

Crime & Courts

Body of missing waitress found

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A body found in a bag along a Long Island parkway this month has been identified as that of a Cliffside Park woman missing since September, authorities said today.

Thalia Stathis, 28, was reported missing on Sept. 26 by her co-workers at the Arena Diner in Hackensack, who told police they had last seen her leaving the restaurant around 3 a.m. on Sept. 14.

Her boyfriend, Hugues J. Francois, 34, was charged with her murder in January. Prosecutors were preparing to move forward with the tricky task of prosecuting the case without a body when Stathis' remains were identified today through dental records and a DNA match, authorities said.

"First of all, there's closure for the family, which is probably the most significant thing," said John L. Molinelli, the Bergen County prosecutor. "And it certainly strengthens our case."

A New York state trooper discovered the remains in a vinyl shopping bag on the shoulder of the Southern State Parkway in North Merrick, N.Y., on July 9, Molinelli said. The remains were badly decomposed, leading investigators to believe that Stathis was killed shortly after she went missing in mid-September, he said.

The cause of death, according to an autopsy conducted by the Nassau County Medical Examiner's Office, was blunt trauma, Molinelli said.

Francois, who served seven years in prison on a 1997 aggravated manslaughter conviction, was arrested on Sept. 26 the day Stathis was reported missing at the apartment that they shared on Jersey Avenue in Cliffside Park. He was charged with possession of drug paraphernalia and failure to register as a sex offender following a conviction, also from 1997, for sexually assaulting a 14-year-old girl.

Authorities charged Francois with Stathis' murder in January. He remains at the Bergen County Jail in Hackensack with bail set at \$2 million.

Stathis had worked as a waitress at the Arena Diner for about two years before she disappeared after finishing a 10-hour shift early on Sept. 14. Employees said she was a popular waitress who knew the names of her regular customers and their orders by heart.

One of the diner's owners, Chris Vetsas, said the news that Stathis' body had been found was met with mixed emotions at the restaurant.

"We're kind of glad to hear it," he said. "You know, it's a sad thing, but we're happy that there's some closure for the family. Other than that, I don't know what else to say. It's a tragedy. We were hoping it wouldn't come to this, but at least we know now. Everybody's saddened by this whole thing. It's a terrible ordeal."

Prosecutors said Francois forged Stathis' signature on one of her checks to pay a cable bill five days after she was last seen leaving the diner. Lab tests on blood found in the trunk of Francois' 2007 Honda Accord did not produce a match, but the blood was found to be consistent with Stathis' DNA, authorities said in January.

Francois was convicted in 1997 on an aggravated manslaughter charge stemming from the shooting death of Karriem Goodwin, 19, whose body was found in a snow-covered dugout at Milton Votee Park in Teaneck in February 1994.

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