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## Workers Struggle to ID Katrina Victims

**BYLINE:** By **RUKMINI** CALLIMACHI, Associated Press Writer**SECTION:** DOMESTIC NEWS**LENGTH:** 2560 words**DATELINE:** NEW ORLEANS

Water is unforgiving to the dead and by the time the crews arrived, the men were missing their eyes.

Carefully, the workers slipped them into black, zippered bags, placed them inside a van and drove them 70 miles to an emergency morgue which had been set up inside a refrigerated tent. Over the months that followed, investigators cut them, prodded them, photographed them, X-rayed them and removed pieces of their DNA, all in an attempt to coax their bodies into spitting out names.

In neat rows beside them are the coffins of 27 other anonymous souls, their bodies stuck in a forensic purgatory unknown, unclaimed and unable to be buried more than 15 months after Hurricane Katrina made landfall.

There were those among Katrina's dead who succumbed alongside people they knew; slips of paper or damp cardboard, inscribed with their names, were tucked into their clothes. But many more drowned alone, their bodies drifting in the black water, getting snagged on fence posts, coming to rest beneath freeway overpasses, in the rubble of uprooted homes.

It's a fate which continues to torture the living as they struggle to give the dead what the dead are owed.

A body can only say so much about itself. It can tell its sex, for instance, its height, a race. Bones can speak of past accidents.

But the elements and simple decay can erase much of the rest. More than a week passed before the first crew arrived to retrieve the more than 1,300 people who died in Louisiana and by that time, many of the bodies were bloated beyond recognition.

Besides their eyes, the two men were missing their finger- and toenails. Soaking in the coarse water, their skin color changed; the workers who retrieved them couldn't tell if the men were black or white.

The two bodies had been lying in the mud inside the locked apartment at 224 De La Ronde Drive for at least 16 days when the white, unmarked van pulled up.

With orders to save the living, the National Guard had already searched the building, but could do little more than mark it with the words "2 dead" and a spray-painted X. They painted a red arrow on the muddy weeds, pointing to apartment 4D, before moving on.

Then the rescue crew from Kenyon International Emergency Services arrived, slipping into white Tyvek

suits and strapping on respirators. They broke down the door.

With their gloved hands, they lifted the two bodies from a carpet of wet mud and placed them into two plastic body bags.

Then they carried them out feet first, as they walked in life, said Kenyon CEO Robert Jensen, a veteran of the U.S. Army's mortuary service, where he learned the ritual.

"We can't give them a lot, but we do what we can to give them a little bit of their dignity back," he said.

Under police escort, they were driven out of the disaster zone to the tiny town of St. Gabriel on the winding banks of the Mississippi River.

In the Bible, the archangel Gabriel stands at the gates of heaven. Here, Blackwater guards greeted the dead, ushering them into a refrigerated tent where the fresh, cold air was not enough to disperse the odor of death a fruity smell, like that of a distorted, stinking peach.

"I always knew how fragile life is. But I had never seen so many people in that terrible condition before," said Dr. Frank Minyard, 77, Orleans Parish's coroner since 1973. "They were bringing them in by the truckload. All in body bags. All badly deteriorated. As tough as I am and I think I'm tough it affected me. I lost the joy in my heart."

In a loading bay, the bags containing the two men were lifted onto two aluminum tables and unzipped. The mud was washed from their bodies, and the investigators recorded what few details were apparent, starting with the men's personal effects.

The first man had on a fancy, short-sleeved dress shirt. On it, a pattern of red, single-stem roses. In his pocket, \$60. On his shoulder, a blue tattoo of a sailing ship.

He was 6 feet tall and at least 65 years old. Several weeks would pass before his skull and facial bones were measured and investigators could say with certainty that he was white.

When they opened the second bag, they found a naked man. He was also over 65 and around 6 feet tall. Measurements would show that he, too, was white.

In the bag with him was a single packet of Sweet'n Low.

Each man was tagged with a number, their name in the afterlife until their real ones could be found. Then they were wheeled to different compartments in the tent, each one with a different identifying function.

At the X-ray booth, morgue workers took full-body images of the corpses. They hoped to find a pacemaker or a hip implant a piece of steel inserted inside the body that might yield a serial number.

The men had none.

They also looked for evidence of trauma, a healed fracture, perhaps, that could be pinned to a relative's memory of a car accident or bad fall.

There were none.

At another station, investigators tried to lift their fingerprints, but their skin slipped off like a glove.

