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DNA: Some evidence was lost, some was destroyed

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mentioned the existence of a second contributor.

It's also possible that three or more people's DNA could be on the chicken piece, Doyle said. There were a minimum of two sources and at least one of them was male, she said.

"I got a mixture of DNA profiles," she said. "(There is) more than one contributor."

Doyle used the DNA results to rule out 90 people, including the seven victims and scores of law-enforcement officials who may have come in contact with the food. She also excluded a man who admitted to the crime as well as a friend he implicated in his 1998 confession to police.

All DNA swabs taken during testing, however, were later lost. "They were sent out, but they were never received at the destination," Doyle said.

In 2002, authorities say they matched Luna's genetic code with DNA found on a half-eaten chicken piece discovered in the Palatine establishment's trash can. Prosecutors did not attempt to explain the existence of the second profile during testimony Wednesday.

Prosecutors say Luna, a former Brown's employee, and his high school pal Jim Degorski killed the restaurant's two owners and five workers in January 1993 in an attempt to "do something big."

Authorities have never said there is DNA evidence linking Degorski to the crime, presumably ruling him out as the second source on the chicken.

The men, who are being tried separately, have pleaded not guilty to the crime. If convicted, both could face the death penalty.

The crime rocked the Northwest suburbs and almost immediately drew accusations of poor detective work. With the investigation stalled in February 1994, authorities asked famed forensic scientist Henry Lee to consult on the case.

Lee examined physical evidence, visited the restaurant and looked over police reports.

44 Minutes in January

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS
VS. JUAN LUNA
CASE NUMBER
02CR154962



In his review, Lee predicted the half-eaten chicken dinner — which was frozen five days after the murders — would be the key to solving the crime.

Register receipts show the restaurant served its last meal, a four-piece meal with a small drink, at 9:08 p.m. Jan. 8, 1993. The vast majority of the meal — including at least three untouched pieces, two uneaten biscuits, unopened honey containers and at least three dozen french fries — was discovered in an otherwise empty trash can.

The bin's contents seemed suspicious to Lee, who questioned why someone would be hungry enough to order a meal after closing and then throw it out. Most likely, he said, the customer didn't plan to eat that night.

"This could either give you a good witness or a suspect," Lee testified Wednesday. "Whoever is eating this meal either was there and left quickly ... or was waiting for someone."

Lee, who became the country's best-known forensic scientist when he testified for the defense in the O.J. Simpson trial, suggested Palatine officials send the frozen chicken pieces to a Connecticut laboratory for testing.

"This is your most important evidence," Lee said he told police.

At the time, technology did not allow for such a small DNA sample to be extracted from the bone and tested. In the researchers' attempts to glean something from the evidence, they destroyed a single bone and a coffee stirrer found in the trash can.

The rest of the food — including five other bones — was shipped back to Illinois for preservation.

In 1998, scientific advancements allowed for smaller samples to be studied. Palatine authorities asked the Illinois state police crime lab to handle it.

The responsibility fell to Doyle, a DNA expert who was still training on the particular testing needed. The microscopic sample from the chicken was one of the first four she had ever done using the procedure, she said.

In addition to the lost DNA

swabs, Doyle's electronic data also went missing when the state police attempted to create more space on the lab's computers. That data, unlike the swabs, was later recovered.

In an effort to prevent the trial from becoming bogged down by scientific evidence and losing its emotional punch, the prosecution is spending time each day focusing on one of the seven victims: Michael Castro, Lynn Ehlendorf, Richard Ehlendorf, Guadalupe Maldonado,

Thomas Mennes, Marcus Nelsen and Rico Solis.

On Wednesday, Schaumburg resident Diane Clayton testified about calling the Palatine police department after learning about the murders. Her son Marcus Nelsen, a Navy veteran, worked as a manager trainee at the

restaurant.

"He [an officer] asked me 'Ma'am are you by yourself? Are you sitting down?'" Clayton said, fighting back tears. "He didn't have to say anything else."

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An 'Idol' house call

Family night with ice cream and a TV crooner

BY GEORGIA EVDOKIADIS
Daily Herald Staff Writer

Any family with a TV and five bucks can grab a tub of ice cream and a spoon and settle in on their couch to watch "American Idol" together.

But not many can say they took their treats into their living room and watched an actual American Idol sing live.

"I'm glad we're not outside," Ace Young said with a laugh as he braved the late April chill to greet the Skinners outside their Libertyville house.

Young, a contestant on last season's show, visited the Skinners' house to sing, chat and sign autographs Wednesday after the youngest Skinner daughter put in overtime on her computer to win a contest sponsored by Edy's ice cream.

Emily, 14, entered herself, her mom and her sisters almost every week — sometimes every day — hoping to get a visit from one of their favorite crooners

from last season's show. Mandy Skinner, 19, wound up winning but shared the glory with her mom, Tammy, and her two sisters, Emily and Jennie, who flew in from college in Colorado to see Young.

"It's a family win," Mandy said as she mixed up a batch of her famous hot fudge to pour over the free ice cream that was part of their reward.

Mandy said the family didn't know Young would be arriving until yesterday, when a crew showed up at her school, Columbia College in Chicago.

"I just said, 'What?'" Mandy remembers, throwing her hands up. "I freaked out a little in class all day."

Also freaking out was Tammy, the girls' mom, who worked nonstop to clean and prepare snacks for the visit.

"She was so panicked," Emily remembered with a laugh. "But everything went off without a hitch as Young charmed the group."

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