's ex-wife and the three sons the couple had together. Yes, the suspected killer was a family man. More on that later. Anyway, they contacted the family and asked for DNA samples and the test revealed that the person who left his semen inside of Peggy's sleeping bag was 45 to 160 billion times more likely to be James Raymond Taylor than any other person. Of course, the best way to confirm the match would have been to have Taylor provide his DNA, but if it were that easy, this would have been a one-part podcast.

00:20:04 ALBERTI

I do not know that he is still alive, at this point in time. We can't prove that he's deceased either.

00:20:12 CENSULLO

So, while Peggy's case is solved on paper, meaning there is more than enough evidence to secure a conviction, it cannot be resolved until it is confirmed that the suspect is dead, or he turns up somewhere.

00:20:27 MORRISSEY

I mean, we just want to find this guy. If they can do anything with him once they find him, dead or alive, it just kind of closes out the story. It explains, you know, that's the mystery here. What happened to him?

00:20:48 CENSULLO

James Raymond Taylor was 23 at the time of Peggy's murder, just seven years older than the victim. He went by Jim or Jimmy. That is according to someone close to the case who spoke to me on the condition that he or she remained anonymous. Jimmy was born in 1939 in West Bend, WI and had two younger sisters, although they never heard much from him as they got older. In fact, whatever happened to Jimmy was usually brought up at holiday get togethers as the decades passed.

Taylor's parents, Arthur and Ina, divorced when the kids were young. Ina was given custody, although Jimmy remained close to his father, whose been described as a masochist with little respect for women. The Taylor kids moved around when they were young, staying with relatives in rural Wisconsin towns. They spent several years living on a farm in Egg Harbor, sharing a home with an aunt, uncle, female cousins, and a couple of elderly family members. While the close quarters might not have been ideal, the farm life seemed to suit Jimmy, who was described to me as an outdoorsy loner and, while a bit creepy, he seemed to be the type that could tolerate anything nature could toss at him. Literally. Jimmy was reportedly zapped by lightning once while drawing a pail of water on the farm. His education records seem spotty, although I did dig up a freshman yearbook photo from 1954, where he'd attended a tiny school near Sturgeon Bay.

The family relocated to Milwaukee after that, whether Jimmy finished high school is not clear. But it is likely that this is where he met his future wife, Sharon, who grew up in Milwaukee. Sharon would later tell investigators the couple married in December of 1961 in Colorado, although I have not had any luck tracking down marriage records. The Taylors lived somewhere in the Denver area and by 1963 Sharon was pregnant. Their first son, Blake, was born three months to the day after Peggy's death. Sharon says Jimmy used to be into CB radios and once worked for Kunkel TV, a business started by former Arapahoe County, Colorado Police Officer Warren Kunkel, Sr. Kunkel passed away years ago, as have his kids, so it's difficult to pinpoint when Taylor worked at the business. Kunkel TV opened its doors in 1952, the year television came to Denver, offering up sales and service on televisions, radios, hi-fi systems, and home appliances. Today the old Kunkel TV building is still there on West Colfax Avenue, although now the space is occupied by a funeral cremation service, sandwiched between a barber shop and a cannabis dispensary. Kunkel TV was located less than four miles from the Beck family home on Decatur Street. It's unclear where the Taylors lived at the time. In fact, very little is known about their time in the Mile High City. It's possible, due to a lack of public records, that the Taylors rented a home or an apartment in the area. Sharon Taylor told investigators she'd never heard of Peggy Beck and she did not remember going camping in the fall of '63 because, of course, she was six months pregnant at the time Peggy was murdered. But investigators are certain that Taylor spent some part of the night of August 17th and the early morning of August 18th, 1963, at the Flying G Ranch. It's also unclear whether Taylor made any trips to the area near the Flying G to do repairs. Although I'd asked Steve Stewart, the grandson of the ranch caretaker, about that. Would there have been any reason or need for someone who either worked on electronics or CB's or anything like that to have been up there at any point.

00:25:25 STEWART

You know that's a good, I didn't know that, that's a good question. Uh, I don't remember if Slim had any CB radio, I kind of don't think he did, you know, like you'd imagine somebody would have it in the car and he could connect to the lodge at the, at the Girl Scout part. Well, I could see that as a way to get up there and look around and sort of, but no one has ever said they saw that guy, right? I mean no one said oh we had a TV repairman or a CB radio repairman up last week.

00:26:00 CENSULLO

Despite having a handful of suspects early on, Taylor wasn't on the radar of original investigators. He wasn't interviewed or questioned about the rape and murder of Peggy and had left the state by 1966, going to California and then Nevada.

00:26:18 ALBERTI

So, we were able to track the fact that he was in Colorado during this time frame, during the early 1960s, specifically in August of 1963, and we are able to track his movements up to 1976 in Las Vegas.

00:26:35 CENSULLO

By the time of that press conference in 2020, Joan had already moved on to other cases and other families that need her help. But she carries the weight on her shoulders, a mom who understands the hurt that comes with unexplainable loss.

00:26:56 JOAN

They just want answers, you know, let's get answers to this family and to communities that are, these people are from.

00:27:06 CENSULLO

And so, when I told Joan what I'd found, that Jimmy Taylor was accused of victimizing at least four other girls, and that there may be many more, Joan's heart sank a little deeper.

00:27:22 JOAN

And it's frustrating, knowing that he went on to Nevada to commit other crimes, and you wonder is he still out there? For how long did he keep committing crimes against women and children? It breaks my heart.

00:27:41 CENSULLO

But she says that's more reason to keep going. Without knowing where Jimmy Taylor is, we might never know what else he's done.

00:27:52 JOAN

It, with all of these cases, I just wonder these, did this guy go out there, rape and murder somebody and then say, oh I'm glad I got that out of my system, and never do it again? I don't, I can't believe that. You gotta believe that they continue committing crimes, that they may have committed crimes prior to the one I'm researching, and there are other victims out there that may or may not have come forward, may or not have been found.

00:28:31 CENSULLO

Next time, on The Evidence Speaks, the other victims and the disappearance of Jimmy Taylor.

00:28:39 MORRISSEY

The women got into the car voluntarily, not knowing what kind of monster was behind the wheel, and that's what you had in Las Vegas.

00:28:48 AUBIN

Those types of people that commit these crimes they're like the guy next door, you never know. You think that they're the friendliest guy and the nicest guy, the last people you'd expect have that dark side.

00:29:05 DUFFIN

The Evidence Speaks is a production of FIU's Global Forensic and Justice Center. Meredith Censullo is responsible for the research, writing, and editing. Our subject matter experts are Kevin Lothridge, Director of the GFJC, Mitch Morrissey from United Data Connect, and Joan the genealogist, also from United. Data Connect. If you have any tips regarding the whereabouts of James Raymond Taylor, we ask you contact the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office.