They took X-rays of their teeth in the hope that dental records salvaged from New Orleans could help them attach a body to a name.

(Back in the submerged city, Doug Cross, a dentist whose own practice was underwater, donned a Hazmat suit and ventured inside flooded dentists' offices. It would take him an hour or more to open a bloated filing cabinet and meticulously pull apart each crusty folder. Files crumbled in his hands. Others

remained stuck together like a child's botched paper mache project.)

In another compartment of the tent, a piece of each man's right tibia, or shinbone, was extracted, and from the inner core of the bone, his DNA.

The specimen was put on ice, but the men would have to wait three more months, until the state finalized a contract with a DNA lab, before their genetic code could be unraveled.

Like the living, the dead would learn early on to wait.

In December, the bone fragments were cut into halves and carefully rewrapped.

The first piece was sent to a DNA lab in Virginia. The second to a lab in Bosnia, set up to unravel the identities of people retrieved from mass graves.

In Baton Rouge, a family assistance center was fielding calls from the relatives of the more than 13,000 people initially reported missing. More than 1,000 mouth swabs were collected from the families of those presumed dead and a database of their DNA was established. Back in New Orleans, investigators were venturing into the rubble, retrieving hair brushes, nail clippers, socks, anything that might offer specks of the genetic barcode of the missing. Almost all of it was contaminated by the floodwaters.

Relatives were asked to bring Christmas and Mother's Day cards in the hope that a trace of saliva could be found behind the crusty stamp.

It would be spring before the two labs returned their findings: Their DNA didn't match any of the samples donated by families of the missing. But it turns out, the genetic material distilled from the four tiny pieces of thigh bone was nearly identical.

The two men from apartment 4D are brothers.

In April, the bodies of the two brothers made the 70-mile trip back to New Orleans in another refrigerated truck.

The warehouse which was to become their temporary home is on a street of flowering weeds not far from Interstate 10, in a deserted, industrial corridor downtown. Its yellow, corrugated metal doors are sealed shut. It's a place that might store two-by-fours, or PVC pipes, an anonymous product, sold in bulk.

For the first time, they were laid to rest in handsome, silver coffins. Inside, the brothers still lie in their body bags, but the bags now rest against the silken, ivory crepe that lines the caskets. Priests and ministers of different faiths came to bless the coffins lying in the warehouse, murmuring prayers.

"It kills me that we can't identify them," says Julia Powers, chief of the forensic identification unit handling the Katrina deaths.

When she got word that the men were brothers, Powers could barely contain her excitement: "I mean, how many people are missing two white, elderly brothers?" she asked.

At her desk inside the New Orleans Forensic Center, she searched the database. For keywords, she tried variations of "white," "brothers" and "over 65" but got no hits.

No one, it appeared, has been looking for two brothers from a street of flooded 1970s-era apartment buildings in the white, blue-collar community of Chalmette, La.

From the beginning, the identification of the dead, like every aspect of the post-Katrina recovery, was marred by bureaucratic red tape. Eventually, a state-of-the-art morgue, nicknamed the "forensic Taj Mahal," would be erected inside the shell of a building in Carville, not far from St. Gabriel.

But as federal dollars dried up, it would be packed up, and the forensic team disbanded. The remaining dead were shipped back to New Orleans. Relief agencies that had collected information on the missing packed up, too, and some took their databases with them.

By spring, only a few scientists remained. New employment contracts, unlike their previous agreement, specified that they could do only analysis, not field work. They could pore over pathology reports and X-rays, but they couldn't search flooded houses.

Despite all the restrictions, the constantly shrinking team which now consists of just one full-time employee, Powers succeeded in identifying more than 900 people who died in Louisiana. But some homes fell through the cracks and were never searched, like the one where the brothers were found.

Fed by the floodwaters, the shrubs flanking apartment 4D have bloomed into calf-high weeds. They're tough and knotted and they encroach on the landing.

St. Bernard Fire Chief Thomas Stone was there when they took the bodies out, and now, more than a year later, he has returned with an AP reporter and photographer who want to document the place where the brothers lived and died.

He shoved the door open. The mud that once flowed across the floor had turned gray and crusty, and as it hardened it receded and revealed some of the dead men's belongings like the medicine bottle, lying in a corner of the living room.

Stone knelt down, picked it up and scanned the label, holding it to the oval of light pouring in from a broken window.

Turning it in his hand, he read: Warfarin, 5 mg. The medication typically prescribed to prevent blood clots was last filled at the neighborhood's Sav-A-Center on Aug. 18, 2005, 10 days before the storm.

Also on the label was the address of apartment 4D. And a smudged name.

"How do you pronounce that?" asked Stone, struggling to sound out the unfamiliar syllables.

Keistut Pranckunas.

It's like uttering the name of a ghost.

"They had a difficult name Greek, I think. Maybe Russian," says Abdul Khan, the owner of the apartment block that housed apartment 4D.

Pranckunas?

"That's it!" he exclaimed.

"I kept on checking the paper to see if they'd turn up on a list of the dead. They never did," said Khan, a businessman who owns several buildings in the flooded neighborhood.

For years, he'd leased the unit to the brothers. The two kept to themselves, staying behind the apartment's locked door, rarely venturing out. One was sick. The other cared for him.

Occasionally, Khan would see the healthy one wheeling a cart back from the Sav-A-Center loaded with groceries, rattling it across the uneven pavement. Off to the side of the mold-coated living room is a cart bearing the Sav-A-Center logo. There are three more in the first of the two bedrooms, neatly stacked, one inside the other.

When the waters began to rise, Khan says, their upstairs neighbor banged on the door, shouting. He tried to kick it in. The door was bolted from the inside.

After the storm, Kahn tried to retrieve his rental records to help investigators, but the waters had ruined them.

Louisiana voter registrations show that a Kiestutis Pranckunas lived at apartment 4D. He was 78. Also living there, according to public records, was 81-year-old Peter Pranckunas.

Plug "Pranckunas" into the Google search engine. Skim past links to a Lithuanian church in Saginaw, Mich., a football roster and a Web ad for a wedding accessories business, and eventually, you'll find a link to the Katrina People Search Board.

There, 11 days after Katrina toppled New Orleans' levees, someone posted this message:

"Hi: We have two uncles that lived in Chalmette LA ... Their names are Peter and Kayo Pranckunas. If someone knows their where abouts it would be appreciated if you would let us know. Thank you and God Bless all of You."

It's a dead end. E-mail the address listed at the bottom and an automatically generated message bounces back the account has been disabled.

But if you keep searching the Internet, you'll eventually come to an obituary published in 2002 in the Telegram & Gazette, in Worcester, Mass.

Withold Pranckunas was 81 when he died of cancer. He was one of eight children of Lithuanian immigrants and was survived, says the obituary, by three brothers including Peter and Kayo Pranckunas of Chalmette, La.

Withold Pranckunas also left behind four daughters, among them Valerie Pranckunas.

She answered her phone in Winslow, Maine, on the second ring.

"Oh my God," she gasped, and she sobbed. "Oh my God."

A half-century ago, Peter and Kayo joined the circus, leaving their Massachusetts town to tour the country with the lions and bears of Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey. When the big top wound its way back to Worcester, the uncles arranged for the girls to have front-row seats.

Now 53, Valerie last saw them when she was a child; her uncles, who worked at a concession stand, gave her a stick with a toy monkey on top.

Ringling Bros eventually made its way New Orleans and there, after years on the circus trail, the two got off.

In his old age, Peter would become an invalid, bedridden and slowly slipping into dementia. Kayo, stronger and healthier, took care of him. Kayo was the one with a tattoo of a sailing ship on his shoulder.

Their meager Social Security check didn't allow them to have a phone. Several years ago, their nieces sent them a phone card, a book of stamps and a stack of Christmas cards.

Once or twice a year, Kayo walked to a gas station near the apartment and asked the attendant to dial the 1-800 number on the back of the card so he could telephone his nieces, or their father. Occasionally, they would send letters, sometimes written inside one of the Christmas cards or on the back of junk mail.

When it became clear that Katrina had decimated New Orleans, three of the nieces called a relief organization, giving full descriptions of their missing uncles. It was catalogued in a database which was never passed on to the team currently struggling to name the dead.

Although the brothers' files have been updated to reflect their names, the caskets are still tagged with

seven-digit numbers. Before they can be officially identified and put to rest, their DNA must be matched to that of their nieces, the little girls they used to treat to the circus.

Once the match is confirmed, they will most likely be cremated; that's what they wanted, says the family. Their ashes will be poured into separate urns, which will be sent to the Massachusetts town where they were born.

There, those who know them by name await them.

EDITOR'S NOTE Authorities have asked anyone with information on other unidentified Katrina victims to call the New Orleans Forensic Center at 1-504-658-9660.

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